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Bob Dylan at 65

Richard Corliss pays tribute to the pop era's prime poet

By RICHARD CORLISS

Bob Dylan is 65 today. How would you commemorate the Social Security eligibility of America's icon-busting singer-songwriter?

"Celebrate the Tambourine Man's birthday on May 24th with some down-home revelry of your own," advises the website ehow.com. "Bust out your dusty tambourine and make some noise in celebration of one of Mr. Dylan's most famous ditties, 'Mr. Tambourine Man.'" (*Hey, Tambourine Man*, we used to say to Dylan, *play a ditty for me.*)

Go to San Francisco's Hotel Utah, where, says one musician's website, "me and my band Crooked Roads hosts a night of Dylan songs and trivia with prizes."

In Toronto, stop by the folk club Hugh's Room for "a special musical tribute ... 'The Dylan Tree,' a night of songs, astute observations, crazy musical portraits, common sense preaching and beautiful melodies from the 20th century man of the mountain."

Join the tribute band Dylanesque for a birthday concert at the Springhead Pub in Hull, U.K.

Take part in Hibbing, Minnesota's Dylan Days (today through Saturday), when the meistersinger's home town reunites the band that backed Dylan on his *Blood on the Tracks* album. While there, take the annual "Bobby Zimmerman bus tour of Hibbing."

Seriously now, do get two new books on the artist: *Bob Dylan : The Essential Interviews*, a collection of 40 edge conversations edited by Jonathan Cott, and Michael Gray's *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, which has all you need to know, and more, about the little big man.

Or read this article. We all honor / exploit Dylan in our own ways.

PENETRATING MAGIC

"The first time I heard Bob Dylan," Bruce Springsteen said at the Dylan induction ceremony at the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame in 1998, "I was in the car with my mother listening to WMCA, and on came that snare shot

that sounded like somebody had kicked open the door to your mind."

That would have been the summer of 1965; the song, the rock ballad "Like a Rolling Stone." But Springsteen came late to Dylan, as did Martin Scorsese, director of last year's Dylan documentary *No Direction Home*, who acknowledged that he was ignorant of the singer's folk period and only caught on when Bobby D. went electric. By then, Dylan was already nearing the end of his artistic prime — a five-year stretch from 1961 to '66, when he revolutionized first folk, then rock, infusing his music with astringent, haunting imagery that fully justified critic Richard Goldstein's 1969 designation of Dylan as "the major poet of his generation."

Even Dylan is astonished by his once-upon-a-time virtuosity. "I don't know how I got to write those songs," he told Ed Bradley in a Dec. 2004 *60 Minutes* interview. "Those early songs were almost magically written." Quoting a few lines from "It's Alright, Ma" ("He not busy being born is busy dying"), Dylan says, "Try to sit down and write something like that. There's a magic to that, and it's not Siegfried and Roy kind of magic, you know? It's a different kind of a penetrating magic. And, you know, I did it. I did it at one time."

We knew it was magic, those of us who thumbed a ride on the Dylan astro-rocket as it blasted out of Greenwich Village in 1961-62. Even then we knew that he was changing everything. First he updated Woody Guthrie's notion of the topical folk song and made it his own, creating anthems that were the sound track to the early-'60s Civil Rights movement. Then he smartly ransacked the tropes of every hip lyricist from Bertolt Brecht to the Beat Generation poets Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Then adapted his righteous belligerence to the standard love song, upending it into airs of bitter, knowing rejection. When he tired of being the preeminent folkie, and the poster boy for political causes, he plugged himself in, merging the Beats with the beat, and immediately forced a rethinking of nearly every aspect of pop music.

What a popular song could express. It could address any subject, and be written with a poetic density that needed multiple listenings to be understood, or to convince listeners that they understood them. Suddenly, nothing was forbidden.

