

THE CUTTING EDGE:

NASHVILLE SESSIONS FOR BLONDE ON BLONDE

MARCH 1966

by Roger Ford



Dylan in a hotel room, playing an acetate from a small pile on the table (note the BLONDE ON BLONDE sleeve beside the girl on the settee)

After another two weeks touring, and with *'4th Time Around'* having now joined *'Visions Of Johanna'* in his acoustic set, Dylan returned to Nashville to finish the new album.¹ It seems he had been busy in his hotel rooms, as he was able in the next three days to record eight new songs, as well as to revisit one other. Quite likely he had been bouncing ideas off Robbie Robertson in the fashion we later saw in *Eat The Document*, and as also now evidenced on Disc 18 of *"The Cutting Edge"*.

March 7-8, 1966

After a couple of weeks touring Dylan has a few days' break to finish the new album. He returns to Nashville with more than enough new songs, though they are in varying states of readiness. According to Michael Krogsgaard,² sessions were booked from 9.30 am on the 7th to 4 am on the 8th, but nothing was actually recorded during all those hours on the first day; perhaps Dylan arrived late, or maybe much of the time was spent working up the arrangement for *'Absolutely Sweet Marie'*. Mac Gayden was logged as being present on March 7,³ but he was apparently replaced by Wayne Moss and Robbie Robertson for the early hours of March 8. So it seems unlikely that Gayden was actually on any of the takes recorded; but who knows how reliably these studio documents were completed. Gayden is not mentioned at all in the box set notes.

ABSOLUTELY SWEET MARIE (NCO 83259)

Rehearsal (Disc 15 Track 3): In some ways this rehearsal is more interesting than the complete Take 1 that was chosen for the more selective editions: it is further removed from the familiar *"Blonde On Blonde"* cut, but more like a stand-alone take than most of the rehearsals on *"The Cutting Edge"*; it lacks only the harmonica solo and the final verse. Its key is a tone lower than the later takes, which lends it a distinctive feel. Someone provides handclaps – or something similar – over towards the left of the soundstage, and with Kooper's Augie Meyers-style organ the song sounds not wholly unlike the Sir Douglas Quintet's *'She's About a Mover'* – bubblegum gone hip. Robbie Robertson makes his first properly documented appearance at the Nashville sessions, his strident Telecaster tones giving the song its hard edge. Henry Strzelecki plays a neat octave-jumping bass line, Hargus Robbins plays an energetic electric piano and Buttrey's crisp drumming is as impeccable as ever.

The words are still very sketchy in places, and provide a few surprises (“Sometimes it’s so hard for me to see / And now eagles tease down above the train line”;⁴ and “Now, anybody can turn themselves into me, naturally”). The second bridge section is mostly unintelligible improvisation. But it’s totally infectious, and the sort of track that – to me at least – effortlessly justifies the 18-CD set.

Take 1, Complete (Disc 15 Track 4, also on 6-CD and 2-CD sets): The tempo is slowed slightly, and the energy and spontaneity of the rehearsal take seems to have dissipated just a little (partly, perhaps, due to a murkier mix), though it’s still a good take. The handclap has gone, and in its place **there is now the staccato, off-beat popping of a second electric guitar.** There are still some unfamiliar words – “And the captain there beating on his trumpet / He now has got the memories you left for me”. The second bridge verse is nearly all there, and the harmonica instrumental and final verse have been added. But Dylan makes the last line a little ungainly (“Yes, I can’t help but wonder where you are, Sweet Marie”), which perhaps leaves him wanting to give it one more try.



Al Kooper, Bob Dylan & Doug Sahm at a New York nightclub

Take 2, Breakdown (Disc 15 Track 5): Bob Johnston breaks in almost as soon as Dylan starts singing: “Hold it, Bob... do it one more time, just in case you get it... and everybody on the intro... the organ was late then, and a coupla other things.”

Take 3, Complete (Disc 15 Track 6): The tempo picks up noticeably for the released album take, and the second electric guitar this time plays a scratchy rhythm not unlike the handclap of the rehearsal; it could even be some sort of percussion instrument rather than a guitar. There are no surprises in this new mix, and the track fades out at pretty much the same point as usual.

Insert (Disc 15 Track 7): Dylan, having played a sensational harmonica solo on Take 3 using his shoulder-rack, apparently decides to re-do it as an insert with the harp held in his hands. So the band cranks itself up and Dylan plays his solo; but it’s really no improvement, and the insert is discarded. It’s a good chance to savour Buttrey’s drumming, though, as it’s mixed well up here. Bizarrely, the credits in the box set book make no mention at all of a harmonica on this song.

March 8, 1966

By two o’clock in the afternoon Dylan is ready to go again, with the studio booked through to midnight.

JUST LIKE A WOMAN (NCO 83264)

Remarkably, despite the fact that the song is in very embryonic form, four complete takes are achieved straight off. It’s another one that starts in 6/8 time, but this time, apart from a one-off experiment, it stays that way.

Take 1, Complete (Disc 15 Track 8, also on 6-CD set): “What’s the name of it, Bob?” asks Johnston; “Uh... *‘Like a Woman’*” replies Dylan. They take the song slowly, and the band isn’t always sure how many bars Dylan wants between vocal lines. There’s an electric guitar adding decorative phrases with lots of little grace notes, in a very similar style to the lead guitar on *‘Memphis Blues Again’* – I’d say it was almost certainly Joe South. Kooper comes in on organ for the second chorus, but plays something a little too bluesy for this particular song. In the words there are lots of half-formed or provisional lines, and as in all the early takes of the song, it’s ‘Honey’s got new clothes’ in the first verse and “Annie, she’s my friend” in the second. The line that sticks with me, though, is “But I... gave... you... those... pearls”; it’s a pity that had to go in the end.

