

= Visions of Johanna =

" Visions of Johanna " is a song written and performed by Bob Dylan on his 1966 album *Blonde on Blonde* . Dylan first recorded the song in New York City in November 1965 , under the working title of " Freeze Out " , but was dissatisfied with the results . When the *Blonde on Blonde* recording sessions moved to Nashville in February 1966 , Dylan attempted the composition again with different musicians , and decided to release this performance . All the alternate versions of the song have been officially released , but some only on a limited edition collectors set : many of them are November 1965 or later 1966 studio outtakes , and two others live performances from his 1966 world tour .

Several critics have acclaimed " Visions of Johanna " as one of Dylan 's highest achievements in writing , praising the allusiveness and subtlety of the language . *Rolling Stone* included " Visions of Johanna " on their list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time . In 1999 , Sir Andrew Motion , poet laureate of the UK , listed it as his candidate for the greatest song lyric ever written . Numerous artists have recorded cover versions of the song , including the Grateful Dead , Marianne Faithfull and Robyn Hitchcock .

= = Recording = =

Clinton Heylin places the writing of " Visions of Johanna " in the fall of 1965 , when Dylan was living in the Chelsea Hotel with his pregnant wife Sara . Heylin notes that " in this déclassé hotel ? the heat pipes still cough " , referring to a line from the song . Greil Marcus reports that when the song was first released , " the story was that the song had been written during the great east coast blackout of November 9 , 1965 . "

Dylan first recorded this song , backed by The Hawks , in the CBS New York recording studio , on November 30 , 1965 , announcing his new composition with the words : " This is called ' Freeze Out ' . " Andy Gill notes that this working title captures the " air of nocturnal suspension in which the verse tableaux are sketched ... full of whispering and muttering . " According to Marcus , Dylan introduced the song in live performances in 1966 with the words , " Seems like a freeze @-@ out . "

Some of the New York recordings were uptempo and contain in the fifth verse the additional line " He examines the nightingale 's code " . Historian Sean Wilentz , for his book *Dylan In America* , listened closely to full studio tapes of the *Blonde on Blonde* sessions , and describes how Dylan guided the New York backing musicians through fourteen takes , trying to explain how he wanted " Visions of Johanna " played . At one point , Dylan says : " It 's not hard rock , The only thing in it that 's hard is Robbie . " Analyzing the evolution of the song in the New York recording session , Wilentz writes that Dylan " quiets things down , inching closer to what will eventually appear on *Blonde on Blonde* ? and it is still not right . " Several complete takes of the song were recorded on November 30 , including one with an uptempo rock beat , containing harpsichord accompaniment , and another with a march @-@ like tempo , which was released on *The Bootleg Series Vol . 7 : No Direction Home : The Soundtrack* in 2005 .

" Visions of Johanna " fell into place when Dylan was persuaded by his producer , Bob Johnston , to move the recording sessions to Nashville , Tennessee . During his first day in the CBS Nashville studio , on February 14 , 1966 , the *Blonde on Blonde* version of the song was recorded . In an interview with Andy Gill , Al Kooper has said that he and guitarist Robbie Robertson became sensitive to the nuances of Dylan 's vocal . Kooper added that " it 's very important what Joe South 's bass is doing in that " ; Kooper described it as " this throbbing ... rhythmically amazing bass part " . Other backing musicians were Charlie McCoy , guitar , Wayne Moss , guitar , and Kenneth Buttrey on drums .

The " Visions of Johanna " recording sessions were released in their entirety on the 18 @-@ disc *Collector 's Edition of The Bootleg Series Vol . 12 : The Cutting Edge 1965 ? 1966* on November 6 , 2015 , with highlights from the November 30 , 1965 outtakes appearing on the 6 @-@ disc and 2 @-@ disc versions of that album .

= = Live performances and recordings = =

Dylan first performed " Visions of Johanna " in public on December 4 , 1965 , at the Berkeley Community Theatre . Present at this concert was Joan Baez , who believed the lyrics referred to her . She said , " He 'd just written ' Visions of Johanna ' , which sounded very suspicious to me ... he 'd never performed it before and Neuwirth told him I was there that night and he performed it . " Heylin suggests that if Dylan performed it for anyone that night it was Allen Ginsberg , who was also present . Heylin argues Dylan considered Ginsberg to be an important influence on his songwriting at this juncture , and was keen to showcase the song for the Beat poet .

Two live versions of the song recorded during Dylan 's 1966 tour of England have been released . His performance of the song at London 's Royal Albert Hall on May 26 , 1966 appeared on Biograph , released in 1985 . Asked by Cameron Crowe , for the liner notes for Biograph , how he could remember the words of such a complex song in live performance , Dylan responded , " I could remember a song without writing it down because it was so visual . " A performance of the song recorded at the Manchester Free Trade Hall on May 17 , 1966 was released on The Bootleg Series Vol . 4 : Bob Dylan Live 1966 in 1998 .

= = Interpretation = =

Noting how popular " Visions of Johanna " remains among " hardcore Dylanophiles " , Andy Gill suggests it is the enigmatic quality of the song that is responsible for its popularity ? " forever teetering on the brink of lucidity , yet remaining impervious to strict decipherment " . Gill writes the song begins by contrasting two lovers , the carnal Louise , and " the more spiritual but unattainable " Johanna . Ultimately , for Gill , the song seeks to convey how the artist is compelled to keep striving to pursue some elusive vision of perfection .

