

Bob Dylan – The Original Mono Recordings

by Roger Ford

The eight albums in this box are of course the foundation of Bob Dylan's career and legend, the records that made him famous. But more specifically, *these* are the records that made him famous – not the albums as they sound on the standard CDs today, not the earlier generation of CDs from the late '80s, not even the stereo LPs that came out as each record was made. It was the mono LPs (and the singles taken from them) that people heard on the radio, round at friends' houses, in record shops. These were the sounds that were engraved into the memory of anyone who listened to Dylan in the sixties.



Bob Dylan in Columbia Studios, 1963

And these were the versions that Dylan and his producers *knew* most people would be listening to, the versions that would be played on the radio. While stereo already had a following among classical and jazz fans, this audience tended to be older, with enough disposable income to buy stereo equipment – costly back then – and the more expensive stereo editions of the records they wanted. Listeners to pop and folk were predominantly young, with mono record players in their bedrooms and limited money to spend on their records. They also listened mostly to AM rather than FM radio, and the mono records played on AM had to sound clear and punchy enough to cut through the inherent background noise.

As a consequence, the artist and the producer would devote practically all of their attention to getting the mono mix sounding right. Big companies like Columbia in the US and EMI in England would always put out a stereo edition as a matter of policy, but the job of mixing this would often be given to any engineer who happened to have some spare time, and little further heed would be paid to them. The people who bought them were presumably happy that they had got something with a noticeably added dimension to justify the extra money they had paid.

In fact the stereo mixes were often artistically inferior, for a couple of reasons. First, they often missed important edits and adjustments that the artist or producer had requested be made to the final mono mix. Second, back in the sixties little attention was paid to how well the stereo effect served the music. It was a common practice, for example, to put the drums way out on one channel – because that gave the record the maximum stereo *effect* – rather than in the centre where a drummer would almost always play in practice. It was all about maximising separation, rather than producing

a sound that was still integrated but with added presence and depth.

But technology marched on, and the mono versions of Dylan's LPs were discontinued in 1968 in the US, a year later in the UK, and as far as I know had disappeared from all other parts of the world by the mid-'70s. For the last quarter of the 20th century they were completely unavailable, and once people realised what had been lost, good condition original copies became increasingly sought after.

The mono albums were eventually reissued by the US specialist reissue label Sundazed between 2001 and 2004, though only in vinyl format. They were remastered by Sundazed owner Bob Irwin, a well-respected audio engineer in his own right. Irwin put a lot of work into finding the right master tapes as well as into the remastering process itself, but nonetheless these editions evoked a somewhat mixed response, with some albums better received than others. And even where they hit the spot, by their nature they only really satisfied vinyl enthusiasts. I suspect that a lot of the people who bought the Sundazed LPs played them once to convert them to digital format and thereafter listened to their CD copies – complete with any rumble and the inescapable bits of surface noise that somehow affect even the best vinyl pressings. What most fans wanted – totally clean digital versions of the mono albums – still eluded them.

Now, after almost another decade, Dylan's own record company has decided that the time is right to do the job themselves, and to put them out in both vinyl and CD format. Steve Berkowitz of Sony's Legacy Recordings division was given the job of producing the audio side of the project, a role he has filled with many previous Dylan archive releases including *"No Direction Home"* and, of course, the 2003 programme of stereo CD/SACD reissues. Berkowitz chose to work with senior Sony mastering engineer Mark Wilder on this project. He had previously worked with Wilder on the 2005 remasters of *"Bob Dylan"* and *"The Times They Are A-Changin'"*, the two early Dylan albums that were omitted from the 2003 programme. Wilder has also worked on many previous Dylan archival projects going as far back as 1991's *"Bootleg Series Vol 1-3"* and the MasterSound gold CD of *"Blonde On Blonde"*. Didier Deutsch, another familiar name from the small print of past releases, did much of the work in the tape vaults for the mono reissues. It's important to note that this team started again from first principles – no reference was made to the choice of tapes used by Bob Irwin for the Sundazed vinyl editions, so it's quite possible that in some cases different tapes may have been used for the two projects.

