

Book Review: Dennis McNally, *On Highway 61: Music, Race and the Evolution of Cultural Freedom*. Berkley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-1619025813 (Paperback). \$16.95. 384 Pages.

Reviewed by Charles Cuthbertson¹

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Last November, Bob Dylan released the latest volume of his “Bootleg Series” titled “The Cutting Edge, 1965-1966,” in multiple editions. The most elaborate of these was an 18-CD edition that purported to include “every note recorded” during Dylan’s studio sessions of that year and included nine different takes of his song “Highway 61 Revisited,” a song that was also the title track of the Dylan album released in 1965. It has in fact become something of touchstone among Dylan fans, one that has been discussed and dissected as much for its figurative lyrics as for channeling the famed highway.

Highway 61 carries both historic and symbolic power in American popular culture. As Greil Marcus, the music journalist and cultural critic, documents in his examination of Dylan, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*, “Bessie Smith, the Queen of the Blues, died on Highway 61 in 1937, near Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Muddy Waters grew up and where, in the 1910s and ‘20s, Charley Patton, Son House, and others made the Delta blues; some have pretended to know that Robert Johnson’s 1936 ‘Cross Road Blues’ was set right there, where Highway 49 crosses Highway 61. Elvis Presley grew up on Highway 61, in the Lauderdale Courts public housing in Memphis; not far away, the road went past the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King was shot in 1968.” (Marcus 2006, 166-7)

Marcus notes that most of Dylan’s fans had probably never heard of Highway 61 at the time his album was released, but it is now the subject of a book by Dennis McNally, who has previously written a biography of

¹ **Charles Cuthbertson** teaches literature and composition courses at Palm Beach State College. He studied American Culture at Bowling Green State University and has seen Bob Dylan in concert many times.