

Program Note

Howard Fishman: The Basement Tapes Project
The music of Bob Dylan and the American Songbook

The songs we're playing tonight were originally recorded by Bob Dylan and The Band in the summer and fall of 1967 in West Saugerties, New York. The songs were recorded, informally, in the basement of the now-legendary house known as Big Pink, and never intended for release. Sometime thereafter, some of this music leaked out and became the first widely available rock "bootleg," a recording illegally trafficked among fans. When Columbia Records finally released a greatly abridged, somewhat bastardized version called *The Basement Tapes* in 1975, it became a best-seller, prompting Bob Dylan to famously remark (in mock surprise), "I thought everybody already had it!"

Since then, more and more of these recordings have surfaced. About ten years ago, another bootleg began making the rounds: a five-CD set called *The Genuine Basement Tapes*, which included everything that is known to have been recorded during those sessions. Greil Marcus wrote a wonderful book about this set, entitled *The Old, Weird America*. In it, he passionately expresses a feeling common to anyone who's heard the complete *Basement Tapes*— that this is some of the greatest, strangest, most elusive music ever made.

In 1967 Bob Dylan and The Band were recovering, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, from a tumultuous tour of Europe. The incendiary performances on that tour (recently documented in Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home*) had been less musical events than dramatic confrontations. Everywhere they went, Dylan and The Band were booed and heckled, treatment unexpected and unprecedented for someone of Dylan's already-iconic stature or The Band's (then known as The Hawks) down-home likeability. On a break from the tour, Dylan had a motorcycle accident and all bets were off. Both singer and band retired/retreated to the peace, quiet, and anonymity of Upstate New York. Dylan took a house with his family down the road from one rented by The Band (Big Pink), and over the course of several months, the guys got together in The Band's basement to make music when they felt like it (which turned out to be a lot). It was a laboratory, a clubhouse, and decompression chamber all in one.

What has survived of those recordings is a fantastic mish-mash, a trove of buried treasure. Most of it remains unreleased. There are the well-known songs like "I Shall Be Released," "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," and "Tears of Rage." But there are also covers of songs by Johnny Cash and Curtis Mayfield and the Sons of the Pioneers, and traditionals like "Buffalo Skinners" and "Bonnie Ship the Diamond." Some of the best originals have never been heard by most: "All You Have to Do Is Dream," "I'm Your Teenage Prayer," "I'm a Fool for You." And then there are the fragments, the tantalizing shards of masterpieces that we long to hear finished and made whole: "Sign on the Cross," "I'm Not There (1956)."

It is interesting to me that many view what Dylan did before and after this summer respite of home recordings to be the dividing line in his career; that what came before is this immortal, untouchable greatness, and that what came after was just a sort of "keeping on." My feeling is the opposite. I don't return to the things Bob Dylan recorded before 1967 too much. It's terrific, but it's buried under so many layers of what he's trying to do and who he's trying to be, that after a while the various filters become an impediment. To me, the sessions with The Band now known as "*The Basement Tapes*" are the first time Bob Dylan reveals his true self: not as a visionary prophet, not as a generational spokesman, not as a hallucinatory poet, but just as guy who loves to make music with friends; a guy who cracks himself up (and so cracks us all up), a guy who knows that his own true self is deeper, more mysterious, and more compelling than any role he could ever choose to play.

It's an honor and a joy to pay tribute to this music tonight.

-- Howard Fishman