When the stereo LPs of this period were prepared for reissue in 2003-2005, some of the original stereo mix master tapes were found to have sustained so much wear and tear that they were no longer fit for use. In these cases the albums concerned had to be remixed from the original multi-track studio tapes. The stereo mix tapes – and the second generation copies – had after all been used for cutting vinyl LPs for thirty years or so, until CDs really started to take over in the 1990s. The mono tapes, on the other hand, were used for a much shorter period of time prior to the mono format

being dropped in 1968. As a result there were no cases, according to Berkowitz and Wilder, in which tape wear prevented the original mono mixes being used. There were, though, one or two other difficulties, and these are detailed below in the notes on the individual albums.

Another important part of the preparation for the remastering was the gathering together of copies of the original LPs, wherever possible US first pressings. These were used as reference points during the remastering process.

The actual mastering work was done at Sony's Battery Studios on New York's West 44th Street, once the home of the famous Record Plant studios. Berkowitz and Wilder started their work there in late May this year, and wound up during August. They also produced the *"Witmark Demos"* release during this period.

For the CD remasters, the general approach was to load the original tape onto a vintage mono tape machine and use that to create a 96 KHz, 24-bit digital master. These studio-quality digital masters were then used to create the 44.1 KHz, 16-bit CD masters, with as little adjustment as was necessary to match the sound of the original mono LPs.

For the vinyl edition of the new package the disc-cutting was done by George Marino at New York's Sterling Sound, using exactly the same analogue master tapes as Mark Wilder used for the digital remastering. The vinyl box set is due out in December, the delay is due to the current-day dearth of facilities for quality vinyl disc-pressing. Everything else in this review relates purely to the CD box set.

The Packaging

Before you get to the music, of course, you have to find your way through the packaging – and this is a lot of fun.

The box itself, as you'll probably have seen, is really attractive, with the inner part bearing lots more black & white studio portraits from the series Jerry Schatzberg took for the original *"Blonde On Blonde"* inside sleeve and songbook. One or two more of these, incidentally, can be found in the booklet of the *"Best Of The Original Mono Recordings"* CD. The 60-page booklet that comes in the box set has on its covers another series of miniature Schatzberg portraits, but this time in colour; inside it has numerous other photos, some familiar and some new to me, and excellent, extensive notes by Greil Marcus.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the booklet is that the recording details at the end of the booklet include, for the first time, musician credits down to specific tracks. Sadly, for the three 1965-66 albums where these would be of greatest interest, the credits are full of patent nonsense. Did Charlie McCoy play guitar on *'Like a Rolling Stone'* and harmonica on *'Sad-Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands'*? Was *'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat'* the only *"Blonde On Blonde"* song on which Dylan played guitar at all? Do you hear a piano on Side Two of *"Bringing It All Back Home"*? And so on. Plus the release date given for *"Blonde On Blonde"*, as usual, is around six weeks too early.

Sony put a fantastic effort into getting their archive releases sounding as good as they possibly can, but then seemingly throw together the documentation in an hour or two without doing any cross-checking whatsoever – with musicians' recollections, for example, or even with what can plainly be

heard on the records. Anyone who's read Sean Egan's excellent recent piece on the making of *"Highway 61 Revisited"* (*Record Collector*, November 2010) will realise how suspect the original studio logs can be. Mind you, he also demonstrates that musicians' memories are not necessarily 100% reliable either, and probably any sensible attempt at documenting the personnel on individual tracks of these electric albums would need to admit to an ultimate level of uncertainty. But I know there are plenty of Dylan fans who would be delighted to contribute to a collaborative effort on this, and I'm there standing in the queue.

Having got this complaint out of the way, from here on the news is pretty much all good. Each CD comes in a beautiful little replica of the original LP sleeve (front and back, accurate right down to the type of paper used); the faces of the CDs themselves reflect the original label design, and the first two albums even have what I assume to be facsimiles of the original inner sleeves. The outer sleeves don't have the artwork cropped or otherwise compromised in the way that they were for the digipak SACD reissues; the square shape suits the original designs much better. We don't get the original sleeve stickers that were promised at one stage; just as well, in my view, since I never know whether to leave them on for authenticity or take them off for aesthetic improvement. But we do get the original LP inserts where relevant: the last seven of the "11 Outlined Epitaphs" in the case of *"Times"*, and the now rather dated sketch portrait of Dylan that was included with *"Highway 61 Revisited"*.