How pop might be sung. He began by aping Guthrie's tinny tenor, but pushing it farther, into a siren wail, into banshee territory. Mitch Jayne of the Dillards famously compared the early Dylan sound to "a dog with his leg caught in barbed wire." It certainly was a prickly handful to kids raised on either the smooth Sinatra sound or the orgasmic church screaming of Little Richard. But to Dylan, barbed-wire vocals were an aesthetic and, as the French would say, a politique. Mellow was a lie; raspy was authentic. As he wrote in an early poem: "The only beauty's ugly, man / The cracklin', breakin', shakin' sounds're / The only beauty I understand." With extended exposure, his ugly became beauty. Intimate and accusatory, the voice twisted and tortured each word in a lyric, weirdly drawing out the silent half of a vowel sound — not "rain" but "raiiiiin", not "deal" but "deaaaaal."

What a pop song could be called... Dylan pioneered the eccentric fashion of hit singles whose title words don't appear in the song: "Subterranean Homesick Blues" ("Look out, kid, it's somethin' you did./ God knows when, but you're doin' it again"), "Positively Fourth Street" ("You've got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend"), "Rainy Day Woman #12 and 35" ("Everybody must get stoned").

...and how long it should last. There had been other songs broken up into two sides of a single: Cozy Cole's "Topsy," Ray Charles' "What'd I Say," the Isley Brothers' "Twist and Shout" and, in the early 50s, Johnny Standley's comedy homily "It's in the Book." But the 1965 "Like a Rolling Stone" was, I believe, the first epic rock ballad issued as a one-side, 6min. single. (Within two years, Richard Harris' "MacArthur Park and the Beatles' "Hey, Jude" went Dylan one minute longer, though not better.)

What a pop singer could look like. Physically not a heroic figure (his song-publishing company was called Dwarf Music), Dylan nonetheless had a compelling presence: the voluptuous lips nearly hidden by his harmonica holder, the untelling eyes under a brakeman's cap. He didn't have as much influence on performing styles as Mick Jagger — he was a static figure, while Jagger's stage-sprawling struts set the fashion for rock-band lead singers — but he notarized the dress-down look for pop performers.

Who could write the songs. Before Dylan, the decades-long Tin Pan Alley division of labor between singer and songwriter held sway. Dylan's success (and the Beatles') convinced every vocalist he was a poet, and every tunesmith an Elvis. Except in Nashville, the profession of songwriter disappeared. Whatever the lasting results — a lot of ragged vocals, I'd say, and tons of bad songs by singers who should never have picked up a pencil — but the singer-songwriter has been the m.o. ever since.

ZIMMERMAN TO DYLAN

In his autobiography *Chronicles, Volume 1*, the usually furtive artist sheds light on how Robert Allen Zimmerman became Bob Dylan — how he almost instantly bloomed from a nothing-special teenager into a pathfinding songwriter. Hibbing was a north-country town where, he said in *No Direction Home*, "It was so cold, you couldn't be bad." Seems he was a decent kid, whose dream was to attend West Point. (The mind reels when considering how different the 60s might have been if Bob Dylan the protest poet had instead become Lieut. Zimmerman in the jungles of Vietnam.)

Dylan didn't just materialize, in the Village, "modern Gomorrah," he called it, in 1960. The pop-cult 50s was Dylan's home — or, at last, his sleepover when he was a kid. In *Chronicles* he describes his feeling of kinship with smooth-singing Bobby Vee and Ricky Nelson, with the composer Harold Arlen and the wrestler Gorgeous George. He also played occasionally in rock band and briefly backed Vee in 1959, when the Buddy Holly soundalike singer was booked to fill the dates Holly couldn't make because he'd died in a plane crash in a frosty Iowa cornfield.

What changed Zimmerman was hearing Guthrie's songs. The Dust Bowl balladeer with the scrappy social conscience touched this kid, gave him purpose and ambition. "You could listen to his songs," he says in *No Direction Home*, "and actually learn how to live." Pierced to the heart, Bob actually left home this time, thumbing east to a Queens, N.Y., hospital, where Guthrie lay ailing of Huntington's Disease. That pilgrimage accomplished three things. It gave comfort to his idol; it gave Zimmerman, now Dylan, a vocal style; and it got him to New York City, where within a few months he was the toast of a tiny coterie.

