

WEEKEND

Bob Dylan has been accused of plagiarising an obscure American poet in his latest album Modern Times. Now Nelson poet **Cliff Fell** has revealed a new string of poetic influences that date back almost 2000 years.

An avid follower of Ovid

The legendary American songwriter and rock star, who is known to many of his fans as "the poet laureate of rock'n'roll", released Modern Times in August and saw it shoot straight to No 1 in CD charts around the world, his first album to meet such public acclaim in 30 years.

This success was swiftly followed by controversy, when it was shown that some of the lyrics in Modern Times bear a strong resemblance to lines by an obscure 19th century American poet, Henry Timrod.

That sort of thing fascinates many Dylan fans, though the controversy initially passed me by because, by pure chance, I was slowly uncovering other, more ancient influences in the new album.

When I got my copy of Modern Times, I had just started reading Tristia, a book of poems by the Latin poet Ovid. It's the book of laments he wrote when he was sent into exile from Rome, about 2000 years ago.

I was trying to read it in Latin, but my Latin's a bit rusty, so I was also reading it in the Penguin, Peter Green translation. I sat down with the book one evening, and the Dylan CD on the stereo, and then this uncanny thing happened - it was like I was suddenly reading with my ears.

I heard this line from the song Workingman's Blues 2: "No one can ever claim/That I took up arms against you."

But there it was singing on the page, from Book 2 of Tristia: "My cause is better: no one can claim that I ever took up arms against you."

It was weird, though it didn't entirely



Cliff Fell,
similarities

surprise me, because in Thunder on the Mountain, the album's first song, Dylan sings: "I've been sitting down and studying The Art of Love/I think it's gonna fit me like a glove," and I knew that The Art of Love was the book Ovid was most famous for and one of the reasons he was sent into exile.

I was vaguely bemused by the similarity, but thought little more of it. In fact, I put it down to a simple coincidence, and kept on with Tristia.

But I'm a slow reader, and it was only a couple of nights ago that I came to the final sections of the poem, and there I discovered enough lines from Modern Times to know that Dylan really had been there before me.

So which lines are they, then, that have worked their way into Modern Times?

Apart from the "take up arms" line, they come from the last three sections of Book 5 of Tristia - and relate to two of the record's best songs, Workingman's Blues 2 and Ain't Talkin', the last song on the album.

Section 13 of Tristia begins with Ovid sending greetings from "his outback", and section 14 speaks of Ovid's wife being known "to the world's end".

In Ain't Talkin' Dylan closes the song "Heart burnin', still yearnin'/In the last outback at the world's end."

While that similarity might also be put down to coincidence, there are other lines that are much closer to Ovid. They all come in the song Workingman's Blues 2 and put the connection beyond doubt.

For example, in Tristia, Book 5, Section 12, Ovid writes: "Or Niobe, bereaved, lead off some cheerful dance," where Dylan sings: "I'm expecting

Finally, Ovid starts Section 14 of Book 5 with: "How great a monument I've built you in my writings, /wife, dearer to me than myself, you yourself can see," where Dylan has, in one of his most beautiful lyrics: "My cruel weapons have been put on the shelf/Come sit down on my knee/You are dearer to me than myself/As you yourself can see."

There may be more, for all I know. I've only just started reading the Black Sea Letters, the verse epistles published in the same Penguin volume. Not that I'll be counting. Anyone who knows anything about Dylan knows that he's frequently been a magpie, a bricoleur -



WORDS LIVE ON: Ovid, in a woodcut illustration.

you/To lead me off in a cheerful dance."

Or, in Section 13, line 18, of Tristia, Ovid has: "That I'm wrong in thinking you have forgotten me," while Dylan has: "Tell me now, am I wrong in thinking/That you have forgotten me?"

an artist who picks up tunes, lines, ideas and images from all over the place.

That's part of his process as a writer. What I find much more intriguing about this discovery, is that the more you listen to Modern Times, the more you sense that Dylan's cast the songs as a modern lament, in the mask of a new Ovid, a kind of modern exile in the modern world.