Take 2, Complete (Disc 15 Track 9): Kooper’s organ style shifts in the right direction, and Buttrey goes for a softer drum sound, using brushes rather than sticks. Some of the words are fitting into place – though some will change again later; in other places they are still indistinct. Dylan adds a verse of harmonica to the end of the song.

Take 3, Complete (Disc 15 Track 10): Buttrey’s drum intro, familiar from the final recording, makes its first appearance here, and the organ is even less obtrusive. Dylan opens with “I can’t feel no pain / Tonight as I walk inside the rain”, and the second verse has “She don’t ever know / Just why I have to go / But you come around here when the going’s slow”. In the choruses, experimentation continues with the “shake” / “fake” / “ache” / “take” / “wake” rhymes, and Dylan tries dropping the “just” from “like a woman”. The last part of the final verse has yet to come into proper focus.

Take 4, Complete (Disc 15 Track 11, also on 6-CD and 2-CD sets): A sudden change of direction to a hilariously inappropriate Bo Diddley beat has made this track one of the most remarked-upon revelations of *“The Cutting Edge”*. Maybe boredom had set in, or maybe Robbie Robertson had turned up at the studio (he was logged as being present from 6pm onwards); the lead guitar on this take certainly sounds like him rather than Joe South. Dylan has fun fitting words to the new rhythmic pattern, but the result is strictly for laughs, and we should be grateful that it’s a one-off – unlike the doorbell arrangement of *‘Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat’*. “That’s one hell of a beat,” remarks Johnston at the end.

PLEDGING MY TIME (NCO 83265)

Take 1, 'Breakdown' (Disc 15 Track 12, also on 6-CD and 2-CD sets): Dylan decides to switch to a song that makes better use of Robertson's talents, and pulls out a 12-bar blues. Playing this type of thing would no doubt be like riding a bike for the Nashville musicians – probably just as much as for Robertson – and they quickly turn out a complete take in *'Can I Get a Witness'* style, much faster than the final version. At the start Dylan's harmonica sounds as though he's playing it with his hands cupped round the microphone as well as the harp, in order to get a dirty, overdriven blues sound; but after he starts singing it goes back to a normal tone, probably because he has to use the same microphone for his vocal. The opening verse is different from the one we know: "Baby got jealous / She took five / Trips with the hobo / And left me here alive"), and there's an extra verse at the end that sounds as though Dylan made it up on the spot just to keep the song going, much as he had done with *'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat'* back in January: "Well I'm gonna play wigwam / I'd better tell you now / If you don't know how to play / You better find out how".⁵ "All right!" he exclaims after this final verse, and launches into a double-length harp solo that ends with a cough and what sounds like a dropped harmonica. This track could easily have been faded and billed as a complete take; calling it a breakdown seems to be under-selling it rather.

Rehearsal (Disc 15 Track 13): "It's got to have a very *strong beat*, man, y'know?" says Dylan, and Hargus Robbins sets up a suitable slow groove on the piano; Dylan joins in vocally, demonstrating where he wants the beats: "To-*dum*-bom-bom-tom-bom-dom-bom"; Buttrey and the others fall in with this, and Dylan tries singing the first verse to this new, *'Mannish Boy'*-type rhythm; it's great. Dylan's not satisfied with it, though. "Here, let me play it," he says, and it sounds as if he actually sits himself at Buttrey's drum kit, and quickly finds the beat he wants. Kooper, meanwhile, riffs on his keyboard, which now sounds somewhere between a steam organ and an electric piano: presumably another strange voicing on the Wurlitzer.

Take 2, False Start (Disc 15 Track 14): More weird sounds from Kooper, now like a pan-pipe record being played at 16rpm; then Buttrey kicks off a new take, but it crashes before the intro is finished.

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"Release card" for Side 3 of BLONDE ON BLONDE

Take 3, Complete (Disc 15 Track 15): The master take, with the first verse rewritten and the 'wigwam' verse from Take 1 consigned to the bin. The 1987 and 1992 CD remixes of *"Blonde On Blonde"* revealed tape-wear dropouts on the 4-track master; these were digitally fixed for the 1999 Michael Brauer remix. Here they have either been more perfectly fixed during the mix-down, or a better condition safety copy of the 4-track has been unearthed. Part way through the final long harmonica solo, Dylan cups his harp against the microphone again and gets that fabulous blazing tone. This new mix is not faded, and so is slightly longer even than the early mono mix included in the Canadian and UK mono albums; the tune actually turns around into a third verse of harmonica, but immediately after that Hargus Robbins brings it to a halt with some dissonant piano chords.

JUST LIKE A WOMAN (NCO 83264)

Take 5, False Start (Disc 15 Track 16): Dylan has decided that the aberrant Take 4 was not where he wanted to leave this song, and prepares to continue in the style of the first three takes. As we re-join the proceedings the tape is already rolling for the next attempt, but in the meantime some of the musicians have started playing a shuffle blues, with Dylan improvising words on top. Maybe it's an attempt to recall a specific song that someone has mentioned, but most likely it's put together on the spot. The only recognisable phrase is "Even my feet are soaking wet", which could have been picked up from quite a number of old blues songs.⁶ Sadly this little fragment only lasts for ten seconds or so, Johnston cutting them off with "OK, this is still 64 [i.e. NCO 83264], rolling on take number 5". They start *'Just Like a Woman'*, but after the first vocal line Dylan stops it: "There's no drums... I can't sense it without the drums". There's evidently been some misunderstanding. "Do you want sticks or brushes?" asks Johnston, and they settle for brushes as on the earlier takes.