There, he made himself into Bob Dylan by reading everything — the poetry of Rimbaud and the Beats, non-fiction on issues of the day — that graced the coffee tables of friends whose living-room couches he crashed on. "I began cramming my brain with all kinds of deep poems," he writes in *Chronicles*. "It seemed like I'd been pulling an empty wagon for a long time and now I was beginning to fill it up and would have to pull harder." He burrowed into the microfilm files of the New York Public Library to research the social issues he needed to know and wanted to write about. He hung around the offices of the folk magazine *Sing Out!* and in Village folk clubs like *Cafe Wha?* and *Gerde's Folk City*, Hoovering the great American folk-song book and the performing styles of the day. He also got an instant education from his first New York girlfriend Suze Rotolo, a political activist who took Dylan to an evening of Brecht songs in the Village.

Soon Dylan had assimilated Guthrie — gone through him and come out the other side. Now, as a singer-songwriter, he had joined the folkie scene of people who made, in the words of the New Lost City Ramblers' John Cohen, "Long-playing, short-selling records." Everyone remarked on Dylan's lyric gift and driving ambition. After just a few months, and before he was 20, he had scored his first professional gig in the Village (a supporting act to blues singer John Lee Hooker). Rejected by the traditional labels, Folkways and Vanguard (whose A&R man said, "We don't record freaks"), he made an odder move: being signed by legendary producer John Hammond for Mitch Miller's Columbia Records. Miller called Dylan "Hammond's folly."

What came out of this furious schooling was an amalgam of all these influences that Dylan forged into his own ornery persona. It was as cannily career-minded as it was artistically valid. Dylan mystified and promoted himself, inventing a biography that included being a seven-time runaway and a carny roustabout (he had done nothing of the sort) and putting his own name in his song titles ("Bob Dylan's Blues," "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream"). He knew he had lucked into being the right man at the right time: "America was changing. I had a feeling of destiny and I was riding the changes."

For Dylan, it was all to claim the crown of folkie purist. As he said in the spoken intro to "Bob Dylan's Blues": "Unlike most of the songs nowadays that are bein' written uptown in Tin Pan Alley -- that's where most of the folk songs come from nowadays -- this, this is a song, this wasn't written up there. This was written somewhere down in the United States." In fact,

Dylan had kinship to those great songwriters, especially to the kids his age, at exactly this time, who were toiling away up in the Brill Building writing for Phil Spector and his black girl groups. The connection went back ever further, for Dylan was as brilliant and canny an imitator, synthesizer and transformer of folk music as Irving Berlin was of ragtime and George Gershwin of jazz. And within a few years, his songs would be covered more than any other songwriter.

His studio sessions were portraits of a young man in a hurry. The first album was a fairly traditional folk album, with only two original songs; its main provocation would have been to Mitch Miller, whose easy-listening aesthetic was violated by Dylan's rasp and snarl. The second LP, *The Freewheeling Bob Dylan*, showed his instant, astonishing blossoming as a songwriter, with "Blowin' in the Wind," "Masters of War," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" (wow!), and his voice got stronger, more assertive, as if he was ready to fill the larger halls he would soon be playing. By the third album, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, he was the fully-formed folk prophet, and so assured of his abilities that he could record his fourth LP, the 1964 *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, in one night.

With the fifth album, *Bringing It All Back Home*, he stayed acoustic on one side, went electric on the other. Anarchy! the folkies cried. Welcome! the mass audience purred. His sixth, *Highway 61 Revisited*, consolidated his rep as the first rock poet, and the seventh, the two-record *Blonde on Blonde*, concluded it. Just after its release, Dylan was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident. Some of us think that, after the crash, he and his music were never the same.

PROTEST ZINGERS

Dylan told Ed Bradley that his songs "were songs, you know? They weren't sermons. If you examine the songs, I don't believe you're gonna find anything in there that says that I'm a spokesman for anybody or anything, really."

Oh, really? What about "Masters of War," "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and a dozen others? Dylan not a political animal? At the August 1963 March on Washington, where Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech, Dylan sang one of his few optimistic political numbers, "When the Ship Comes In," and Peter Paul and Mary sang the summer's hit "Blowin' in the Wind."

