

## ALUMNI BOOKS

# In the Service of Bob Dylan's Genius

*The Lyrics is an elegant, outsized tribute to the Bard* BY SUSAN SELIGSON



Editors of *The Lyrics* (from left) Lisa Nemrow, Julie Nemrow, and Christopher Ricks.

CYDNEY SCOTT

“PROVOCATIVE, MYSTERIOUS, TOUCHING, BAFFLING, NOT-TO-BE-pinned-down, intriguing, and a reminder that genius is free to do as it chooses.”

This is how Christopher Ricks characterizes the work of Bob Dylan in his introduction to *The Lyrics*, a hefty, lavishly produced volume he created with his former student Lisa Nemrow (CAS’87) and her sister Julie Nemrow (CAS’90).

Dylan has released 36 studio and 6 live albums since he first knocked the socks off the folk music world in 1962, and his lyrics, which have a way of colonizing entire lobes of the brains of Dylan aficionados, have been collected in bound form before.

But for Ricks, BU’s William M. and Sara B. Warren Professor of the Humanities, who compares Dylan’s cultural influence and likely legacy with that of Shakespeare, the tidily packaged verse in earlier efforts did not reflect the contemporary Bard’s distinctive and inspired phrasing or his penchant for reinventing lyrics when performing the songs live. In fact, as Ricks explains in the introduction to *The Lyrics*, with all the ink devoted to Dylan over the decades, this is the first time the lyrics are presented as Dylan sang them, with what Ricks calls “very different arcs for each of the songs that he shaped.”

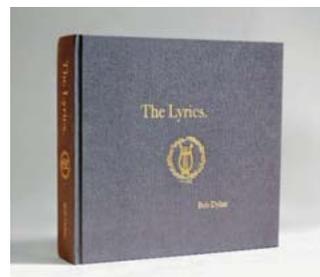
The verses, says Ricks, whose writing on Dylan in his book *Dylan’s Visions*

of *Sin* (2003, Ecco) was called “the best there is” by *New Yorker* music critic Alex Ross, “should all be presented to the eye in such a way as to help the eye see what the ear hears.”

“Here are the lyrics, as set down, as sung, and as sung again,” writes Ricks of the collection. With a printing of 3,500 in the United States and 500 in the United Kingdom, at \$200 apiece, Simon & Schuster is offering 50 additional copies, at \$5,000 each, signed by Dylan. “I didn’t buy one myself,” says Ricks, who met Dylan just once, about 15 years ago at a BU concert “that was a gift to us all from then President Jon Westling (Hon.’03).”

Ricks has had a decades-long association with the Nemrow sisters, who run Un-Gyve Press, an independent imprint of the Boston-based Un-Gyve Limited Group. Ricks is literary advisor to the small press, which according to its website publishes books of “art, epicurism, literature, history, photography, industry, ephemera, etc.” While not an easy sell, the Dylan book was embraced and strongly supported by Simon & Schuster, despite its complicated, expensive production, which required

that each book—which is 960 pages, weighs in at 15.2 pounds, and has the dimensions of the reproduced album covers it includes—be assembled by hand. “As expensive as the main edition was to produce, the limited edition was more so: the



gilded edges and slipcase, the paper—made in the United States—and then [Dylan’s] signature, emboss-sealed and certified,” Julie Nemrow says.

“There are a lot of people who believe not only, as I do, that he’s a genius, but believe he is a fascinating and extraordinary genius of a certain kind,” says Ricks. “It was interesting to see Simon & Schuster easily convinced when the Nemrows made the case for the book to be this size.”

Ricks describes their design as inspired and lauds their creation of a format that allowed the three editors to present the lyrics graphically, with the rhymes and emphasis true to the songs as they are heard.

Do the lyrics stand on their own as poetry? Ricks likens the question to asking whether it would be edifying for someone to read only the screenplay of *Citizen Kane*.

“The words in the movie are terrifically good, but they only constitute part of the art that it is,” he says. “It clearly is an amputation of a song to reduce it to its words. But if the words are really very, very good, then there’s

plenty of reward in them. Clearly there are things in Shakespeare that are a combination of what people say with the body language they use—there’s a kind of a vocal body language that you feel.”

Pressing fists to his chest for effect, Ricks cites what he calls “the physical nature” of a verse from “Just Like a Woman”: “your long-time curse hurts, but what’s worse, is this pain in here, I can’t stay in here...”

“Now that’s directly physical writing,” says Ricks.

“We can learn to hear the songs better if we comprehend and apprehend the words more assuredly—or less assuredly when that is the better response,” says Ricks, who explains that one reason the book is so big is that “it’s got lots and lots of full alternative versions of a song.”

And with Dylan, a song may be altered with different instrumentation or different words during its

long life, to the point where it is less a version of a song than a new song. Dylan likes to change the order of his stanzas or play with pronouns, as in the “Tangled Up in Blue” line that morphs from “I was laying in bed” to “he was laying in bed,” Ricks explains.

Dylan and his agents approved both the text and the design of the book, and offered any material or information that Ricks and the Nemrows needed to get it right, they say.

Beyond a reverence for Dylan, the book reflects a partnership born at BU, and a shared commitment to timeless words and craftsmanship.

As Ricks puts it, the only thing predictable about Un-Gyve is that it’s unpredictable. “But, our books are, predictably, always made of paper and ink. We’re traditionalists,” Lisa Nemrow says. “Our effort is to ensure that books that are supposed to be made *are* made and get made in the right way.”

## Book Asks: Are Terrorists Cowards?

Chris Walsh breaks ground with *Cowardice: A Brief History* BY RICH BARLOW

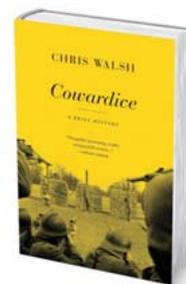
**WHAT IS A COWARD?** Many Americans called the 9/11 hijackers and the Boston Marathon bombers cowards, with no clearer proof than the photo accompanying this story of a labor union’s sign after the attack. Chris Walsh (GRS’95,’00) disagrees, and he can claim considerable

credibility: he’s written what he says is the first scholarly book on pusillanimity. His book argues that the misuse of “coward” has caused enormous harm throughout history. But properly understood, Walsh says, the word and the idea behind it are essential to promoting ethical behavior.

*Cowardice: A Brief History*, published by Princeton University Press, began as Walsh’s PhD dissertation at BU. He now directs the College of Arts & Sciences Writing Program and is a CAS assistant professor of English.

His research plumbed diverse disciplines and sources. These include fiction such as Dante’s *Inferno*, which consigned to hell those souls too cowardly to live life fully, and Stephen Crane’s Civil War novel, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Nonfiction informed him, too—in particular *The Execution of Private Slovik*, a 1954 account of the titular World War II soldier who was the last American executed for desertion.

*Bostonia* spoke with



Walsh about his exploration of the use—and misuse—of the problematic word.

**BOSTONIA:** How did you go about researching as unwieldy a topic as cowardice?

**WALSH:** I did it in an unwieldy way. It was my dissertation back in the ‘90s. I abandoned it for five years and went back to it [in 2005]. The dissertation was what one of my friends called “intellectually diapered,” looking at a selection of American fiction and asking, what does it tell us about cowardice? I decided if it were to be a book, it would have to look into history



This sign, put up by a labor union about the Boston Marathon bombings, spoke for many, Walsh writes.