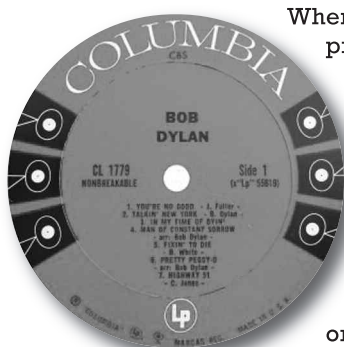
My only regret is that *"Blonde On Blonde"* still doesn't have the original inside sleeve layout featuring Claudia Cardinale. Presumably the legal injunction regarding the Cardinale photo – which was originally used without consent – still prevents its use in the United States. It's a shame for us here in Europe, since numerous European editions of the album over the years have continued to use the picture. Having said this, the use of the later seven-photo layout isn't totally inauthentic, as some late copies of the US mono LP were actually sold with the revised sleeve.

Now at last, we get to the real reason for this release – the music on the nine CDs (yes, *"Blonde On Blonde"* is presented, nicely, in its original two-disc format).



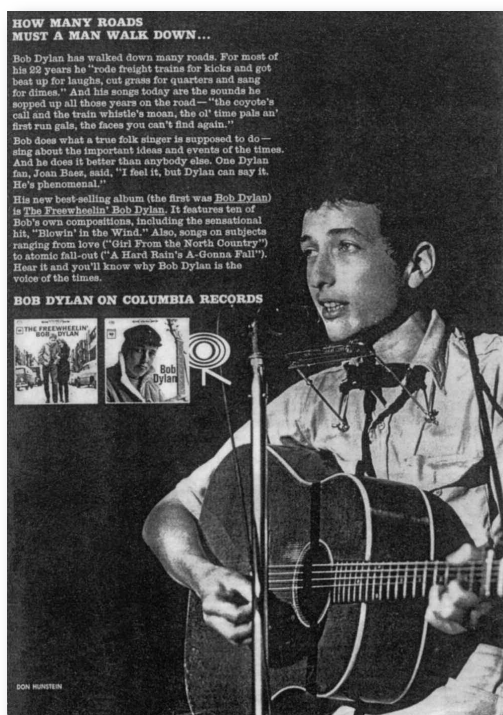
Bob Dylan

Those of you who have owned this album in the form of either a stereo LP or a CD bought anytime up to 2005 will know that this was the very worst of Dylan's stereo productions. It has Dylan's voice entirely on the left channel, his guitar on the right and a big silent space in between. This is undeniably an example of what Steve Berkowitz engagingly refers to as "stupid stereo", where the stereophony was used for pure novelty purposes.



First edition US Mono
"Bob Dylan" LP
with six-eye logo

When Berkowitz and Wilder prepared the album for re-release in 2005 as an addendum to 2003's big SACD reissue programme, they sensibly took the decision to abandon the original stereo mix and to create a new one – still stereo, but with a very narrow soundstage – from the original three-track studio tapes. So really, the fairest comparator for the new mono CD is this 2005 reissue CD. The only real difference between the two is that the stereo CD adds a little presence, particularly noticeable on the vocal, whereas the mono mix sounds absolutely flat. Which is better? It just depends on whether you want it to sound as though you've got Bob Dylan in the room with you or whether you want it to sound like you're listening to a Bob Dylan record. You really can't fault the 2005 stereo version, but the mono version is what everyone would have heard back in the sixties – only now without the clicks and pops. If all you have is the *original* (pre 2005) stereo mix then with the mono box you'll at last have a listenable copy of the album. For another fiver, you might want to also pick up the 2005 remaster and see if you like it even better.



The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan

This is where the real value of this set starts to reveal itself. Perhaps because it was recorded at so many sessions over

such a long period, the original stereo album was totally inconsistent in its mixing style. A few tracks sounded good, with both vocal and guitar in the centre, but most had the voice in the middle and the guitar displaced towards the right. The most ridiculous group ('*Blowin' In The Wind*' is a prime example) likewise had the guitar on the right and the voice in the middle, but when the harmonica came in (recorded on the same microphone as the voice) it was suddenly and clumsily panned over to the left hand channel, sometimes hardly keeping up with itself; then it was back to the middle for the next verse. Quite why Sony decided to reissue this farrago in 2003 without remixing at least some of the tracks is beyond me. I can only assume that the policy was to stick with the original stereo mix for the sake of authenticity as long as the tapes were usable. When they came to do the first album a couple of years later the original mix was so totally and consistently awful that they were prepared to override that principle.