That was the song that made Dylan famous beyond the Village, and the renown was well earned. Sung in a whisper that sounds like the last breath, the dying words of a shaman, he poses a series of angry rhetorical questions ("How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?") with a strangely gentle, enigmatic resolution: "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind."

The young Dylan's original repertoire was particularly strong on civil rights. He could have filled a LP side with songs decrying the injustices done to black Americans: "Oxford Town" (about the shooting of Medgar

Evers), "The Ballad of Hollis Brown", "Who Killed Davey Moore?" and "The Death of Emmett Till" ("This song is just a reminder to remind your fellow man / That this kind of thing still lives today in that ghost-robed Ku Klux Klan").

Most impressively, "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll." That song, which Dylan wrote within a few weeks of the event it describes, tells of the killing of a Baltimore maid by a rich, politically connected society toff named William Zantzinger. Don't cry yet, Dylan warns in each of the first three choruses, as he relates the awful particulars of the case: "Now ain't the time for your tears." At the end, he spits out the judge's obscenely lenient decision: "And handed out strongly for penalty and repentance, / William Zanzinger with a six months' sentence." Dylan's message: Don't weep for one blameless soul brutally, thoughtlessly killed; weep for the system that, after due consideration, shrugs away a rich white man's murder of a poor black woman. "Now's the time for your tears."

It's possible that Dylan's social-musical conscience was a career movie too. He suggested as much to Nat Hentoff, who wrote a 1964 New Yorker profile on Dylan. About the "finger-pointing songs," he said, "Some of that was jumping into the scene to be heard and a lot of it was because I didn't see anybody else doing that sort of thing." But to those who took the songs at face value, they sounded like the voice of an angry God promising hard rain if the human race doesn't shape up quick.

THE INSULT FOLK SINGER

What caught the ear of many early fans, as much as Dylan's voice and political acuity, was his snarly attitude. When he sang to a lover (would-be or ex), to someone who crowded him by trying to be a friend or a fan, the protest in his tone turned personal and hostile. ("Just because you like my stuff, he famously said, "doesn't mean I owe you anything.") Long before he was a folk rocker, Dylan was the folk Rickles.

At times his scorn was directed at agents of destruction, like the munitions manufacturers in "Masters of War." The song begins with a catalog of their sins ("You put a gun in my hand / And you hide from my eyes / And you turn and run farther / When the fast bullets fly") before imagining a suitable comeuppance ("And I hope that you die / And your death'll come soon. ... / And I'll stand o'er your grave / 'Til I'm sure that you're dead"). But more often the songwriter's derision was directed at someone who had committed no atrocity greater than befriending him. It was the tactic of a natural-born complainer; when he tired of denouncing war and racism, he went after ex-girlfriends.

Before Dylan, pop music wallowed and exulted in the love song; the body of get-lost songs was small. If pop approached the topic, it was usually an invitation to mutual hermitting. ("Let's get lost," Frank Loesser wrote and Mary Martin sang, "lost in each other's arms.") It's true that songs of emotional defiance had been a sub-genre of blues. In folk music, John Jacob Niles, the Kentucky balladeer with the dramatic delivery and the pure falsetto, had written "Go Away from My Window," covered by Harry

Belafonte and Joan Baez — and adapted by Dylan.

The Niles lyric sounds clear enough: "Go away from my window, / Go away from my door, / Go away way from my bedside / And bother me no more / And bother me no more." But it got a softer, more complex meaning both from the melody, which has the poignancy of a lullaby to an absent child, and from Niles' rendition, his voice soaring on the first "bother me no more" so that he sounds like an unquiet spirit, or maybe a sleeper shoeing a ghost out of his nightmares.

In "It Ain't Me, Babe," Dylan uses the title of Niles' song, but ups the antagonistic ante: "Go away from my window, / Leave at your own chosen speed. / I'm not the one you want, babe, / I'm not the one you need. / ... You say you're lookin' for someone / Who will promise never to part, / Someone to close his eyes for you, / Someone to close his heart, / Someone who will die for you an' more, / But it ain't me, babe, / No, no, no, it ain't me, babe, / It ain't me you're lookin' for, babe."

