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## The Political Bob Dylan

By [Peter Dreier](#) - May 24, 2011

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Bob Dylan turns seventy today. The following essay is adapted from *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*, which *Nation Books* will publish early next year.

When the makers of Hollywood movies, documentary films, or TV news programs want to evoke the spirit of the 1960s, they typically show clips of long-haired hippies dancing at a festival, protestors marching at an antiwar rally, or students sitting-in at a lunch counter, with one of two songs by Bob Dylan—"Blowin' in the Wind" or "The Times They Are a-Changin'"—playing in the background.

Journalists and historians often treat Dylan's songs as emblematic of the era and Dylan himself as the quintessential "protest" singer, an image frozen in time. Dylan emerged on the music scene in 1961, playing in Greenwich Village coffeehouses after the folk music revival was already underway, and released his first album the next year. Over a short period—less than three years—Dylan wrote about two dozen politically oriented songs whose creative lyrics and imagery reflected the changing mood of the postwar baby-boom generation and the urgency of the civil rights and antiwar movements. At a time when the chill of McCarthyism was still in the air, Dylan also showed that songs with leftist political messages could be commercially successful. Unwittingly, Dylan laid the groundwork for other folk musicians and performers of the era, some of whom were more committed to the two major movements that were challenging America's status quo, and helped them reach wider audiences.

By 1964, however, Dylan told friends and some reporters that he was no longer interested in politics. *Broadside* magazine asked Phil Ochs, another "protest" singer-songwriter, if he thought that Dylan would like to see his protest songs "buried." Ochs replied insightfully: "I don't think he can succeed in burying them. They're too good. And they're out of his hands."

DYLAN WAS born Robert Allen Zimmerman and raised in Hibbing, a mining town in northern Minnesota, in a middle-class Jewish family. As a teen he admired Elvis Presley, Johnny Ray, Hank Williams, and Little Richard, and taught himself to play guitar. In 1959, he moved to the Twin Cities to attend the University of Minnesota but soon dropped out. He stayed in the area to absorb its budding folk music and bohemian scene and began playing in local coffeehouses and improving his guitar playing. A friend loaned Dylan his collection of



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Woody Guthrie records and back copies of *Sing Out!* magazine, which had the music and lyrics to lots of folk songs. He read Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, and learned to play many of Guthrie's songs.

By then young Zimmerman had changed his name (apparently after Welsh poet Dylan Thomas) and had adopted some of Guthrie's persona. He mumbled when he talked and when he sang, spoke with a twang, wore workman's clothes (including a corduroy cap), and took on what he believed to be Guthrie's mannerisms. At first Dylan seemed to identify more with Guthrie as a loner and bohemian than with Guthrie the radical and activist. Soon after Dylan arrived in New York City in January 1961 at age nineteen, he visited Guthrie, then suffering from Huntington's disease, in his New Jersey hospital room.

At the time, New York's Greenwich Village was the epicenter of the folk music revival, a growing political consciousness, and (along with San Francisco) the beatnik and bohemian culture of jazz, poetry, and drugs. The area was dotted with coffeehouses, some of which charged admission fees and others which allowed performers to pass the hat while customers purchased drinks and sandwiches.

Dylan made the rounds of the folk clubs and made a big impression. His singing and guitar-playing were awkward, but he had a little-boy charm and charisma that disarmed audiences. Dylan's initial repertoire consisted mostly of Guthrie songs, blues, and traditional songs. At the time, he began weaving a myth about his past, including stories about being a circus hand and a carnival boy, having a rock band in Hibbing that performed on television, and running away from home and learning songs from black blues artists. He was, as he continued to do throughout his life, reinventing himself.

Dylan got a huge break when music reporter Robert Shelton wrote a flattering review of a performance at Gerde's Folk City in the *New York Times* on September 29, 1961 under the headline, "Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Stylist." Shelton said that Dylan seemed like a "cross between a beatnik and a choir boy" and referred to four of the songs he performed that night: the traditional "House of the Rising Sun" and three humorous songs Dylan wrote—"Talkin' Bear Mountain," "Talkin' New York," and "Talkin' Havah Nagilah." Shelton made no mention of any topical or protest songs. He did write that Dylan was "vague about his antecedents and birthplace," which contributed to the singer's myth-making. The review put Dylan on the map and landed him a record contract, although his first album, *Bob Dylan*, wasn't released until March 1962. None of the album's thirteen cuts (including two original compositions) could be considered political, protest, or topical songs.

In July 1961 Dylan met seventeen-year-old Suze Rotolo, the daughter of Communists and a leftist herself. They soon moved into a Village apartment together. She introduced Dylan to writers and poets (especially Bertolt Brecht and Arthur Rimbaud) that expanded his own lyrical horizons. She also raised his political awareness. Rotolo was working as a secretary at the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) office and each night gave Dylan the latest scoop about the civil rights movement. The sit-ins had erupted the previous year. By the spring and summer of 1961, the Freedom Rides were in the news. The Village folk scene was abuzz with singers writing and performing songs ripped from the headlines.