Early US Mono
"Freewheelin'" LP with
guaranteed hi-fidelity logo

Anyhow, here at last we have "*Freewheelin*" as it sounded back in 1963, and as it should always have sounded – plain, simple and quite timeless, and with the sound crisper and brighter than on the Sundazed mono vinyl. Given that there's no listenable CD alternative for this album, I'd say the whole set is worth buying for just this one disc.

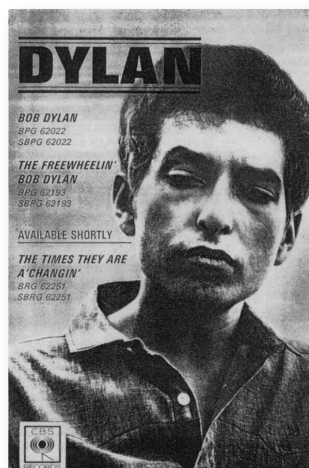


First UK advert, March 20, 1965

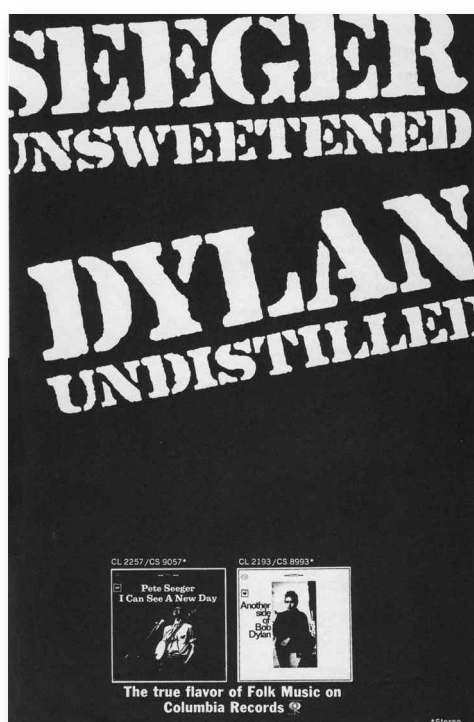
The Times They Are A-Changin'

The compulsive novelty of stereo had clearly worn off by the time this album was put together – or maybe the engineer happened to be one of those who had already been creating good stereo mixes of jazz and classical releases for years. So the stereo production was fairly subtle, with both vocal and guitar centrally placed, but with some added ambience on

both. The 2005 remastered stereo CD in particular sounds very good indeed.



But when it came to producing the mono CD for the box set there was no mono master tape to be found anywhere; so for this album Berkowitz and Mark Wilder had to go back to the three-track studio tapes and create a new mono mix that would sound as close as possible to the original vinyl pressings that they had. To my ears they've made a very accurate job of this. It sounds terrific, and it's a matter of taste again whether you prefer this to the 2005 stereo CD.



Another Side Of Bob Dylan

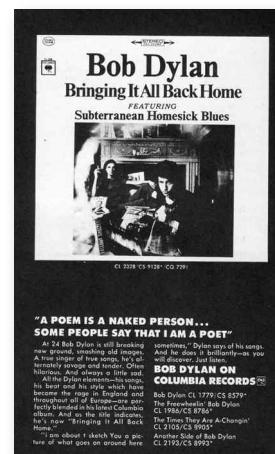
The real choice here is between the new mono remaster and Michael Brauer's stereo remix for the 2003 reissue. The placement of voice and guitar (and piano) on the original stereo mix was fine, just as with *"The Times They Are A-Changin'"*, but Brauer's enforced remix (the original stereo tapes were too far gone) does the same thing with more warmth and realism. The new mono mix likewise sounds very good, and certainly very like my old mono vinyl, but it's the same choice as with *"Bob Dylan"* and *"Times"* – it just depends on whether you want to hear Dylan himself or that old friend, a Bob Dylan record.

