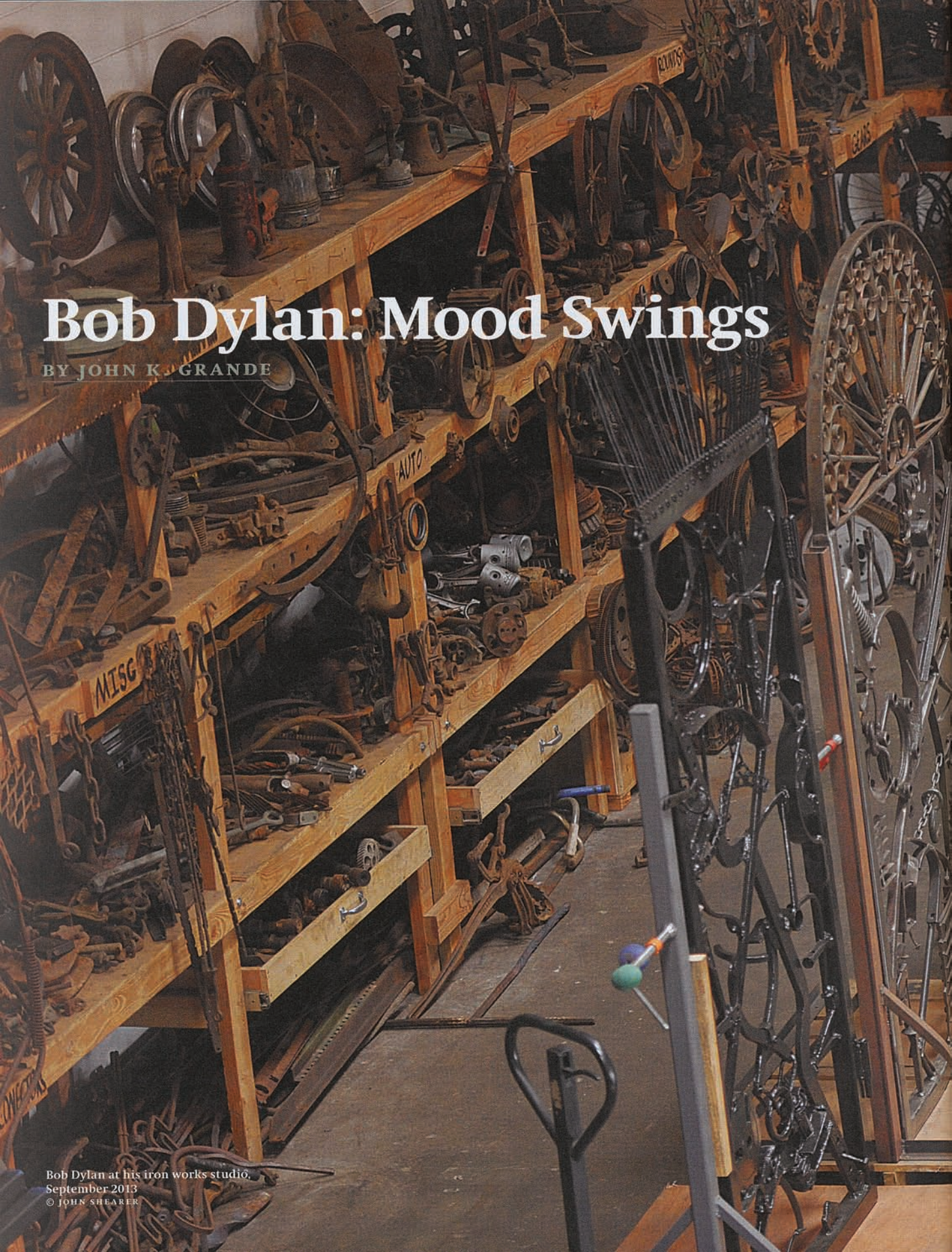
Bob Dylan: Mood Swings

BY JOHN K. GRANDE



Bob Dylan at his iron works studio, September 2013
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PLOW PARTS
LONGS