The word "babe," normally a term of endearment, or at least of hipster familiarity (the 60s equivalent of "dude"), here takes on the acridity of a four-letter word. By the end of the song, the person to whom its sung not only has no doubt she/he's been dumped but finds her/his ego in tatters. The message is: I won't be your love slave, and nobody else should either. It's a rancor most people have felt after an affair goes sour, but was rarely set to music. Dylan started doing it, and kept doing it. In the liner notes for the three-disc set *Biograph*, he told Cameron Crowe that the 1966 song "Most Likely You'll Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine" was "Probably written after some disappointing relationship, where, you know, I was lucky to have escaped without a broken nose." Moral: Never piss off a poet; he'll have the last word, and in public.

Political or personal, Dylan's impudence was catnip to kids my age, who, if we couldn't shout righteous invective at Bull Conner in Birmingham, Alabama, could at least be rude to our parents at home. His "my generation" song, "The Times They Are A-Changin'" announces the passing of power from the burghers of middle-aged authority to their children. In succession Dylan addresses these mammoths who don't realize they're dinosaurs: writers and critics, senators, Congressmen and finally mothers and fathers. His acute message to parents: "Don't criticize what you can't understand. / Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command. / Your old road is rapidly agin'. / Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand, / For the times they are a-changin'." That was prophesy — for a while politically, as the 60s generation marched on Washington, closed down their schools and for all time economically. Kids today may not want to change the world, but they sure can afford to buy it.)

Dylan reveled in all forms of excoriation. "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" begins with a high wail that follows advice with threat: "You must leave now, take what you need you think will last. / But whatever you wish to keep, you'd better grab it fast." By the end of the verse, his voice has dropped an octave to whisper, "And it's all over now, Baby Blue." We also

adopted Dylan's dismissal of the clueless — "Something is happening but you don't know what it is, / Do you, Mr. Jones?" — in "Ballad of a Thin Man." The ultimate shrug-off came from "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right": "You just sorta wasted my precious time."

And what is "Like a Rolling Stone" if not the kick-her-when-she's-down elegy to a fallen idol? "When you ain't got nothing, you got nothing to lose. / You're invisible now, you got no secrets to conceal. / How does it feel / To be on your own / With no direction home / Like a complete unknown / Like a rolling stone?"

The ultimate zinger from Bob Dylan the insult comic troubadour.

BOB DYLAN AND I...

...never met. Which must be one of the great regrets of his life. But as a kid who loved folk music, I heard his stuff on a Philadelphia FM station and attended his first concert at our Town Hall. The local folk club, The Second Fret at 19th and Sansom Streets, hosted most of the singers Dylan hung out with and learned from. Dave Van Ronk played there; the gravel-voiced Brooklyn bear was one of my favorites, and an inspiration to the young Dylan. Indeed, I thought Dylan's "Baby Let Me Follow You Down" was a radio-friendly bowdlerization of Van Ronk's "Baby, Let Me Lay It on You." (Turns out Dylan learned the song from its author, Eric Von Schmidt, and Van Ronk took it from Dylan. In his conversation with Crowe, Dylan says puckishly of the song, "Dave Van Ronk might have played it too.")

I also had the privilege to know Carolyn Hester, the beautiful "Texas songbird" of folk, who had secured Dylan's first professional recording gig as a backup harmonica player on her first Columbia Records album. (Hammond, Carolyn's producer, heard Dylan and promptly signed him to Columbia.) Carolyn, who was inexplicably omitted from the final cut of *No Direction Home* (though she had been interviewed for the film), had recorded with Buddy Holly back in Texas, and, according to *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia*, Holly "followed her to Greenwich Village" in 1958. He wasn't the only one infatuated with Carolyn. Robert Shelton, the New York Times music critic who gave Dylan his first rave review (when he appeared on a bill with Carolyn) was also smitten by her. So was Dylan. Referring in *Chronicles* to her brief marriage to the poet Richard Fari-a, Dylan wrote, "I thought he was the luckiest guy in the world to be married to Carolyn." Me too.