Take 6, Breakdown (Disc 15 Track 17): The requirement clarified, Buttrey starts it off as he had done on Take 3. The pace is lugubrious, and Robbins introduces some rather corny country & western piano arpeggios. The electric guitar adornments of the first three takes have been replaced by a Spanish guitar, which could be Joe South or Wayne Moss. The notes credit Robbie Robertson with guitar on all these later takes of the song, but I can't hear him in there at all. Dylan has clearly been working on the second verse, which is now in its final form. In the first two choruses the lines now begin with "She" rather than "You", but on the down side one of those lines is "She *makes mistakes* just like a woman". The turnaround between verses isn't working well, different instruments at odds with each other. They struggle through the bridge and into the last verse, but the wheels are just about falling off, and a few lines in they give up.

Take 8, Complete (Disc 16 Track 1, also on 6-CD set): Take 7 is absent, most likely just through a failure in Johnston's tally-keeping. Take 8 is still pretty slow, which means that it lasts half a minute longer than the album cut. The turnarounds go better until after the last verse, when it all gets a bit ragged. Dylan plays a verse of harmonica, but then returns to singing the chorus

rather than continuing with the harp. There's another step forward in the words: it becomes clear that Dylan has made the inspired decision to stick with "She" in the first two choruses, but to switch to "You" for the last.

Takes 9-10, False start, Breakdown (Disc 16 Track 2): Take 9 starts off at an even more funeral pace, and Dylan calls it off after a few bars – "Too slow, too slow". Take 10 has a better tempo, and Dylan's harmonica intro and his singing have a beautiful polish. The opening line has finally moved on from "Nobody can complain" to "Nobody feels any pain". The bridge seems to go well, with some particularly fine piano from Robbins, but a line into the last verse Dylan breaks it off and asks, "How are we doing that, Charlie?... Let me do it alone"; he starts playing the bridge by himself, but the track fades after a couple of lines.

It's clear that both Dylan and Johnston see McCoy as the musical leader of the sessions; Kooper may be the one who takes notes in the hotel room as Dylan works on the songs, and he may well run through the chords with the other musicians at the start of each session; but after that McCoy appears to be in charge, and he does nearly all the count-ins.

Takes 11-12, Rehearsal (Disc 16 Track 3): There's some discussion of the tempo, which Dylan still thinks is too slow; they experiment a little, arriving at a pace that Dylan likes. Johnston isn't happy with Buttrey's lead-in on Take 11. Take 12 gets off to a better start, but Dylan gets his opening line wrong ("Tonight... nobody feels any pain") and calls it off apologetically.

Take 13, Breakdown (Disc 16 Track 4): The song sounds better at the new tempo, but Dylan slips up a couple of time on the lyrics; after the final chorus someone plays a wrong guitar chord and then Dylan comes in a bar too soon with his harmonica solo. "I don't understand," says Dylan as it comes to a halt; the subsequent discussion is rapidly faded.

Takes 14-15, Rehearsal (Disc 16 Track 5): After some random bits of practising Take 14 starts, but Johnston stops it almost immediately. Buttrey complains that one of his drums is sounding "like a dead pillow" and takes some corrective action. On Take 15 Johnston breaks in after Dylan's smoky first line, with "That's too good a feel, Bob... Go ahead and get the intro – the intro was off, but that's a perfect feel." By now it seems that there are actually two Spanish guitars playing, though the narrow mix makes it hard to distinguish them.

Take 16, Complete (Disc 16 Track 6): After nearly skidding off the end of his harmonica in the intro Dylan delivers a great vocal performance and the music is clean. The "She makes mistakes" line has wisely been dropped from the chorus, Dylan falling back on "takes", "fakes" and "aches". This performance could just about have been a keeper, but Dylan presses on.

Take 17, Breakdown (Disc 16 Track 7): The tempo is increased again, for the better, but something seems to have gone off the boil; Dylan makes a small stumble on the "But lately" line, and the lead Spanish guitar sounds a little lackadaisical. They all come to a stop before the first chorus; "What's the matter?" asks Dylan.

Take 18, Complete (Disc 16 Track 8): The master take reveals significant improvements in both the arrangement and the words. In terms of the arrangement, the turnaround following each chorus had up until now comprised a two-bar chord sequence dominated by rather ungainly strummed guitars. This is now replaced with a solo Spanish guitar playing a much more elegant fingerpicked sequence, followed by Kooper's descending organ line, again played solo; this is a transformation. In the lyrics, Dylan has finally come up with the "makes love just like a woman" line, which likewise transforms the chorus. It's a magical performance.

March 9-10, 1966

This mammoth session, which saw all the album's remaining songs recorded, started at 6pm on the 9th and went right through to 7am on the 10th.

MOST LIKELY YOU GO YOUR WAY (AND I'LL GO MINE) (NCO 83274)

Take 1, Complete (Disc 16 Track 9, also on 6-CD set): Robbie Robertson is all over this one, his wiry guitar phrases well up in the mix. The other hero is Kenny Buttrey, who kicks it off with an elaborate drum figure and then keeps up the energy with his military snare rolls. The bass is being played by Charlie McCoy, as Henry Strzelecki is not booked in until 9pm; there's no trumpet yet. The words of the second verse still need a little work: "I can't stand to hear you say you're gonna lose face / It can't be this way everyplace". The ending is faded.

Take 2, Rehearsal (Disc 16 Track 10): This is evidently the point at which McCoy suggests he might double up Al Kooper's organ line on the trumpet during the intro and between verses, famously managing to continue playing bass at the same time. We hear some preliminary practising of the trumpet riff, accompanied by piano – but without the bass for now. "Yeah, that's it!" says someone; "Can you hear him now?" asks Johnston – presumably McCoy has had to be provided with a microphone for the trumpet. Take 2 ensues, with McCoy managing the feat for the intro, where he only has to play two open strings with his left hand. But it seems that he hasn't yet worked out the transition to the bass part for the verse, which *can't* be played on open strings, and he stops playing. The others keep going, but only for the first few lines of the verse.


