

***Bob Dylan: An Impact on
American Society in the
1960's***

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The 1960s was a decade of liberation for music, public opinion, dance, invention, and the binds of racism. From this generation spawned some of the greatest musical artists of all time—one in particular, Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan is considered to be the greatest influence on popular culture of all time. However, Bob Dylan was not born an idol—his legacy was a result of his surroundings. Throughout Bob Dylan's life, starting with his childhood, he has been somehow affected by various historical events, such as the after-shocks of the world wars, improvement of television and radio in society, Kennedy's assassination, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the civil rights movement; it was these changes in society that influenced Dylan to write music that would in turn evoke changes within that society itself.

Robert Allen Zimmerman, later known as Bob Dylan, was born on May 24, 1941 to Abraham Zimmerman and Beatty Stone Zimmerman. He was born in Duluth, Minnesota; however, at the age of seven, he and his family were forced to move to Hibbing, Minnesota. Abraham worked as a department supervisor at the local Standard Oil in Duluth, but after World War II, there was a low demand for Standard Oil products and the family decided to move to Hibbing. Iron ore had been discovered in Hibbing, which caused an economic boom. Abraham got a job at Micka Electric, while Beatty worked at Feldman's Department Store.¹

Growing up Jewish in a small town like Hibbing, was no easy task. There were very few Jews there; in fact, Robert was related to just about all of the Jews in town. Because of this, he spent much time around his family.² At an early age, Robert was already showing signs of natural talent. He had a natural ability for writing poetry; according to his mother, Robert was “a prodigious writer of poetry throughout his youth.”³ Robert's primary inspiration as a young boy came by means of the television and radio. He spent countless hours admiring the television as some of his favorite actors filled the screen. However, the radio had the biggest effect on young Zimmerman. Many believe rock-n-roll to be Robert's first inspiration; however, it was actually country music that he loved.⁴ His “first idol” was country singer Hank Williams. “Hank Williams sang about the world of railroads, the pain of loss, and the need to move. His restlessness echoed Bob's own.”⁵ Among his other inspirations were James Dean and Woody Guthrie. Robert mimicked the sound of Hank, but his image came from James Dean.⁶ In 1956, Robert heard for the first time the sounds of what would become his next inspiration--it was called rock-n-roll. As he listened to the music of Little Richard, Buddy Holly, and Elvis Presley play through the radio, Robert decided that he would also become a rock-n-roll star.⁷ “The lyrics crystallized all his feelings of ambition, rebellion and individual identity...Hibbing no longer represented a frontier to his aspirations.”⁸ Robert now had the music, the ambition,

and the image (he mimicked the look of James Dean “the rebel”). He decided to start a band, if fact, Robert was a part of several bands including the Shadow Blasters', Elston Gunn and the Rock Boppers, and Bobby Vee's Band.⁹

In 1959, Robert left home to attend the University of Minnesota. Shortly afterwards, he tried out for a gig at the Ten O'Clock Scholar coffeehouse. David Lee, the owner, was auditioning for folksingers. When he asked for Robert's name, he simply replied, “Bob Dylan.” Later, when interviewed, Dylan said that the name just came to him right then—it had no meaning other than that.¹⁰ Some suspect that the name actually came from poet Dylan Thomas, but Bob never confirmed this. Other sources say that it may have come from Matt Dillon off of one of Bob's old favorite TV shows, “Gunsmoke.” Another possibility was that “Dillon” was a family name, from one of his uncles who was a Las Vegas gambler.¹¹ Wherever the name came from, however, Robert Zimmerman, a.k.a. Bob Dylan, was becoming an increasingly popular musician.

Despite Dylan's goal to become a famous rock-n-roll star, he soon became known as a folk singer. Most of his influences were from country, folk, and rhythm and blues. One of his biggest role models was folk musician Woody Guthrie—Bob even “adopted Guthrie's Okie accent.” That was the tradition of folk music—borrowing from other artists. Dylan

borrowed from just about every blues or folk performer he ever saw; “the music belonged to no one.”¹²

In 1961, Dylan’s dreams were becoming a reality—he was finally going to become a star. Columbia Records offered Dylan a contract, and in March of 1962, he released his first album, *Bob Dylan*, and his second, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, in 1963. It was around this time that Bob started writing his protest songs (also called “finger-pointing” songs—sincere expressions of frustration towards leaders who opposed change¹³), in response to the beginning of the civil rights movement.

