

ONE BOTTLE: THE 1985 DOMAINE DE LA ROMANÉE-CONTI ÉCHÉZEAUX

BY JOSHUA BAER

Now the moon is almost hidden
The stars are beginning to hide
The fortune-telling lady
Has even taken all her things inside
All except for Cain and Abel
And the hunchback of Notre Dame
Everybody is making love
Or else expecting rain
And the Good Samaritan, he's dressing
He's getting ready for the show
He's going to the carnival tonight
On Desolation Row

(All lyrics are from "Desolation Row" by Bob Dylan, 1965.)

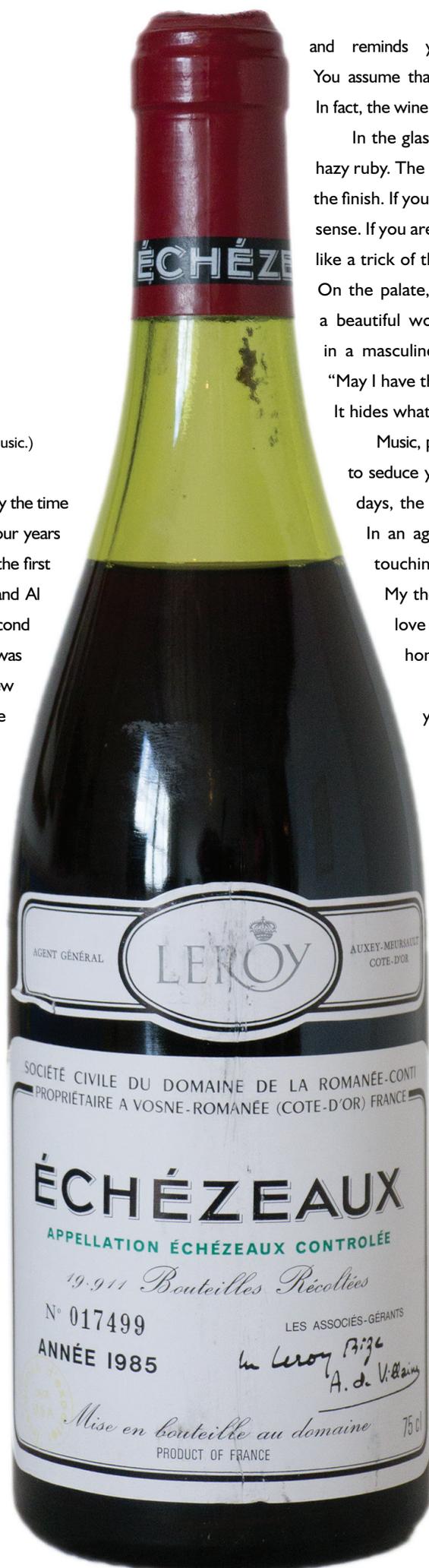
©1965 by Warner Bros. Inc.; renewed 1993 by Special Rider Music.)

Bob Dylan was born on May 24, 1941, in Hibbing, Minnesota. By the time he wrote "Desolation Row," in July of 1965, he was twenty-four years old, and world famous. Dylan recorded "Desolation Row" for the first time on July 29, 1965, with Harvey Brooks on electric bass and Al Kooper on electric guitar. The eleven-minute, twenty-one-second version that appears on Dylan's sixth album, "Highway 61," was recorded on August 4, 1965, at Columbia Records' studio in New York City. Russ Savakus played bass. Nashville musician Charlie McCoy played acoustic guitar. McCoy's delicate, playful, neo-Mariachi guitar introduces you to the song, then it leads you between the stanzas and down the song's blind alleys, much in the same way that Virgil guides Dante through Hell.

Like Dylan himself, the words and the music of "Desolation Row" are not clear. They do not tell you what you need or want to know. They give equal weight to lies, to truth, to lies about the truth, and to the truth about lies. On your way through the song, something happens to the way you live in time. The assumption that events occur in a linear fashion is disrupted. After challenging your sense of time, the song moves on to your identity. Are you who you think you are, or somebody else? By the end of the song, the honest answer is, "I'm really not sure."

Which brings us to the 1985 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Échézeaux.

1985 was the last of the old-school years in Burgundy. When they were released, the 1985 red Burgundies were praised for their finesse—the wine world's version of a left-handed compliment. Among the experts, the consensus opinion was that the eighty-fives lacked structure and would not age well. In 1988, I bought two cases of DRC's Échézeaux and started drinking them. Each bottle taught me more about wine than any other bottle I have opened. The most valuable lesson was that a great wine does not tell you its secrets the first, second, or third time you taste it. A great wine misleads you. The moment you think you understand it, the wine changes the rules



and reminds you that you're not the one who's keeping score. You assume that you're using your intuition and senses to judge the wine. In fact, the wine is judging you.

In the glass, the 1985 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Échézeaux is a hazy ruby. The bouquet ties together some of the loose ends articulated by the finish. If you have not yet tasted the finish, those loose ends will make no sense. If you are familiar with the finish, the bouquet's references may seem like a trick of the mind, but those references are the opposite of trickery. On the palate, the Échézeaux displays the charms and idiosyncrasies of a beautiful woman, but those charms and idiosyncrasies are displayed in a masculine style, the way men used to approach ladies and say, "May I have this dance?" The finish is simultaneously generous and stingy. It hides what it delivers but also delivers what it hides.

Music, poetry, and wine have attributes in common. They are designed to seduce you, to take your inhibitions and turn them inside out. These days, the consensus opinion is that the art of seduction is obsolete. In an age where you can have sex with another person without touching them, why waste time disguising your true intentions? My theory is that the truth is not all it's cracked up to be. If you love someone, and want her or him to love you, by all means, be honest, but don't confuse being honest with telling the truth.

On May 24, 2013, Bob Dylan turns seventy-two. In the forty-eight years since he wrote and recorded "Desolation Row," he has written many great songs, including, but not limited to, "Just Like a Woman," "Stuck Inside of Mobile (With the Memphis Blues Again)," "Visions of Johanna," "Dear Landlord," "I Dreamed I Saw Saint Augustine," "Lay Lady Lay," "Señor," "Most of the Time," "Man in the Long Black Coat," and "Not Dark Yet." If you listen to those songs, memorize their lyrics, and carry their banshee music in your heart, sooner or later they will lead you back to "Desolation Row."

Praise be to Nero's Neptune
The Titanic sails at dawn
And everybody's shouting
"Which Side Are You On?"
And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot
Fighting in the captain's tower
While calypso singers laugh at them
And fishermen hold flowers
Between the windows of the sea
Where lovely mermaids flow
And nobody has to think too much
About Desolation Row

Happy Birthday, Bobby. Whatever you're drinking, I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoy your songs.

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