

Bob Dylan: A Giant Among the Greats

Any short list of “greatest songwriters ever” includes Bob Dylan’s name. But Dylan stands alone for his impact on both music and culture.

When Dylan received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2012, President Barack Obama declared, “There is not a bigger giant in the history of American music.” When *Rolling Stone* compiled a list of greatest songs of all time, Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” was at the top. And when *Time* magazine selected the hundred most important people in the world during the twentieth century, Dylan was among them.

Born Robert Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota, on May 24, 1941, Dylan began writing poetry as a boy, bought a guitar at age fourteen, and soaked up country, folk, blues, and rock on the radio. In high school he played in rock bands, but his interests turned to folk in college. At age twenty, he changed his last name and joined New York’s emerging folk scene. He quickly earned a recording contract and poured himself into songwriting.

“I learned lyrics and how to write them from listening to folk songs,” Dylan explained in 2015. “And I played them, and I met other people that played them back when nobody was doing it. Sang nothing but these folk songs, and they gave me the code for everything that’s fair game ...”

Dylan’s poetic lyrics took on war, injustice, and racism at a time when the country was being torn apart over these issues. The music connected with the youth of the 1960s, and he became known as “the voice of a generation.” Dylan’s unusual singing style didn’t lend itself to radio play at first, but many



pop stars turned his tunes into Top Forty hits and added to his fame.

Over the years, Dylan has continued to be a trailblazer, reinventing his music again and again and experimenting across genres. In 1998, in the fourth decade of his career, he won a Grammy for Album of the Year—an amazing feat that speaks to his depth of talent.

“Everybody owes a debt” to Dylan, says rock legend Bruce Springsteen. “He really did change the face of popular music, particularly in how a singer could sound and what topics you could take on. Everything from hip-hop lyrics to [R&B artist] Marvin Gaye to [the punk rock song] “Anarchy in the U.K.” can be traced in some fashion back to his breakthroughs.”

Sources: *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, *Rolling Stone*, *Time*, *USA Today*

LISTEN:

“All Along the Watchtower”
“Blowin’ in the Wind”
“Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right”
“I Threw It All Away”
“Like a Rolling Stone”
“Mr. Tambourine Man”
“To Make You Feel My Love”
“Visions of Johanna”

READ:

Bob Dylan: Voice of a Generation by Jeremy Roberts (Lerner Publishing Group, 2005): For ages 11 and up, this biography describes the different phases of Dylan’s career and his influence on the culture.

Who Is Bob Dylan? by Jim O’Connor (Grosset & Dunlap, 2013) For ages 8-12, this biography traces Dylan’s life from coffeehouse singer to music legend.

Many Dylan lyrics have been turned into illustrated children’s books; titles include *Blowin’ in the Wind* (Sterling, 2011), *Forever Young* (Atheneum Books, 2008), *If Dogs Run Free* (Atheneum Books, 2013), *Man Gave Names to All the Animals* (Sterling, 2010), and *Play a Song for Me* (Archway Publishing, 2014).