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(S) DDP 66012
(Mid-August Release)

U.K. music trade advertisement for the release of BLONDE ON BLONDE

Take 3, Rehearsal (Disc 16 Track 11): McCoy has his trumpet-and-bass technique sorted out now, and they proceed through the first verse. At the end of this, they go into the intro riff, including harmonica and trumpet; after two bars Dylan starts to sing the second verse, but the others keep playing the riff as per the intro. "Figure out how many times you're gonna do it," says Johnston after they stop. "Let's not do it there," proposes Dylan, "It's gonna be kinda hard. We'll just do it after the break... after the bridge." They agree that the band will play the riff four times after the bridge, but Dylan will just do it three times on his harmonica – presumably to give himself a chance to take a breath before he starts singing again.

Take 4, Rehearsal (Disc 16 Track 12): Dylan suggests they "play the bridge down, y'know – just play very lightly." But they don't get as far as that: it seems they'd agreed not to do the trumpet/harmonica riff after the first verse, but failed to agree how else to do the turnaround into the second verse. So again, Dylan starts to sing before the others are ready to change.

Take 5, Breakdown (Disc 16 Track 13): Buttrey leads into the intro with yet another variation of his elaborate drum fill, and the first verse seems to go fine apart from Dylan stumbling slightly over the words near the end; but Johnston breaks it off with "OK, hold it a second... I'm sorry, Bob, you're too close to the mike, you're right on top of it, and we're not picking your diction up good."

Take 6, Complete (Disc 16 Track 14): So, we're into the master take, and the surprise is that there's rather more to Buttrey's drum lead-in than we've ever heard on the *"Blonde On Blonde"* cut. He starts off with three solid tom-tom-hits before the intro that we're familiar with. Other than that there are no surprises in this new mix, the end faded very much as on all previous releases.

TEMPORARY LIKE ACHILLES (NCO 83275)

Take 1, Complete (Disc 16 Track 15): Dylan retrieves a couple of lines from the discarded *'Medicine Sunday'* of the previous October, and from that seed grows this wonderful aching blues. The first take is pitched in the key of F, a tone below what we're used to; it's also noticeably slower, but Buttrey's heavy backbeat gives the song more of a swing. Robbins plays in a more honky-tonk piano style, and hasn't yet introduced the distinctive descending turnaround phrase of the later takes. Musically, this first take would have made a more interesting inclusion in the 6-CD set than the chosen Take 3, which is much closer to the released final version. Some of the words are still very much in draft form – "Looking at your walls / Staring at your second door"; "But I get bent up and sent back by your guard". The ending is faded after three lines of harmonica instrumental.

Take 2, False Start (Disc 16 Track 16): The key is shifted up to G, and the tempo increased a little. Buttrey has switched from sticks to brushes, and now plays very much in the style of the album cut. But after a couple of lines Dylan loses his way with the words, and apologetically calls it off.

Take 3, Complete (Disc 16 Track 17, also on 6-CD set): With no further change in key or tempo, they pull off a second complete take. Towards the end of the harmonica bridge section the electric piano makes itself very evident; the book gives no credit for this instrument, but it is surely played by Al Kooper. At the end of the last verse, as Dylan sings "so hard", Kooper comes up with the keyboard phrase that becomes a regular feature from then on. There are at least three electric guitars on this track; one of them, the most jangly, sounds to be a rather subdued Robbie Robertson; the one with heavy reverb playing with lots of hammer-on grace notes sounds very much like Joe South; and the third, playing mainly up-strokes, is probably Wayne Moss. I don't hear a Dylan guitar. There are still unfamiliar words: "Trying to get to you tonight, / Yes, I've been here before". After a complete verse of harmonica instrumental the track starts to fade and then suddenly cuts.

Take 4, Complete (Disc 16 Track 18): The original stereo mix of *"Blonde On Blonde"* always had the longest version of this master take, again with a complete harmonica verse at the end; this is equalled in the new *"Cutting Edge"* mix, though the final fade is swifter. An edit was made for the very carefully polished US mono mix, with a section at the end of the final verse replaced by a duplicate of the same section of the third verse, perhaps because the electric piano fill was better. That edit has never been replicated in any of the released stereo mixes, and that holds true here. Lyrically, this final take has some lines further altered; had they gone on to do further takes then no doubt the words would have changed again.

RAINY DAY WOMEN # 12 & 35 (NCO 83276)

Rehearsal (Disc 16 Track 19): Preparations are made for the party, and everyone sounds pretty excited. "During the take, Al, can you keep that radio off?" asks Johnston, and as he switches off the intercom we hear a very tinny snatch of Nancy Sinatra's current single, *'These Boots Are Made For Walking'*. Someone – McCoy? – asks, "Hey, what do you think about a bit of the bass-drum-and-drum thing before we start?" "Oh yeah!" says Dylan enthusiastically. Buttrey demonstrates, and Johnston responds "Oh yeah!... Charlie, with the trumpet a little..." McCoy joins in on trumpet for a few bars. After a little more practising there's an abrupt break in the tape; perhaps trombonist Wayne Butler was sent for at this point. After the break, Johnston asks, "What's the name of this, Bob?" "Uh... *'A Long Haired Mule And a Porcupine Here'*" replies Dylan. Someone is playing bass notes on the organ, sounding suitably like a tuba; according to Daryl Sanders in his 2011 article for *Nashville Scene*,⁸ this is Henry Strzelecki, lying on the floor playing the organ's foot pedals with his hands, while Kooper plays the tambourine and Wayne Moss the bass guitar. The box set notes agree regarding who's playing the organ and tambourine, but give no credit for the bass.