There are several catalysts that led up to the civil rights movement. The integration of major league baseball in 1947 and Truman’s proposal to integrate the armed forces were both pawns in starting the movement. Also, the integration of schools in 1954 was a major event in history; the Supreme Court ruled that “separate but equal” in schools was no longer tolerable. In the next year, an event took place that would change the course of the movement. On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks was arrested for violating the busing segregation ordinance when she refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. This caused a ripple effect; it led to the Montgomery Improvement Association, whose president, Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as many advocates, started boycotts, protests, and marches that eventually led to

many positive changes in society.¹⁴ All of these changes caused Bob Dylan to write some of the most influential protest songs of a generation.

Bob's girlfriend at this time, Suze Rotolo, was involved in C.O.R.E (Congress of Racial Equality), an organization heavily involved in the civil rights movement. She asked him to write some songs for the organization. His first was called, "The Death of Emmett Till." This song raised a lot of heads. It was about the murder of a black boy in 1955, 15 yr. old Emmett Till, who was killed because he whistled at a white girl. However, Dylan did not stop there. He also wrote "Oxford Town," which was another news account about another major event in the civil rights movement. In September of 1962, black student James Meredith, enrolled in the University of Mississippi, an all-white school at that time.¹⁵ This was the beginning of not only the civil rights movement, but the beginning of Bob Dylan's career as well. He began writing for *Broadside*, the first magazine to publish his work. He became its "most regular contributor."¹⁶

Perhaps one of Dylan's most offensive songs was "Only a Pawn in Their Game," which he sang for the first time in Greenwood, Mississippi at a civil rights battle. The song was about the murder of Medgar Evers, a civil rights activist and the secretary of the Mississippi chapter of the NAACP. Coming home one evening, Evers was shot on his front porch by Brian de La Beckwith. In Dylan's song, he described the murderer as "just a poor dumb white bigot manipulated by powerful racist forces."¹⁷ On

another note, he also said that “the assassin was also a victim, harmed by a system that teaches hate.”¹⁸ Another controversial song about a black person being the victim of a white person was “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.”¹⁹ “Blowin in the Wind” became an anthem for the civil rights movement. It made Dylan the “spiritual leader” of the movement. The song was about society being “betrayed by our silence” and the failure of our nation's leaders to keep their promises to their country. His song showed that if we, the people of this country, stand by and say nothing, then we are betraying ourselves because the people in power don't care.²⁰

Dylan's third album included such finger-pointing songs as “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” “The Times they are A-Changin,” “When the Ship Comes In,” and “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll.” These pieces seemed to show more sophistication than his traditional work. Bob said in reference to his traditional songs, “the folk songs showed me...that songs can say something human.”²¹ Researchers have shown that folk singers did not necessarily convince people of something new; rather they reinforced political views that were already there. The way something is presented is often as important as what is actually said. With Dylan, his “medium was also his message.”²² Bob said himself, “I don't think when I write. I just react and put it down on paper...what comes out in my music

is a call to action."²³ His songs influenced the movement, as much as the movement influenced him.²⁴

“Dylan insisted that politics...were an integral element of his songs’ lyrics, and that social issues ‘are more important than music.’” Another event that evoked a musical response was the Cuban Missile Crisis—“the most terrifying confrontation of the Cold War.”²⁵ In 1963, America was threatened with the fear of nuclear warfare by the USSR. Dylan wrote, “A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall,” which described the current situation that the public was facing—fear, anticipation, worry, bitterness, and dread. Dylan said himself that “it was a song of terror. Line after line after line, trying to capture the feeling of nothingness.”²⁶ In this song, he parallels between what was happening in the U.S. and the imagery used by the Biblical prophets describing “destruction and desolation.”²⁷ Dylan’s “The Times They are A-Changin’” was another song about the effects on society by the changes going on in the country. Most young Americans considered it a song about the generation gap between liberals and conservatives. Dylan simply said that “they were the only words [he] could find to separate aliveness from deadness.”²⁸ He was a “poet of the people”; he reinforced the belief that if they believed strongly enough and stood up for those beliefs, “they could build a new world.”²⁹ He was “sowing the seeds of the decade.”³⁰