I was in college back then, and couldn't miss the similarity between the poems I was studying and the ones Dylan was creating. The connection was particularly acute in "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," his 1962 updating of the medieval ballad "Edward My Son," in which he compressed its seven questioning verses into five ("Where have you been?... What did you see?... What did you hear?... Who did you meet?... What'll you do now, my blue-eyed son, my darling young one?"), building a Chartres of apocalyptic imagery. Dylan once said he didn't know if the world would survive the Cuban Missile Crisis, so he put all his songs into one. This

great one ends with a declaration of the poet's mission: "And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it, / And reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it, / And I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin', / But I'll know my song well before I start singin'."

In *No Direction Home*, Ginsberg says, Ginsberg: "I heard *Hard Rain* and wept, 'cause it seemed that the torch had been passed to another generation." The song had the same effect on Child Corliss, and in my innocence I thought my college English teacher, Mr. Morris, might feel the same. Anyway, I figured he'd appreciate that some I typed up the lyrics and presented them to him with the midwifely pride Ezra Pound might have felt after seeing T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* in print. Mr. Morris read the text and looked at me as if I was daft. This wasn't poetry, his mournful look said; it wasn't even English.

It took a while for traditionalists to cotton to Dylan's lurid vandalizing of the language, his faux-folk patois: "If'n ya don't know by now... The light I never knowed... Like ya never done before..." That was the Guthrie influence, which this hip hillbilly mixed with all the other sung and spoken poetry he'd ingested to create his own voice, grammar and verdant, wildly associative language. "I needed to sing in that language," he says in the Scorsese movie, "which was a language that I hadn't heard before." Maybe you had to be young back then to appreciate Dylan's knack of painting a vivid portrait of some awful moment in time, then of drawing a grander, more troubling lesson from it.

No Direction Home makes much of the aggrieved reaction to Dylan's going electric: to the howls of the faithful when he sang "Maggie's Farm" at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. (They should've listened to the lyrics, if they could've heard them: "Well, I try my best to be just like I am, / But everybody wants you to be just like them.") In Britain the following year he was greeted with screams of "Traitor!", "Judas!" and "How about switching it off?" Backstage, the burnt-out singer vowed, "I'm gonna get me a new Bob Dylan and use him. Here's the new Bob Dylan—see how long he lasts."

The switch to rock was fine with this Dylan fan; I loved rock 'n roll as much as folk and was exhilarated to think of the impact Dylan could have in bringing an adolescent musical form to maturity. But by 1966 he wasn't having nearly as much fun making music as I was listening to it. The kid who wanted to be Elvis could now imagine dying like Buddy Holly: "You end up crashing in a private plane in the mountains of Tennessee. Or Sicily. ... I just wanna go home." He went home to upstate New York and crashed his 500cc T100S/R Triumph Tiger motorcycle.

A shame Dylan's penetrating magic couldn't last. But it was great while it lasted.

POST-DYLAN DYLAN

"You can't do something forever," Dylan told Bradley. "I did it once, and I can do other things now. But, I can't do that."

What he has done since the motorcycle accident in 1966, as a songwriter and performer, would amount to an excellent body of work, a pretty distinguished career, for anybody else. But four decades of post-crash Dylan can't come close to matching what he accomplished between the ages of 19 and 25. The changes he's put himself through are less radical and notable than the ones he achieved in his first years in the Village. (For a more acerbic take, see Richard Goldstein's recent cover story in *The Nation*.) Dylan still does concerts, playing the old hits in various, audience-confounding attitudes. In his quirky way, he's become his own tribute band; Dylan is Dylanesque.

So to celebrate his 65th birthday, do not bust out your dusty tambourine. Skip the Zimmerman bus tour of Hibbing. Instead, play those early songs again. You'll shiver at their stark profundity — at the way words, simple chords and a stray mutt's voice could combine to form an immediate and lasting legacy of pop poetry. Dylan was destined, as the beautiful lyric to "Mr. Tambourine Man" has it, "to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free." In following that fate, he taught the rest of us to dance with him.

Hey, Bob, if not for you...

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