In 1998 I heard Bob Dylan’s 1966 ‘Royal Albert Hall’ concert for the first time. Released by Sony as ‘Volume 4’ of the ‘Bootleg Series’, I found the entire performance both affecting and disturbing. For some reason I had never heard the actual ‘bootleg’ recording of this performance – though, of course, I had heard and read references to it for almost 30 years before its eventual ‘official’ release. We know now, as many have always known, that the ‘Albert Hall’ show was in fact a recording of a performance at the Manchester Free Trade Hall on 17 May 1966, several days before Dylan’s UK tour ended with two London appearances. Further, we recognise this as one of the most notorious performances in Dylan’s career because this was the night that one of his abusers was captured on tape issuing perhaps the worst insult of all: ‘Judas!’

Abuse of Dylan during live performance had begun the previous year. Again, the story is a familiar one: at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival Dylan is reported to have outraged the ‘folk music’ community by playing a handful of songs on electric guitar accompanied by a conventional ‘rock’ line-up of bass, drums and keyboards. From that point onwards – until his disappearance from public view following a motorcycle crash in 1966 – Dylan’s performances were organised as two ‘sets’, which took the form of a solo, acoustic rendition of fairly recent material followed after an interval by his taking the stage with an electric band with whom he played a mixture of new material and radically rearranged versions of older songs. At each performance and incessantly – city-by-city, country-by-country – ‘Newport’ was reprised: some audience members loudly booed him, others clapped enthusiastically, while still others (probably the majority) judged the shows on their merits and perhaps remained bewildered by the tensions surrounding them.
If the ‘Albert Hall’ performance is ‘notorious’, then, it is so in part because of the vehemence of the reaction of a proportion of the audience at that particular event (distilled in the infamous ‘Judas!’) but it is ‘notorious’ also because of what the recording captures and has preserved. As the near-final date of his first ‘world tour’, what the ‘bootleg’ conveys so graphically is the scale of the anger Dylan had provoked in a considerable number of his supporters and the degree of polarisation he engendered within his audience as a whole by his conscious and substantially public break with his former incarnation. He had been until this time – and by a very great distance – the leading songwriter and singer of not just the ‘folk revival’, but of the more diffuse ‘protest movement’. It seems impossible now to imagine a singer who could fill large auditoriums internationally, yet sell tickets to people who came to denounce him. Further, it seems impossible to imagine a music performance at which so much would appear to be at stake. For example, Eminem is a controversial writer and performer but his gigs have never been the battlegrounds that Bob Dylan’s were in 1965 and 1966; that they were has continued to lend Dylan a popular cultural status decades later.

As a ‘Dylan fan’ in those years I was too young to appreciate the significance of the stages in his self-development as a singer and as a writer: I saw, for example, no conflict between ‘The Times They are A-Changin’ and ‘Positively 4th Street’. There were no ‘different’ Dylans for me. Consequently I could not then have conceived of him as a betrayer; quite simply, I lacked the cultural context and the degree of personal investment in a version of ‘Bob Dylan’ for any song in his recorded and publicly available repertoire to offend me in any way. This is not to make some pious point; rather, it is to comment on how, in the days before instantaneous and ‘global’ mass communication, cultural distances were often far greater than physical ones: my ‘Bob Dylan’ was a composite of disparate, dislocated and discontinuous ‘facts’, images and opinion. I relied for information on him as did, I am sure, the vast majority of my peers, through occasional radio plays of his material (mostly on Radio Luxemburg and pirate radio stations), on snippets in the mainstream music press, and on the good offices of friends and acquaintances who might be cajoled to lend you a Dylan album for a brief period. All the possible responses to new information of whatever kind would be rehashed and worried at through perhaps hundreds of hours of conversation, joint listening sessions and, as the months and years passed, in front room and local folk club renditions of Dylan songs by close friends and even closer rivals.