Although he was never a big part of the Vietnam protest, Dylan wrote several anti-war songs. Two of the most popular of his anti-war songs were "Masters of War" and "John Brown." In "Masters of War," Dylan is finger-pointing the evil men who make profit off of war while young men go off and die. In the song he says, "like Judas of old, you lie and deceive...you fasten the triggers for the others to fire, then you set back and watch when the death count gets higher."³¹ "John Brown" on the other hand tells of the deception of war, and its true effects on the individual. John Brown, the man in the song, is sent off to war with honor; his mother "brags about her son with his uniform and gun...in this old fashioned war." However, when her son returns, she can hardly recognize his face because of the destruction that the war has caused. John Brown says that in the middle of the battleground, he realized that he was just a "puppet in a play."³² Another popular anti-war song was "With God on Our Side." This song goes through several of the wars that the United States has been through, including the Spanish-American war and both World War I and World War II, and basically says how arrogant it is for "us" to expect God to be on our side.³³ Other anti-war songs of such stature are "Legionnaire's Disease," "Let Me Die In My Footsteps," and "Talkin' World War III Blues."

On November 22, 1963, Lee Oswald assassinated President John F. Kennedy. This was a major event in U.S. history. It was also a major event

in Dylan's career. After this tragedy, Dylan decided to remove himself from politics. Some believe that he was afraid of being assassinated himself. Others had the same fear; because so many of the nation's heroes had been taken away—James Dean, Kennedy—some were afraid that Dylan would be next because to them he was like a “broken-winged sparrow.”³⁴ From that point on, Dylan restrained himself from being involved in any kind of political movements going on at that time. The irony was that him leaving politics had a reverse effect. Dylan laid the foundation for the activists, mostly college students, who fought against the destruction of the system. No other artist was able to create the kind of revolution that he did. He had the greatest impact on that generation.³⁵

The nation was divided in the fall of 1968, by its split over the Vietnam War and social issues such as the continuing battle of integration. As anti-war demonstrations and police clashed on the streets of Chicago, the young protestors chanted Dylan's words, 'The whole world is watching' and television showed the police riots to millions of American viewers.³⁶

Dylan, through his music and songs, was a factor in the revolution of hundreds of thousands of people. He may not have been responsible for the ideologies behind the movements, but he provided the “emotional

drive" behind them.³⁷ Not only was he an influence on the American public, but also on other rising musicians of that era, such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Joan Baez, Eric Clapton, Van Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, and the list goes on.³⁸ Dylan also became the catalyst for cultural change; he has been described as the "most influential popular musician of the twentieth century."³⁹ His footprints were so impressionable that a whole generation followed his lead.⁴⁰

He took in all the events and emotions going on, took them in, rewrote them into prose, poetry, set them to music...and with that beautiful, honest form of liberation and song, set free minds, unlocked emotions, changed, revolutionized, influenced music, truth, protest, confusion, politics, rock-n-roll...⁴¹

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- ¹ William McKeen, *Bob Dylan: A Bio-Bibliography* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993), 5.
- ² Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 23.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ McKeen, 5.
- ⁶ Heylin, 24.
- ⁷ McKeen, 6.
- ⁸ Heylin, 25.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-30.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹¹ McKeen, 12
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 128.
- ¹³ Heylin, 79.
- ¹⁴ McKeen, 22.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ¹⁶ Heylin, 66.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ¹⁸ McKeen, 24.
- ¹⁹ Heylin, 86.
- ²⁰ Anthony Scaduto, *Bob Dylan* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1971), 117-118.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 86.
- ²² Louis Cantor, "Bob Dylan and the Protest Movement of the 1960's: the electronic medium is the apocalyptic message," in *Conclusions on the Wall: New Essays on Bob Dylan* (Manchester: Thin Man, Ltd., 1980), 76.
- ²³ Heylin, 89.
- ²⁴ Scaduto, 137.
- ²⁵ Gary B. Nash et al., *The American People* (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 2000), 734.
- ²⁶ Heylin, 70-71.
- ²⁷ George Monteiro, "Dylan in the Sixties," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 73 (1974): 167.
- ²⁸ Heylin, 87.
- ²⁹ Scaduto, 136.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ³¹ T. Tanaka, "Bob Dylan's Original Lyrics," n.d., <http://orad.dent.kyushu-u.ac.jp/dylan/song.html> (24 March 2001).
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Scaduto, 170.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 224-225.
- ³⁶ McKeen, 44.
- ³⁷ Scaduto, 225.
- ³⁸ Cantor, 90.
- ³⁹ McKeen, 123.
- ⁴⁰ Forland, Tor Egil, "Bringing It All Back Home or Another Side of Bob Dylan: Midwestern Isolationist," *Journal of American Studies* 26 (1992): 337.
- ⁴¹ Amy Blanton, 2001.