Take 1, Complete (Disc 16 Track 20, also on 6-CD set): This is the only *"Blonde On Blonde"* track recorded in a single take, and coincidentally the only one on which there is not a guitar to be heard.⁹ Quite rightly in this context, this new mix for *"The Cutting Edge"* presents the song at its true recorded pitch, in the key of F. The song was speeded up a little for the original single release and for the mono album, but this artistic decision has been ignored for all stereo releases. Here the song lasts a few seconds longer than any previous mix, actually completing the cycle of chord changes to return to the home chord of F before quickly fading; Dylan helps it along with some wordless vocalising.

OBVIOUSLY 5 BELIEVERS (NCO 83277)

Take 1, False Start (Disc 17 Track 1): “83277, ‘*Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat*’, Take 1” announces Johnston. “No, no... this isn’t ‘*Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat*’, this is, uh... ‘*Black Dog Blues*’” corrects Dylan. “Are you gonna start it by yourself?” asks one of the musicians; “No, man, everybody’s starting together, right on the beat!” says Johnston, suddenly back on track. “I want everybody together from the top and all the way through, because one take is all we need on this, man – it’s *there*.” Clearly, they’ve been rehearsing. Kooper, having been shown on the previous song how well the organ can be used to double up the bass guitar, has opted to do the same on this track (though his lines in this song sound to me too complex to be played on the pedals); Strzelecki is presumably back on bass. McCoy asks someone else to do the count-in – “I got a mouth full of harpoon”.¹⁰ The take starts, but after a few bars of the intro Johnston interrupts with “I’m sorry, one more time... Charlie, we need a little bit more of you.” All takes have a maraca or some other sort of shaker, played by an uncredited musician; this, along with much else about this song, owes a debt to Bo Diddley’s 1955 single ‘*She’s Fine, She’s Mine*’.

Take 2, Breakdown (Disc 17 Track 2): They make another good, tight start, McCoy blowing a ‘*Good Morning Little Schoolgirl*’ riff on his harp. Robertson is playing guitar just like he does on the released take, but he’s lower in the mix here, and most of the time is upstaged by a second electric guitar that plays some terrific sliding licks – Joe South or Wayne Moss, I assume. At the end of the first verse Dylan sings “Well, you know I could make it without you / But I... *do feel* so all alone”, which gets me every time. He’s making the words up; the second verse has “I got my black dog barking / Black dog barking / Milk cow mooing / Milk cow mooing / In my back yard”. Just before he sings the last of those lines, both Strzelecki and Kooper change chord a bar too soon, and Dylan is thrown. He tries to fit in the last two lines, but breaks off with “Hey, hey, what the fuck... this is very easy, man, this is very easy to do...” (the producers of “*The Cutting Edge*” must have decided that any children would have given up listening by now). There’s a bit a discussion that doesn’t seem to address the right issue; Dylan responds, “OK, let’s try it this time... I don’t want to spend no time with this song, man.”

Take 3, Complete (Disc 17 Track 3, also on 6-CD set): Robbie Robertson steps forward with his treble-heavy tone on this take – or perhaps he is just brought further up in the mix. The other electric guitar is there too, and playing tougher now; at times it’s hard to make out who’s playing what. The “black dog” verse still comes second; Dylan makes his entry here a bar too late and as a result his lines (“I got my black dog / I got my black dog / Barking louder / He’s barking now for / You in my yard”) fit awkwardly with the music. At the instrumental break, Dylan shouts “All right!” and dives in with his own harmonica, his style very different from McCoy’s. After the last verse McCoy plays his riff twice, and then it seems his microphone cuts out – he can be heard playing the riff a third time, but only very distantly.

Take 4, Complete (Disc 17 Track 4): On the master take the arrangement fills out, with Buttrey adding some great drum fills as Dylan sings the last line of each verse, and the bass and organ play more strongly behind McCoy’s harmonica in the turnarounds. The song may only have taken Dylan five minutes to write, but it’s a hell of a rocker and I’d take it over ‘*Rainy Day Women*’ any day of the week.¹¹ The ending, incidentally, is as long here as it was in the original stereo LP mix, with McCoy’s harmonica riff played twice after the instrumental verse; then it fades abruptly.

LEOPARD-SKIN PILL-BOX HAT (NCO 83278)

Take 1, Complete (Disc 17 Track 5): Dylan has one more go at a song he’s already tried at three previous sessions, returning it to a straight 12-bar blues; he and the musicians are on such a roll that they pull it off in one take. According to Sean Wilentz,¹² it was Johnston’s suggestion that Dylan should lead the intro on his electric guitar, and he does it in characteristically cranky fashion. There’s a very small surprise here: an extra guitar note on the lead-in, evidently always edited out of other mixes, which seems to give it just a little bit more of a swing. As usual for “*The Cutting Edge*”, this mix has little or no reverb to lend it atmosphere; but Robertson’s lead guitar is suitably caustic, and Hargus Robbins’s ace piano-playing gets a better hearing than on the now-ubiquitous Michael Brauer remix. The ending equals the longest of previous mixes, completing the closing turnaround phrase. Sadly edited out here (so we learn from Wilentz) is Charlie McCoy’s praise for Robertson’s ferocious guitar soloing: “Robbie, the whole world’ll marry you on that one”.

