

Bob Dylan: Voice of a Generation — and More

By Ron Sirak • @ronsirak

August 25,, 2019



The extremely wise comedian George Carlin said about wakes that they throw the best party for you when you can't be there. The same can be said about obituaries. Words of appreciation are heaped upon deaf ears. So allow me now to sing praises of someone still here to hear it: Bob Dylan is the greatest poet in the English language. He is my muse.

As a writer, I often read something or hear something and wish I'd written it. When it comes to Dylan, I've said that a thousand times. He captured the anger and anxiety of a generation, my generation, those post-World War II children who grew up amid the suspicion of the Cold War, the chill of the blacklist and in the shadow of nuclear annihilation.

Dylan was the bridge from the Beatniks to the Hippies but, like all artist who produce enduring work, he transcended generations, tapping into the existential angst that is at the core of being alive. All those who have ever taken a breath have wondered why. The genius of Dylan is that he made us ask why.

Why should we be good people and not merely selfish people? In Plato's perfect world of forms, something is what it is because it's good that it be what it is. That's pretty much the way Dylan sees it. He articulated the two battles we all fight: The individual struggle – how to make it through the night – and the collective struggle – how do we make it better for all of us, or at least most of us.

Emma Lazarus, the American poet who wrote the glorious words on the base of the Statue of Liberty, said: "Until we are all free, we are none of us free." That concept is at the essence of everything Dylan has written. Personally, we fight to be who we are, pursuing love, ambition, family. Collectively, we fight for fairness, pursuing the equality for all that should be the birth right of everyone.

At the core of Dylan's genius is a bravery that is almost dysfunctional. He truly doesn't care what others think of his work. His nasal voice was not embraced by many; but he didn't care. When hammered because his lyrics matured from blatantly political to personally liberating; he didn't care. Called Judas when he took folk music electric; he didn't care. Born again, lost again, Jewish again – he didn't care. He was Bob being Bob.

When Dylan was 21 years old he wrote: "How many roads must a man walk down before you call him a man?" That was pretty much the question he asked in

each of the hundreds of songs he's written over the last 60 years. Plato said we are who we are because it's good that we be who we are; Dylan said we are who we are and we have to try to be the best possible version of our self.

Nothing can better describe what Dylan wrote than the words he wrote. In "Master of War" he turned his rage toward those who profit from weapons of war: "You've thrown the worst fear that can ever be hurled; fear to bring children into the world."

In "Tomorrow Is a Long Time" he taps into the isolation we all at times feel: "If tomorrow wasn't such a long time, then lonesome would mean nothing to you at all."

Long before gun violence became an issue, long before the manipulation of the poor to serve the political interests of the rich became clear he used "Only a Pawn in Their Game" to deliver that message: "A bullet from the back of a bush took Medgar Evers' blood, A finger fired the trigger to his name."

Always, he was searching for that person who understood him: "Come in, she said, I'll give you shelter from the storm" (Shelter of the Storm) while not losing sight of who he is: "Well, I try my best to be just like I am, but everybody wants you to be just like them, they sing while you slave and I just get bored. I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more" (Maggie's Farm).

At the core of Dylan's genius is his ability to articulate the duality of us all; the balancing act between the struggle for personal freedom and self-fulfillment while working for the collective good.

"And if my though dreams could be seen they'd probably put my head in a guillotine" (It's All Right Ma). "Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand wavin' free, silhouetted by the sea, circled by the circus sands, with all memory and fate driven deep beneath the waves, let me forget about today until tomorrow" (Mr. Tambourine Man).

Like his hero, Woody Guthrie, Dylan has tried to be the voice of the voiceless.

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows" (Subterranean Homesick Blues). "All the criminals in their coats and ties are free to drink martinis and watch the sun rise" (Hurricane). "And the first one now will later be last for the times they are a-changin'" (The Times They Are A-Changin') "When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose" (Like a Rolling Stone).

But sometimes lost in the meaning of Dylan's words is the magic of his writing. The Pulitzer Prize-winning sports writer Red Smith once said: "Writing is easy; All you do is sit down at a typewriter and open a vein."

Dylan opened a vein over and over again. He wrote with his heart in an ink of blood.

“Lights flicker from the opposite loft, in this room the heat pipes just cough, the country music station plays soft, but there's nothing, really nothing to turn off” (Visions of Johanna).

“When the rain is blowing in your face, and the whole world is on your case, I could offer you a warm embrace, to make you feel my love” (Make You Feel My Love).

“From the crossroads of my doorstep, my eyes, they start to fade, and I turn my head back to the room, where my love and I have laid, an' I gaze back to the street, the sidewalk and the sign, and I'm one too many mornings an' a thousand miles behind” (One Too Many Mornings).

Early on, Dylan made this promise to us: “I'll know my song well before I start singing” (Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall).

That's a promise Dylan has never broken. He's 78 years old now and it was 60 years ago in September – 1959 – that Robert Allen Zimmerman left Hibbing, Minn., for Minneapolis and a short stay at the University of Minnesota. Eventually, he made it to New York City –

seeking to meet Woody Guthrie – and ultimately, he changed American music.

Bob Dylan knew his song well before he started singing and we are all better for it. He took us on a trip upon his magic swirlin' ship and left us in a better place.

Dylan will never read this, but I needed to write it. He made me want to be a writer. Thanks, Bob, it was way more than a simple twist of fate.