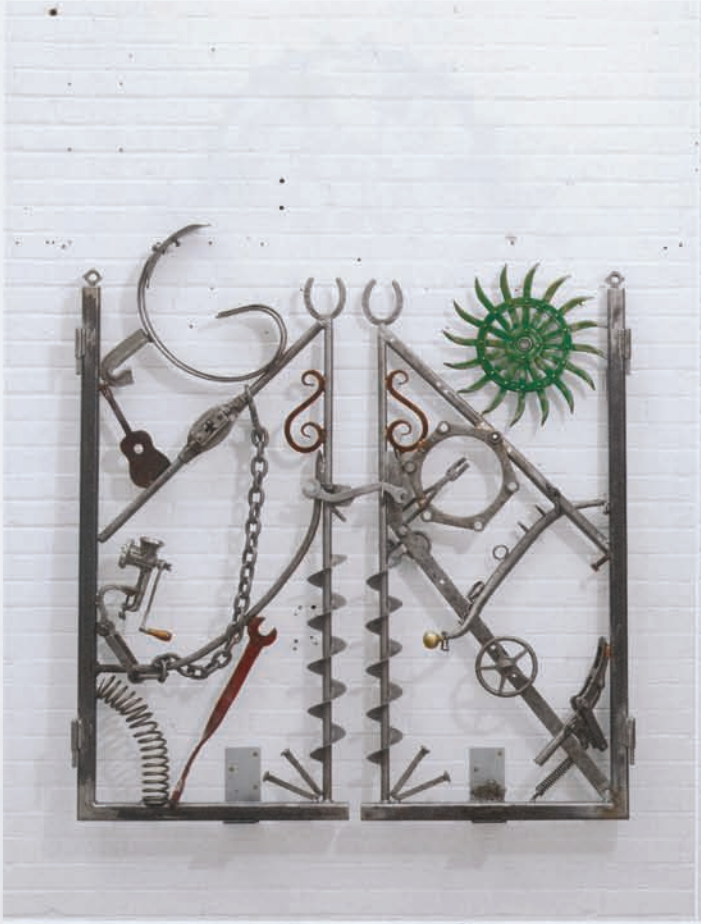
Untitled I (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
97 ¼ x 48 x 7 ⅞"
© BOB DYLAN/HALCYON GALLERY

My dreams are made of iron and steel
With a big bouquet
Of roses hanging down
From the heavens to the ground.
—BOB DYLAN, "NEVER SAY GOODBYE" (1974)

WHAT BRINGS A songwriter, one of the most popular alive, from music to sculpture? In his autobiography *Chronicles*, Bob Dylan talks about renting a third-floor walk up at West 4th Street in Manhattan for $60. A month. He describes the tiny place:

> *There was barely room enough for one person and the heat went off after dark and the place had to be heated by keeping both gas burners up full blast. It came empty. Quickly after moving in I built some furniture for the place. With some borrowed tools I made a couple of tables, one which doubled as a desk, I also put together a cabinet and a bed frame. . . . with hacksaws, cold chisels and screwdrivers—even made a couple of mirrors using an old technique I learned in a high school shop woodworking class using plates of glass, mercury and tin foil. Besides playing music I liked doing those kinds of things.*[1]

There is something no nonsense, plainspoken about Bob Dylan, whether in his lyrics, in his biography, or in his speech. It relates to earlier American history and literature, such as Stephen Hart Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*. Crane was recommended as a writer to Dylan by poet Archibald MacLeish, an American writer of an earlier generation, the same generation as folk legend Woodie Guthrie who so inspired Dylan, that he would visit him in the hospital. And that same plainspokenness helps to explain the accessible materials in Dylan's sculpture, his choice to recycle, to use what is present. As in his lyrics, the materials are always at hand. Reality is Dylan's source and creative medium. Indeed, it is actual experience that shapes the song and the sculpture—the limitations as well as the possibilities. And yet Dylan's sculptural work is criticized for that very same reason, because it is so direct and unencumbered by concepts.