COLUMBIA RECORDS		ARTIST JOB SHEET		DATE PREPARED 3/18/66	
ARTIST BOB DYLAN					
JOB NO. DL 1139	LOCATION NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE	SIGNATURE BOB JOHNSTON	DATE OF SESSION 3/18/66	FROM 2:00 PM	TO
LABEL Columbia	CLASS POP.	BUDGET ALLOCATION ALBUM	ACTUAL PLAYING TIME	EQUITY WORK HRS.	
MATRIX - INSERT - TAKE					
NCO 83264	✓	JUST LIKE A WOMAN -B. Dylan-	BND TIME	PUBLISHER DWARF MUSIC (ASCAP)	1/66
NCO 83265		PLEDGING MY TIME -B. Dylan-		DWARF MUSIC (ASCAP)	1/66
NCO 83259		ABSOLUTELY SWEET MARIE -B. Dylan-		DWARF MUSIC (ASCAP)	1/66
<div> <div> (CHECK ONE) ARTIST <input type="checkbox"/> PHILIP MASTERS <input type="checkbox"/> PURCHASED MASTERS <input type="checkbox"/> LEASED MASTERS <input type="checkbox"/> REPORTS & PAYMENTS <input type="checkbox"/> </div> <div> CONTRACT DATES & ROYALTIES APRIL CARD <input type="checkbox"/> AFM CONTRACT <input type="checkbox"/> AFM TALENT ROYALTY <input type="checkbox"/> TRA REPORT <input type="checkbox"/> AFTRA TALENT PAY <input type="checkbox"/> MISC. TALENT PAY <input type="checkbox"/> AFM TALENT <input type="checkbox"/> </div> </div>					

Artist Job Sheet for the songs recorded at the 8 March 1966 session

To promote the I WANT YOU single and to announce the release of BLONDE ON BLONDE, Columbia Records placed this full-page advertisement in the music trade press in mid-June 1966 - an extract appears below

I WANT YOU (NCO 83279)

It's past three in the morning, but Dylan still has another song to record. Al Kooper has said that he helped Dylan work on this one in his hotel room and was desperate to make sure it got recorded; but Dylan kept putting it off. So to help things along, Kooper wrote out parts for the musicians to play and had them practise the arrangement before Dylan arrived.¹³

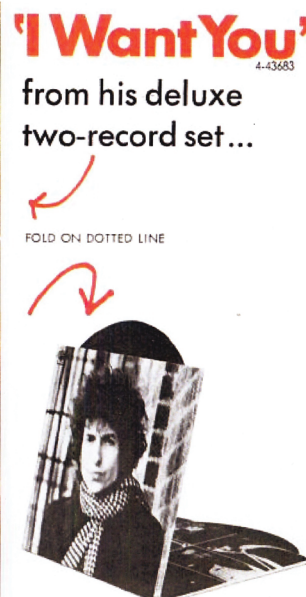
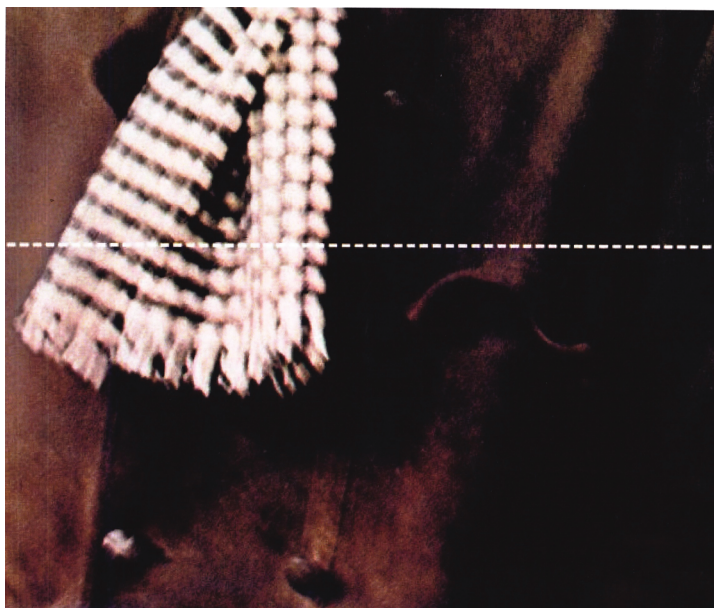
Rehearsal (Disc 17 Track 6): Dylan is very much present at this recorded rehearsal, though, and despite Kooper's preparations it sounds from the discussions here as though there are still quite a few details to be hammered out. Dylan runs through bits of the song with his acoustic guitar, in a manner very reminiscent of the later Glasgow hotel recordings, seemingly as much for his own benefit as for the musicians'. "I have to get acquainted with it, so we'll have to do it twice, anyway," he says, before Johnston slates the first take. "Hold it," says McCoy (I think), "we never decided on the intro, did we?" Dylan demonstrates, strumming, and they agree it's "a four-bar vamp upfront".

Take 1, Complete (Disc 17 Track 7): Buttrey starts it off, very surprisingly, with a drum crash worthy of *'Like a Rolling Stone'*; he settles down to a steady shuffle, but it's still much heavier drumming than on the final version, and rather slower. I don't know what type of organ Kooper is playing,¹⁴ but it sounds here like the sort one might have heard in a 1950s ice rink, with monstrous reverb; at times it sounds like an ice-cream van of similar vintage. Dylan delivers a lovely vocal, though, the choruses almost heart-breaking in their directness. Lyrically, this song (in contrast to many others) seems to have been very much worked out in advance; there are only small variations from the released version.¹⁵

Take 2, Breakdown (Disc 17 Track 8): This track is in fact mainly rehearsal, with Take 2 starting well after the half-way mark. Dylan picks a little blues on his acoustic, bringing to mind Skip James's *'Hard Time Killing Floor'*. Buttrey swaps his sticks for brushes, and practices the faster, busier pattern we know from the *'I Want You'* single and album cut. Kooper tries various stops on the theatre organ. "All one chord on the intro," someone instructs, and mysteriously adds "Let's put it in there for Jackie Fargo".¹⁶ When Take 2 arrives, it's remarkably similar already to the final cut, noticeably brisker than on the first take. This was probably just a rehearsal, though: Dylan fluffs his opening line and sounds a little disconnected throughout; and at the end of the bridge everyone just stops playing.