And that's what Dylan is, in a way - With the mystique that surrounds him, he's the ultimate exile, a voice that seems very close to us, but that also speaks from far away, across an unbridgeable divide, alone in that "last outback at the world's end".

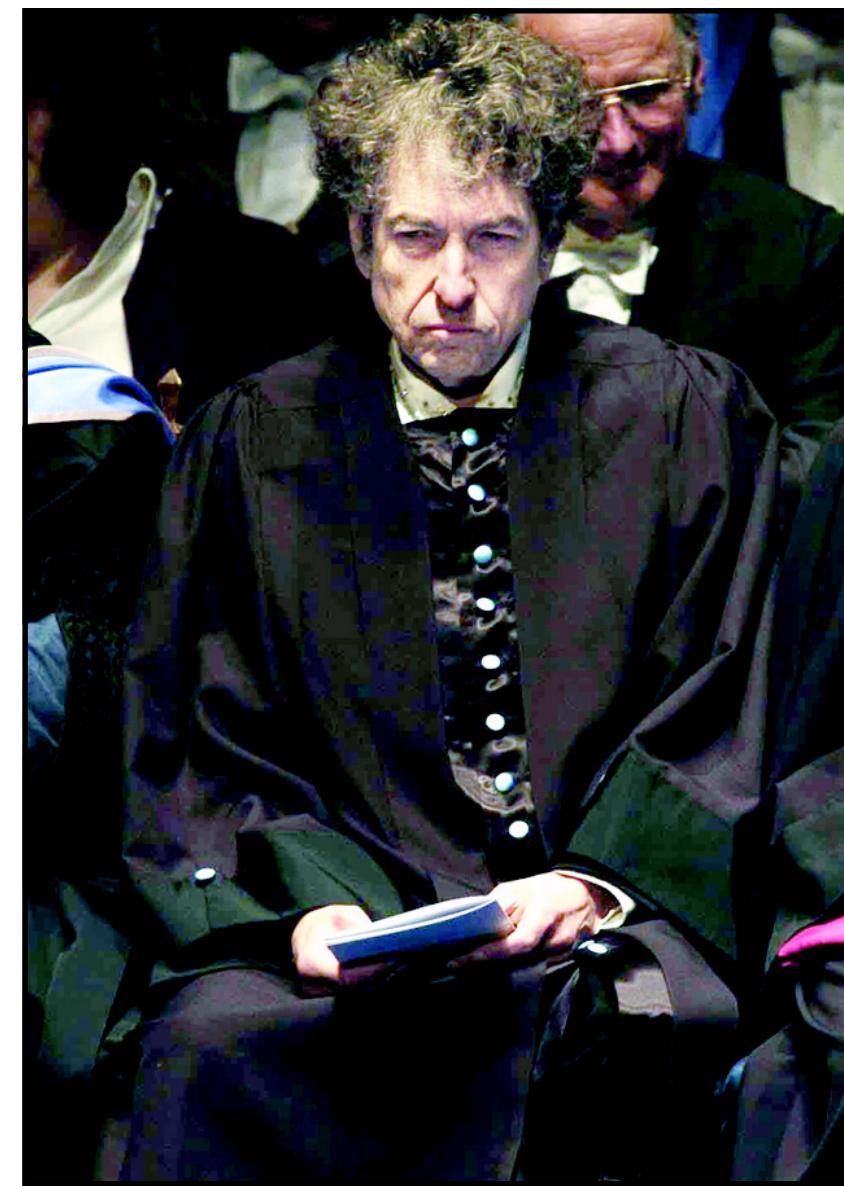
This issue is bound to raise further flutterings of controversy and charges of plagiarism. I would hope not. That's not the point. People who talk like that are simply missing it.