Untitled II (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
67 3/8 x 61 1/2 x 10 1/4"
© BOB DYLAN/HALCYON GALLERY

Untitled III (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
89 1/4 x 36 x 5 7/8"
© BOB DYLAN/HALCYON GALLERY

Perhaps this lack of regard reveals the moral bankruptcy of the high art world that celebrates concept over matter and spirit. Dylan's "Gates" series, exhibited in late 2013 at London's Halcyon Gallery, are far from high art. These works challenge us all to look a little closer at the real world for our inspiration and poetry. And Dylan is always inviting us to express, to feel what we feel, even if it is all wrong, or at least not quite right. While such forthrightness may not resonate in the contemporary art world, it has earned him France's prestigious Légion d'honneur in 2013, and back home he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012.

For his show at the Halcyon, Dylan explained that "Gates appeal to me because of the negative space they allow. . . . They can shut you out or shut you in. And in some ways there is no difference."[2] Dylan's gates are marked by both strong structure and detailing. Like his music, the "Gates" also emphasize texture, with bronze weld marks that are left unhidden. You may see a fragment of a lawn mower, a dog motif in metal, cogs and wheels, but they are given a certain dignity. Not about concepts, they are more like memory maps of the experience of the everyday. This is what Dylan's work with metal seems to suggest. That design is a pragmatic response to availability. What is there is what you use.

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Selecting the elements to include, weld, attach, compose, is like writing. Instead of words, there are car parts, meat grinders, agriculture tools. *Untitled I* (2012–13) is an entrance without doors. A metal silhouette of a bird rests welded on top of a thick chain. At Dylan's sculpture studio in Los Angeles, old parts and iron elements are stored in quantity, like a large-scale box by American artist Joseph Cornell, trying to catch the past and reconfigure it into sculpture. A distant echo of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* is also detectable, with the struggle of man-and-machine and the Great Depression.

In *Untitled II* (2012–13), the doors are shut. You can never enter here, and the wrench that speaks of this "closure" has been bent and twisted out of shape. It's a not-so-subtle social

Untitled VI (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
74 x 71 ⅝ x 6"

Untitled IV (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
90 1/8 x 51 1/8 x 11 3/8"
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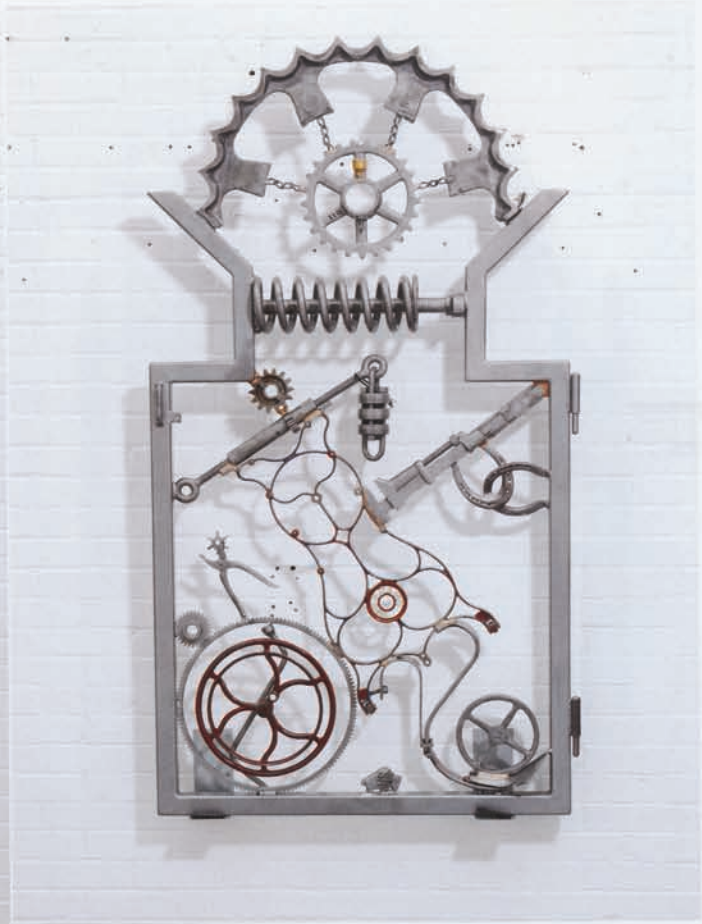