Clinton Heylin has described what he construes as the strange circumstances surrounding the song . Written around the time of Dylan 's marriage to Sara Lownds , Heylin describes it as " one of the oddest songs ever written by a man who has just tied the knot and is enjoying a brief honeymoon in the city " . Noting that the song is an elegy for a past lover , Heylin speculates that " it is awfully tempting to see Johanna as his muse " who , in the song , is " not here " . For Heylin , the triumph of the song lies in " the way Dylan manages to write about the most inchoate feelings in such a vivid , immediate way " .

Dylan critic Michael Gray also praises the subtlety of the song . Gray acknowledges that it is difficult to say what this song is " about " , since it is at once indefinable and precise . For Gray , its principal achievement lies in the way it confuses categories , using language to be simultaneously serious and flippant , delicate and coarse , and mixing up " abstract neo @-@ philosophy and figurative phraseology " .

Robert Shelton called " Visions of Johanna " one of Dylan 's major works . He writes that Dylan 's technique of throwing out " skittering images " evokes " a mind floating downstream " ; these " non @-@ sequential visions " are the record of a fractured consciousness . Shelton argues that the song explores a hopeless quest to reach an ideal , the visions of Johanna , and yet without this quest life becomes meaningless . He suggests that the same paradox is explored by Keats in his " Ode on a Grecian Urn " .

Mike Marqusee situates the song in New York City , " a flickering , electric , ghostly , cityscape " . Dylan describes himself stranded in a fog of detachment which provides a haven , and at the same time is pained by a piercing clarity : an unmediated response that is " too concise and too clear " . For Marqusee , Dylan describes his predicament , suspended between freedom and slavery , yet hungry for an authentic experience . Johanna and Louise are objects of desire and yearning . " It is their elusiveness and unreality that 's the point . "

Guitarist and critic Bill Janovitz also emphasizes the urban , unreal quality of " Visions of Johanna " , calling it a " sprawling epic " . " The journey takes Dylan through lofts , the D train , a museum , empty lots , and through snippets of overheard conversation , as well as a discussion with some ' little boy lost ' , who ' takes himself so seriously ' , and who is ' so useless and all / muttering small

talk at the wall ' . " For Janovitz , this could " possibly be a swipe at a critic " .

Literary critic Christopher Ricks , in his study of Dylan 's work , pinpoints the emotional effect of these same lines :

He ? s sure got a lotta gall to be so useless and all
Muttering small talk at the wall while I ? m in the hall

Ricks writes that the phrase " and all " turns a mood of helplessness into a sense of " aggression and baffled anger " .

Trying to unravel the mystery of the song , Greil Marcus writes that the song is concerned with internal questions , rather than external ones : " Line by line , ' Blowin ' in the Wind ' is pious , or falsely innocent ? isn 't it obvious that whoever wrote " Yes , ' n ' how many seas must a white dove sail / Before she sleeps in the sand ? " already knows the answer , assuming he , or anyone , can actually bring themselves to care about such a precious question ? But ' Visions of Johanna ' is asking different sorts of questions . Such as : Where are you ? Who are you ? What are you doing here ? " Evoking the drugged , urban milieu of the song , Marcus writes of " People wandering from one corner of a loft to another , doped , drunk , half @-@ awake , fast asleep , no point to the next breath , let alone the next step . " For Marcus , " ' Visions of Johanna ' makes a narrative solely out of atmosphere . "

= = Legacy = =

The song has been described by several critics as a masterpiece . In 2004 , Rolling Stone magazine placed the song at No. 404 on their list of the 500 Greatest Songs of All Time , commenting that Dylan " never sounded lonelier than in this seven @-@ minute ballad , cut in a single take on Valentine 's Day 1966 . " (When Rolling Stone updated their list in 2010 , the song dropped to No. 413 .) In 1999 , Britain 's Poet Laureate , Andrew Motion , chose it as his candidate for the best song lyric ever written . Motion praised " the concentration and surprise " of Dylan 's lyrics , and said that , although he distanced himself from some of the singer 's views about women , the " rasp of his anger " was a part of his greatness . Commenting on the song in a 1985 interview , Dylan said , " I still sing that song every once in a while . It still stands up now as it did then , maybe even more in some kind of weird way . "

= = Cover versions = =

The Grateful Dead played " Visions of Johanna " in concert a number of times between 1986 and 1995 , and both they and Jerry Garcia solo each released a live version on record . There is also a 16 @-@ minute studio version of the song on Jerry Garcia 's All Good Things Redux , a bonus CD provided with the All Good Things box set of Garcia 's studio recordings .

Other artists who have covered the song include Marianne Faithfull , Robyn Hitchcock , Lee Ranaldo , Chris Smither , former Flamin ' Groovies guitarist Chris Wilson , Julie Felix , and Maggie Holland . The jazz trio Jewels and Binoculars , who named themselves after a phrase from " Visions of Johanna " , recorded an instrumental treatment of the song on their album The Music of Bob Dylan . Foreign language versions of the song include a recording by Jan Erik Vold , Kåre Virud and Telemark Blueslag in Norwegian , Gerard Quintana 's and Jordi Batiste 's version in Catalan , Steffen Brandt 's in Danish , and Ernst Jansz 's in Dutch .