This is homage, not plagiarism. It's not something to bemoan, but celebrate. A great artist is forging new work, and as he intimates himself, the lines are "gonna fit me like a glove". Besides, think what it's going to do for Ovid - it'll keep his work alive for another 2000 years.

No artist works in an artistic vacuum. Anything original must go back to the origins.

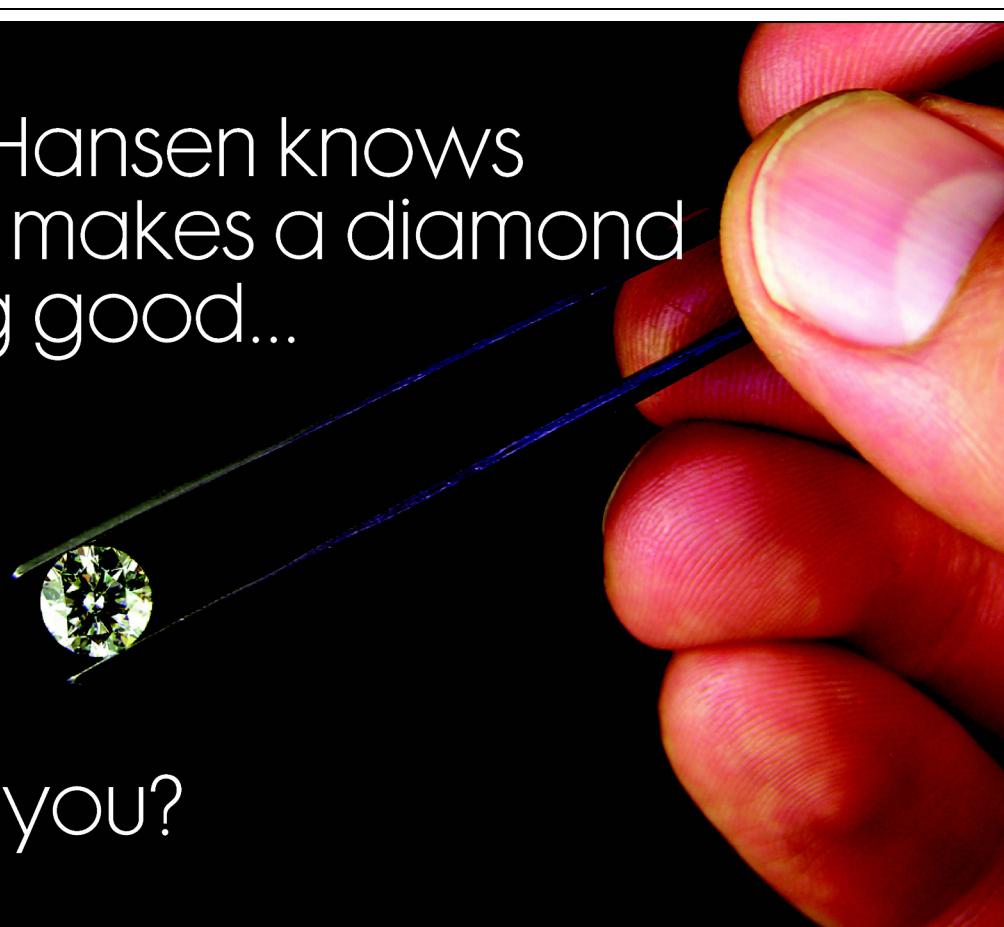
Dylan's in good company. Ovid, himself, stole lines and stories from Homer, as did Virgil. And Dante, Chaucer and Shakespeare all stole ideas and lines from Virgil and Ovid. It goes on. It's a part of the poetic process. In fact, to be frank about it, I was only reading Ovid in the first place, to snaffle up a line or two myself.

□ Cliff Fell is a tutor of creative writing at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology. His book of poems *The Adulterer's Bible* was awarded the Montana Jessie Mackay prize for poetry in 2004.



MAGPIE: Music legend Bob Dylan's latest album Modern Times bears more than just a passing resemblance to the work of Ovid. PHOTO / REUTERS

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