Untitled V (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
46 7/8 x 41 x 6"
© BOB DYLAN/HALCYON GALLERY

comment. Likewise large nails symbolize something forbidden, and a separation between two facets of society, something unspoken, but always present in Western culture. What is surprising is the simple symmetry, the logic of the cogs, rods, and wheels. They are structurally sound and well built with fragments taken from the book of the everyday. Like the work of sculptor Ed Kienholz (1927–1994), there is a manifest desire to seize on mundane material in order to bring art closer to life. While critics have called these works ordinary and lacking bite, it is this natural language that renders them accessible to a public, without rhetoric, even that of Dylan's own youth. In *Chronicles* he explains that this rhetoric became so confused, so misunderstood by people on both sides of debates about war, poverty, environment.

"I was born and raised in the iron ore country—where you could breathe it and smell it every day."

Dylan spent his youth in Hibbing, Minnesota, an area with a long history of iron mining. As early as 1978, Dylan told the *Minnesota Times* that when he returned to his home state: "I like to blast sculpture out of metal." He recalled that he'd "been around metal all my life ever since I was a kid. I was born and raised in the iron ore country—where you could breathe it and smell it every day. And I've always worked with it in one form or another." His interest in art included studies with a New York painter during his Greenwich Village days, a time when he visited the museums to discover art from the past. Dylan's paintings first came to public attention with the covers of his albums *Music from Big Pink* (1968) and *Self-Portrait* (1970). In 1968, on his twenty-seventh birthday in Woodstock, New York, he got a set of paints from his wife Sara and began to paint—quietly (no advertising). More recently, in 2007, he exhibited the "Drawn Blank Series" of paintings in Chemnitz, Germany. The recent "Brazil Series" (2010) manifests a social character, revealing the underbelly of society and corruption.

Dylan's sculpture, on the other hand, displays an entirely different quality than the painting. It has an immediacy that is pragmatic and lighter in spirit. The eight "Gates" in his

Untitled VII (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
98 ½ x 72 ¼ x 6"

Untitled VIII (Gate), 2013
welded iron objects
107 ½ x 63 x 6 ¾"
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recent exhibition are nowhere near Auguste Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, a project that continued for thirty-seven years until the sculptor's death. Nor are they close to "The Gates of Eden," a Dylan song of 1965 full of Biblical references. These "Gates" speak of the American industrial era with a direct language. They are a defense of the working class, the unions, the spirit of the people who made America, with axes recalling the pioneers of early American life. These are gates that engage the scale of the human body and provide a place in relation to potential transformation, serving as spaces we can move through. They suggest expectancy, seclusion, protection, or incarceration like that of Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who, after a long imprisonment, was freed, partly due to a song Dylan co-wrote in 1975 with Jacques Levy about this confinement.

These "Gates" speak of the American industrial era with a direct language.

In addition to the gates, Dylan's London exhibition included sculptures on various other themes. Dylan's "Gangster Doors," for example, are battered doors of American cars from the 1920s. Some have bullet holes in them, and each has a poster of a notorious American gangster, like Al Capone, next to it. There are table sculptures too, and small sculpted bronze guitars and treble clefs, a slightly tongue-in-cheek allusion to Dylan's other craft.

Bob Dylan's metal sculptures are not nostalgic. Art, Dylan once said, should "Hold that time, breathe in that time, and stop time."[3] Part poetry, part real, Bob Dylan's "Gates," like all his metal sculpture, speak of faith, hope, the times he lives in, and above all, the never-ending struggle that is for, with, and of life itself.

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1. Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Volume One* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), pp. 267–68.
2. Gallery brochure, Halcyon Gallery, London, England, 2013.
3. Bob Dylan, interviewed by Jonathan Cott, *Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1978; reprinted in Jonathan Cott, ed., *Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews* (New York: Wenner Books 2006), p. 192.