Bringing It All Back Home

Things get more interesting here. With the preceding solo records there was very little choice to be made (you'd think) with a stereo mix, and the only remarkable thing is just how dramatically Columbia did get the first two of them wrong. With a full studio band recorded on four-track tape there are an awful lot more decisions to be made in the mixing process, and therefore much more scope for variation between the mono and stereo mixes. Add to that the fact that the stereo mixes were usually done by different engineers without supervision, and it's hardly surprising that the stereo mixes of the electric albums came out quite different from the mono mixes that the artists and producers devoted all their attention to.

While *"Bringing It All Back Home"* wasn't Dylan's first experience of recording with other musicians, I'd guess it was the first in which the other musicians looked to him for their direction, and by all accounts they didn't get much. There were an awful lot of musicians in the studio, and with no rehearsals they all just pitched in, bashed out a couple of takes of each song, and that was mostly it. There was a surfeit of electric guitarists in particular, with only Bruce Langhorne really distinguishing himself. In stereo, even in Michael Brauer's much improved 2003 remix, it all sounds too exposed and too messy, and the individual instruments just distract and detract from the impact of the songs. It always did sound far better all concentrated into one mono channel as Dylan intended at the time.

And the new mono CD sounds just great. *'Subterranean Homesick Blues'* kicks it off with the same energy and impact that the single had in 1965; *'She Belongs To Me'* sounds effortless and crystal clear. *'Mr Tambourine Man'* is perfect, with Bruce Langhorne's electric guitar blending in beautifully with Dylan's vocal rather than sounding like a spare part standing off to the side . . . and so on. As an added bonus, on *'Mr Tambourine Man'* the mono mix gives you an additional few seconds of Dylan's final harmonica solo. On the original stereo LP and the 2003 stereo remix the fade-out on this song always sounded too hasty, particularly if you bear in mind Dylan's live performances of the song from this period, where there would be a complete harmonica verse at the end.





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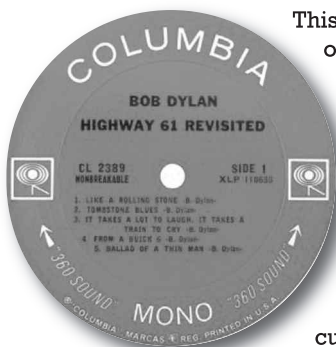
Highway 61 Revisited



Bob Dylan with
Tom Wilson

By this album Dylan was clearly ready to put more work into getting the songs sounding the way he wanted them. There were many more complete takes per song, there were fewer musicians and their roles were clearer. In particular there was a shift from the guitar-based sound of the previous album to the organ-and-piano axis which carried through both **"Highway 61"** and **"Blonde On Blonde"**. This made for an inherently cleaner sound which fares rather better in stereo than did the previous album. Nonetheless, the stereo mix has a number of unsatisfactory aspects: (a) the senseless placing of the drums on the right hand channel (a sixties convention which plagued Dylan's stereo productions right through to **"New Morning"**); (b) other individual instruments distracting from Dylan's vocal rather than blending in – the left hand piano on **'It Takes a Lot To Laugh'** is a good example; and (c) sloppy editing of the ends of the songs, with **'It Takes a Lot To Laugh'** in particular allowed to ramble on way past its bedtime.

Now, listen to the mono mix, and you just *know* that this is more like it. Much better focussed, more economical editing, more impact overall. And you get to hear Dylan's laugh of relief at getting all the way through **'Desolation Row'**.



This one doesn't quite get ten out of ten, though. In comparison with my UK first pressing, and even more so when compared with the Sundazed reissue LP, the Sony CD has more emphasis on the treble frequencies, giving Dylan's voice a rather hard, edgy sound and slightly over-emphasising the percussion. While this might suit the more confrontational songs, it's

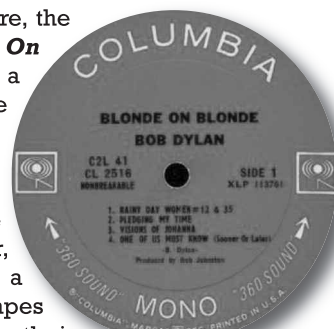
rather tiring over the length of the whole record. Maybe this characteristic is due to the fact that the album had to be mastered from a second-generation overseas copy of the mono mix, or maybe it's down to the particular US pressing whose sound Berkowitz and Wilder set out to match.