Take 3, Rehearsal, False Start (Disc 17 Track 9): There's half a minute of rehearsal, one of the Nashville players leading with fast strumming on a high-pitched steel-string guitar – McCoy, I think, though he isn't credited. Kooper plays along, developing his organ lines, while pianist Robbins plays something completely unrelated in the background. When the take finally starts, it lasts only a couple of bars before folding; "I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting anything like that," says McCoy, who'd failed to join in.

Take 4, Complete (Disc 17 Track 10, also on 6-CD and 2-CD sets): There's a Spanish guitar more evident in the mix now, as well as the high-pitched acoustic heard on the previous track; I'd guess this was Wayne Moss. Dylan's own acoustic strumming is just about distinguishable too, but Robertson must have been sitting this one out. Just before the song's fourth line Kooper hits a comically wrong note; Dylan immediately seems to falter slightly on "The cracked bells", but they carry on anyway. It ends with Johnston breaking in with "OK" when he thinks they've got enough for a fade-out. Kooper's slip aside, the take is fine, but Take 1 would have made a much more interesting choice for the 6-CD and 2-CD sets; this one just seems like a slightly inferior version of the released track.



In this detail from the above advert, Columbia Records seems to be showing retailers how to fold the sleeve of a double album

Take 5, Complete (Disc 17 Track 11): Instead of playing the intro all on one chord, they decide to use the descending chord sequence of the choruses, and Dylan adds harmonica for the first time too; both of these changes make for a more engaging opening to the song. It all seems familiar, but there's something missing – and that's the electric guitar of the released version.

Take 5b, Insert, guitar overdub (Disc 17 Track 12): Here Wayne Moss adds that guitar part. Asked about his playing on this track in a 2014 interview for TVStoreOnline, Moss said “Well, I was just playing some Chet Atkins licks there. It seemed to go over well with everyone in the studio. Al Kooper told me that he liked what I was doing so we went ahead and recorded it. I was playing 16th notes and Al Kooper heard that and said, ‘You don’t hear a lot of people playing 16th notes up in New York City...’”¹⁷ In true Chet Atkins style, Moss plays two complementary guitar parts simultaneously: a damped, stepping line on the lower strings, with that amazing semiquaver run in the choruses; and the more ear-catching, jangly part based around Kooper’s organ line, played on the treble strings. As with Take 5, this overdubbed master version is faded, but at a length equal to any previously released mix.

The album done, Dylan went off into the morning, and the following day was back on tour, playing a concert in St Louis. The first mono mixes were produced in Nashville after the sessions finished; in Los Angeles the following month some of the mono mixes were redone, and the stereo mixes were produced. A last-minute overdub on ‘4th Time Around’ was recorded by Kenny Buttrey in Nashville in mid-June,¹⁸ and the album appears to have finally reached the shops in the US around the last week in June.

* * *

And so we come to the end of the studio recordings on “*The Cutting Edge*”. To be sure, there have been frustrations with the editing of dialogue from the full session tapes, and disappointments with missing overdub takes and less than perfect documentation; and let’s not forget the price tag. But it’s nonetheless been a privilege, and one that we had no right to expect, to be allowed to hear these priceless songs in development. I don’t suppose there are many of the 5,000 purchasers who haven’t enjoyed every minute.

Once again, my thanks go to Ian Woodward and Bob Stacy for their invaluable help with this series of articles. And of course, thanks to Bob Dylan and the musicians – oh yes, and to Bob Johnston and the engineers too – for making this wonderful music in the first place; and to those at Sony who have been involved in making it all available to us, half a century on.

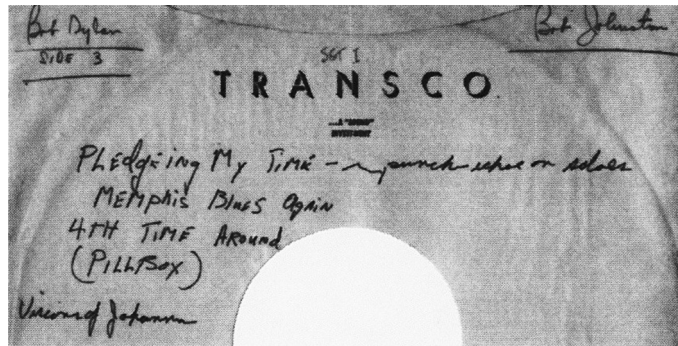
Notes:

1 Let’s just deal with Al Kooper’s persistent assertion that there was no second trip to Nashville, that all the recordings were done in a single stretch of about ten days (see, for example, his article about the “*Blonde On Blonde*” sessions in *MOJO* magazine, July 2016). Kooper maintains that studio documents have been misinterpreted by Dylan enthusiasts, and that what might look to an amateur like a recording session was in fact just a session for mixing previously-recorded songs or for cutting acetates. But the evidence for there being two sets of dates is in fact overwhelming:

- Dylan’s touring schedule in February and March 1966 did not contain any stretch of ten consecutive days free for recording. A day after the last documented February session Dylan was in New Haven, Connecticut starting another string of concert dates.
- The CO numbers allocated to the songs show a big break between those recorded in February and those recorded in March.
- Columbia/Sony have *always* shown the “*Blonde On Blonde*” recording dates in two groups, right from the 1970s Japanese releases of “*Blonde On Blonde*” which contained a booklet giving the recording date for each track. The separate groups of dates were likewise shown in the booklet for “*The Original Mono Recordings*” box set in 2010 and are now reaffirmed in all the detailed notes in the book for “*The Cutting Edge*”. These releases have of course been put together by professional tape researchers and producers, not by ill-informed amateurs.
- The original 1966 release cards for “*Blonde On Blonde*” that are now reproduced in the 18-CD set’s media-carrying book (behind Discs 15 & 16) quite unequivocally show the recording dates and locations for all the songs – some in mid-February, some in early March.
- On February 17, 1966, *The Nashville Tennessean* carried an article about Dylan’s visit to the city to record at the new Columbia studio. It quoted Albert Grossman as saying that Dylan would “... be back in three weeks to finish this album”.
- In March 1966, *Variety* reported that ‘Folk-rocker Bob Dylan was back [in Nashville] for some more wax-workouts at Columbia studio. Taciturn as ever and virtually inaccessible to the press, Dylan reiterated, “I like to record here, that’s why I’ve returned.”’ (*Variety*, March 16 1966)

2 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>

3 Michael Krogsgaard (see above) reported his name as ‘Mae Caydon(?)’, presumably from hand-written studio documentation.



Part of the sleeve of a BLONDE ON BLONDE acetate (as advertised in 1994)

4 An early manuscript for the song (previously at <http://recordmecca.com/news/heres-real-bob-dylan-lyrics-look-like/>) referred to “eagle’s teeth”, but in this take it sounds to me much more like “eagles tease”.

5 According to Clinton Heylin (in *Revolution in the Air*, 2009), this song was shown on the ‘studio log’ as **‘What Can You Do For My Wigwam?’** – though this document has yet to see the light of day. This apocryphal working title varies a little from one account to another. Country musicians Richard Greene and Pete Rowan, who happened to be visiting the studio at the time, later reported that when asked for the song’s title, Dylan came up with **‘What Can I Do For Your Wigwam, Right?’** (though it is not clear whether that final “Right?” was actually part of the title or just thrown in by Dylan after the title) (interview conducted by Neil Rosenberg in July 1966, published in *The Journal of Country Music*, December 1978). Sean Wilentz, who heard the full session tapes, reports the title as **‘What Can You Do With My Wigwam’**, though he doesn’t say at what point Dylan gave it this name (*Bob Dylan In America*, The Bodley Head, 2010, p.122). If Dylan’s spoken introduction was captured on tape at all, it’s certainly not present on **“The Cutting Edge”**.

6 One such song was **‘Waiting For My Baby’** by Mississippi Fred McDowell, released only a year or so previously on **“My Home Is In The Delta”** (Testament Records): “Lord I stood on the corner till my feet got soaking wet” (thanks to contributor fangedesire on the Steve Hoffman Forum for this lead.) Five years before, on the Riverside Church Hootenanny radio broadcast, Dylan had accompanied Danny Kalb singing **‘Mean Old Southern Railroad’**, containing a variation on the same lines. And there are many other possible sources for the image.

7 The early stereo mix of **“Blonde On Blonde”**, possibly released in error, was replaced in the US a couple of years after the initial release, but it remained on sale in Japan and the UK right through the 1970s.

8 See “Looking back on Bob Dylan’s **“Blonde On Blonde”**, the record that changed Nashville” by Daryl Sanders, in *Nashville Scene*, May 2011, at <http://www.nashvillescene.com/nashville/looking-back-on-bob-dylans-blonde-on-blonde-the-record-that-changed-nashville/Content?oid=2420805>.

9 In a May 1966 interview for *Melody Maker*, Robbie Robertson says “I’m the only member of the group [i.e. *The Hawks*] on **‘Rainy Day Women’**”. There is a Salvation Army band on it. And none of the guys belong to the Salvation Army – except me”. But if Robertson is on the track at all, he is probably just one of the party voices.

10 “Harpoon” seems to have been McCoy’s own coined word for a harmonica/harp. In January 1965 he had released a single (as Charlie McCoy And The Escorts) called **‘Harpoon Man’**, about a band with a hot harmonica player, though it failed to chart. When McCoy first met Dylan at the **“Highway 61 Revisited”** sessions he was delighted that Dylan knew and liked the single – see the Daryl Sanders article referred to in Note 8.

11 Dylan himself retained a fondness for the song: he asked for it to be played on the June 1985 *Rock Line* phone-in radio show. Asked why he had requested that particular song, Dylan replied “I just like it.”

12 For Sean Wilentz reference, see Note 5

13 See Andy Gill’s book *Classic Bob Dylan, 1962-69*, Sevenoaks Ltd, 1998, p.100

14 See note 12 of the previous article in this series

15 Indeed, a handwritten lyric sheet for the song shows it very much completed except for the third verse, which was perhaps written just before the recording. Even the first take has all four verses plus bridge. This manuscript can still be seen at <http://recordmecca.com/news/heres-real-bob-dylan-lyrics-look-like/> An earlier draft, mostly typewritten, is reproduced in the books of both the 18-CD and 6-CD editions of **“The Cutting Edge”**; this is little more than a jumble of ideas for the song, but quite fascinating.

16 Jackie Fargo was a renowned south-eastern wrestler, who with his shock of blond hair seems to have served as an early role-model for Donald Trump, and maybe Boris Johnson too. I can only think that the rhythm of the song was perhaps deemed suitable for the famous “Jackie Fargo strut” – see YouTube. Better suggestions on a postcard, please...

17 See <http://blog.tvstoreonline.com/2014/10/interview-guitarist-wayne-moss-on.html>

18 This June 16 session was covered in more detail in the previous article in this series – see the final take of **‘4th Time Around’**.