

BOB DYLAN: A GIANT AMONG THE GREATS

Any shortlist of the greatest songwriters ever includes Bob Dylan. 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* magazine compiled a list of greatest songs of all time, Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” was among the Top Five. And when *Time* magazine selected the one hundred most influential people of the twentieth century, Dylan was among them.

Born Robert Allen 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 music on the radio. In high school he played in rock bands, but his interests turned to folk music in college. He moved to New York a few months before his twentieth birthday and became a part of the city’s emerging folk scene.

After a *New York Times* critic heard Dylan and described him as “bursting at the seams with talent,” Dylan quickly earned a recording contract and poured himself into songwriting. He released his first album, *Bob Dylan*, in March 1962 and legally changed his last name a few months later.

“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, that everything belongs to everyone.”

His 1963 breakthrough album, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, “blew the minds of everyone from his coffeehouse compatriots



to the Beatles,” wrote music critic Andy Greene. The album included his first widely popular song, “Blowin’ in the Wind.”

With pointed, provocative lyrics, Dylan’s songs took on war, injustice, and racism at a time when the country was in turmoil over these issues. Dylan’s music spoke to the youth of the 1960s in particular, and he became known as a “prophet” and “the voice of a generation.” Though Dylan’s raspy, quirky singing didn’t easily lend itself to radio airplay, many pop stars turned his tunes into Top Forty hits and heightened his fame. Dylan also had radio hits of his own, including “Like a Rolling Stone” and “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.”

Over the years, Dylan has continued to be a trailblazer, reinventing his music again and again and experimenting across genres. In 1965, he angered folk music fans when he

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LISTEN

“All Along the Watchtower,” “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “To Make You Feel My Love,” “Mr. Tambourine Man”

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moved into a rock sound, but he also won new fans. Later, he recorded groundbreaking albums in Nashville, ignoring the city’s hillbilly image and leading the way for other pop, rock, and folk artists to take advantage of Nashville’s talented studio musicians.

In 1998, thirty-five years after *Freewheelin’*, Dylan won three Grammy Awards, including Album of the Year—a remarkable feat that attests to his enduring artistry.

The praise keeps coming. “Everybody owes a debt to Dylan,” said rock hero 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 [punk rock song] ‘Anarchy in the U.K.’ can be traced in some fashion back to his breakthroughs.”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. What impact did folk music have on Dylan as a songwriter? Explain your answer citing evidence from the text.

2. Circle the word “provocative” in the seventh paragraph. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning. Then, define the term in your own words.

3. Explain Dylan’s connection to Nashville. In what ways did Nashville benefit from Dylan, and in what ways did Dylan benefit from Nashville?