If you play an instrument you may also notice that the whole of this album is slightly sharp of true musical pitch – and therefore slightly fast too. This is equally the case with all original mono copies that I've heard. Whether Dylan and Bob Johnston deliberately speeded up the mono mix or whether it was an accidental inaccuracy is hard to figure; but on balance Berkowitz and Wilder probably did the right thing in preserving the anomaly.

Anyhow, despite these minor doubts, the mono remaster is still half a mile better than any existing stereo version of the album, and it's great to have it on CD.

Blonde On Blonde

As many of you will be aware, the mono mixes of **"Blonde On Blonde"** went through a number of revisions before the album's delayed release, and through confusion most of them got released in one country or another. So, like Bob Irwin nine years earlier, Berkowitz and Wilder found a bewildering array of mono tapes to choose from. Following their



Early US Mono **"Blonde"** LP
looked to use an original pressing of the album to help

identify the right tapes to use. What they settled on as their primary reference was a white-label promo copy which their colleague Bruce Dickinson, himself a big Dylan fan, loaned them from his own collection. They used the matrix numbers on this copy to identify the matching source tapes, and by my reckoning these must have been -2, -3, -4 and -2 for sides one to four respectively. In other words, what we have here is the final US mix, with no trace of the *earlier* variants that appeared on Canadian, French and UK pressings. (I don't know whether test pressings were made from any of the discarded mixes, but if Bruce Dickinson's copy had happened to be one of those, we could have had an interesting outcome.)

Of course, the final US mix was the best, and it contains post-recording improvements that have never been reflected in any of this album's many stereo mixes. For example, Dylan's vocal stumble in the last verse of **'I Want You'** is neatly edited out, in **'Visions Of Johanna'** the cymbal is deliberately muted, and in the same song Robbie Robertson's lead guitar is toned down and has a couple of musical slips edited out. In **'One Of Us Must Know'**, there was a major edit between the second and third verses, and the song doesn't fade out at the end. Oh, and **'Rainy Day Women'** plays at the speed it was intended to. This one song was speeded up by about 2% on all mono pressings of the album (and on the single too), with the result that it's slightly above true musical pitch; but it's at the tempo Dylan wanted.¹

So we've got the right mix, but how does the new digital release sound? There are small signs of tape wear near the start of a couple of the songs, momentary drop-outs which weren't evident on the Sundazed LP; but that aside, the sound is excellent, to my ears as good as an original US pressing and slightly better than the Sundazed vinyl. And this time the pitch is right on all the tracks. Both Bob Irwin (Sundazed) and Berkowitz/Wilder (Sony) say they used an original mono test pressing as their guide, but either they were different test pressings or someone's speed matching was not exact, as the Sundazed mono is consistently slower throughout. On the new mono CD all tracks are at true musical pitch except for the deliberately adjusted **'Rainy Day Women'**.

I do have some mixed feelings, though, about the best medium for listening to this album. The music was much more carefully arranged than on the previous two albums – thanks mainly to Al Kooper – and the quality of the musicianship is so high that in stereo it sounds like a gorgeous aural tapestry, where the individual instruments

just form part of the weave rather than presenting a distraction. None of the many released stereo mixes is perfect in adhering to the editing of the mono mix, but for the *sound* I'm talking about here, Michael Brauer's 1999 mix (now the standard CD) wins hands down.

So, as always with *"Blonde On Blonde"*, you take your choice and listen to whichever version takes your fancy. But it's great that the range of options now includes the original completed mono mix in such excellent digital quality.

John Wesley Harding



By late 1967, in the US at least, the market's preference was tilting well towards stereo, boosted by a year of psychedelic experimentation by musicians and consumers alike. So, even though Dylan's first album following his post-*"Blonde On Blonde"* retreat was as far from psychedelic as you could imagine, the mono format was only a few months from extinction and a stereo mix must surely have been more than an afterthought. So in theory it's hard to guess which version Dylan and Bob Johnston would have devoted more of their attention to. However, it surely can't have been an equal split as the mixes sound so different from one another. The mono has a much more '50s sound to it, with Kenny Buttrey's snare drum more prominent and propulsive and McCoy's bass deeper than it ever was on the stereo LP. From listening, I'm sure it was still the mono that got the lion's share of the attention.

There's even more of a contrast when setting this mono CD against the stereo CD/SACD remaster of 2003. Steve Berkowitz remarked back then that *"John Wesley Harding"* was the hardest album to remaster, mostly because of the over-recorded harmonica and Dylan's popped 'P's. He and engineer Greg Calbi opted then to present the original stereo mix tape without the compression and the high and low filtering that was always applied to LP pressings; but most listeners, myself included, found the results pretty unappealing. The album somehow lost all of its equanimity and the sound fell apart into constituents that seemed at odds with each other. The harmonica in particular was downright painful, and the pitch was too slow throughout. (Just compare *'I'll Be Your Baby Tonight'* on that edition with Vic Anesini's remastering of the same song on *"The Best of Bob Dylan Vol.2"* and you'll hear how different the results of these remastering exercises can be.)

Working with Mark Wilder on the new mono remaster, Berkowitz once again found this the most challenging album (see the accompanying interview), but this time they really have triumphed – the mono disc is an absolute joy. Everything about it just sounds absolutely right, and once you've heard it you'll wonder why you would ever want to listen to it in stereo.

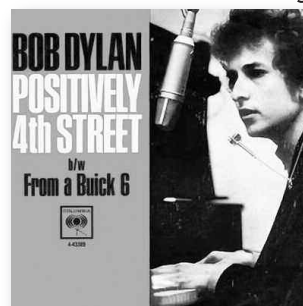
The genuine mono mix presented here appears only to have been released in the USA, and it probably sold in relatively small numbers even there, given the rapid ascendance of stereo. Certainly in England the mono LP – which would have sold far more in proportion than it did in America – was apparently a fold-down from the stereo master, albeit with a

lot more bass. So for UK listeners who didn't buy the Sundazed reissue, some aspects of the new mono CD may come as a surprise. As well as the very different overall sound balance referred to above, there are other noticeable mixing differences in particular tracks. On the title track, for example, there is the driving, up-front rhythm of Dylan's acoustic guitar; and in *'Down Along The Cove'* the pedal steel makes itself evident right from the start, reinforcing Dylan's off-beat piano with percussive little stabs of sound. This is not optional: you really do have to hear this album sounding as it always should have done.

So, all in all? If the albums were being sold separately then I'd suggest you think twice before buying *"Bob Dylan"*, *"Times"* and *"Another Side"* if you're happy with the current stereo CDs. The absolutely vital ones are *"Freewheelin'"*, *"Back Home"*, *"Highway 61"* and *"John Wesley Harding"*. . . OK, and maybe *"Blonde On Blonde"*. But in a way it's nice not to have to make that sort of decision – just buy the box, you'll love it. Aside from the slips in the documentation, Sony have done a tremendous job that's very hard to fault. I really hope that sales of the box repay the effort they've put into it and that the LIMITED EDITION sticker on the shrink-wrap proves to be an empty threat.

Coda: The Best Of The Original Mono Recordings

Rather than include the original US mono *"Greatest Hits"* album as part of the reissue program as Sundazed did, Sony have opted instead to release a low-priced mono sampler CD that is designed (and named) to do a better job of stimulating sales of the full box set. *"The Best Of The Original Mono Recordings"* in fact contains *all* of the songs from the US *"Greatest Hits"* plus five other tracks that ensure representation of all eight boxed albums. I can't say I'd have chosen either *'Chimes Of Freedom'* or *'Tombstone Blues'* for the job, but the point of real interest is the inclusion of *'Positively 4th Street'* in its original mono single mix.



This, like many of the tracks on *"Highway 61 Revisited"*, has a shorter fade-out than its stereo counterpart. The other noticeable feature, after so many years of listening to the song in stereo on numerous compilations, is that it sounds rather muted, largely due to the tambourine being much less evident in the mix.

If you've already bought the box set you'll have discovered that you don't (or didn't) actually have to buy the sampler CD to get this one song – a code that comes inside the box set allows you to download it for free, along with all the eight mono albums, in high quality 320Kbps MP3 format. If you hate MP3 on principle, buy the sampler – it won't cost you much.

¹ For more details of the differences between the mono and stereo mixes of this and the two preceding albums, see www.rdf.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk.

Images in this article are courtesy of Derek Barker, Ian Woodward, Franco Piras, and Alan Fraser at searchingforagem.com