In January 1962, hoping to be asked to perform at an upcoming CORE benefit, Dylan wrote "The Ballad of Emmett Till," about a fourteen-year-old African American who was beaten and shot to death in Mississippi in 1955 for whistling at a white woman. It was Dylan's first "protest" song. Within a year, he wrote several other topical songs, including "Talkin' John Birch Society Blues" (poking fun at the right-wing organization), "Let Me Die in My Footsteps" (a critique of the Cold War hysteria that led Americans to build bomb shelters), "Oxford Town" (about the riots when James Meredith became the first black student admitted to University of Mississippi), "Paths of Victory" (about the civil rights marches), and "A Hard

Rain's a-Gonna Fall" (about the fear of nuclear war, which he premiered at a Carnegie Hall concert a month before the Cuban missile crisis made that fear more tangible). These songs were published in a new magazine, *Broadside*, that sought to encourage topical songs as part of movements for change.

In April Dylan wrote what would become his most famous song, "Blowin' in the Wind," which appeared in the May issue of *Broadside* and the June issue of *Sing Out!* He took the tune from "No More Auction Block," an anti-slavery Negro spiritual. Dylan performed the song at Gerde's Folk City before it was published or recorded, and soon there was a major buzz around the Village about the new composition. Unlike "Emmett Till," "John Birch," and "Let Me Die," "Blowin' in the Wind" was not about a specific incident or public controversy. The lyrics reflected a mood of concern about the country's overall direction, including the beating of civil rights demonstrators and the escalating nuclear arms race.

By avoiding specifics, Dylan's three verses achieve a universal quality that makes them open to various interpretations and allows listeners to read their own concerns into the lyrics. "How many times must the cannonballs fly before they're forever banned?" and "How many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?" are clearly about war, but not any particular war. One can hear the words "How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free?" and relate them to the civil rights movement and the recent Freedom Rides. "How many times can a man turn his head pretending he just doesn't see?" could refer to the nation's unwillingness to face its own racism, or to other forms of ignorance. The song reflects a combination of alienation and outrage. Listeners have long debated what Dylan meant by "The answer is blowin' in the wind." Is the answer so obvious that it is right in front of us? Or is it elusive and beyond our reach? This ambiguity is one reason for the song's broad appeal.

Before singing "Blowin' in the Wind" at Gerde's, Dylan explained, "This here ain't a protest song or anything like that, 'cause I don't write protest songs...I'm just writing it as something to be said, for somebody, by somebody." Dylan may have been being coy or disingenuous, but it didn't matter. The song caught the wind of protest in the country and took flight.

Dylan recorded "Blowin' in the Wind" on his second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, released in May 1963, but it was the version released a few weeks later by Peter, Paul, and Mary that turned the song into a nationwide phenomenon. The single sold 300,000 copies in its first week. On July 13, 1963, it reached number two on the *Billboard* pop chart, with over a million copies sold. Millions of Americans learned the words and sang along while it was played on the radio, performed at rallies and concerts, and sung at summer camps and in churches and synagogues.

The song's popularity turned the twenty-two-year-old Dylan into a celebrity and confirmed his image as a protest singer who voiced the spirit of his generation. Dylan cemented that impression when, on July 5, he and Pete Seeger performed at a SNCC-sponsored voter-registration rally in Greenwood, Mississippi. Dylan sang "Only a Pawn in Their Game," about the assassination of Mississippi NAACP leader Medgar Evers, which occurred just the previous month. Dylan also sang at the August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech.

That year Dylan also wrote "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" (based on a news story from early 1963 about the death of a black barmaid at the hands of a wealthy white man), "Who Killed Davey Moore" (about a black boxer who died after a brutal match), "Talkin' World War III Blues" (about the threat of nuclear annihilation), "Masters of War" (a protest against the arms race), and "The Times They Are a-Changin'," which was not about a specific event but rather challenged the political establishment on behalf of Dylan's youth cohort. The finger-pointing song is addressed to "senators, congressmen," and "mothers and fathers,"

telling them that “there’s a battle outside and it is ragin’” and warning them, “don’t criticize what you can’t understand.” Dylan’s lyric “For the loser now will be later to win” sounds much like the biblical notion that the meek shall inherit the earth, or perhaps that America’s black and poor people will win their struggle for justice. Like “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “The Times” became an anthem, a strident warning, angry yet hopeful. It came to symbolize the generation gap, making Dylan the reluctant “spokesman” for the youth revolt.

Dylan’s third album, also called *The Times They Are a-Changin’*, was recorded between August and October 1963 and included the song “North Country Blues,” which draws on Dylan’s Minnesota upbringing and describes the suffering caused by the closing of the mines in the state’s Iron Range, turning mining areas into jobless ghost towns—a theme that Bruce Springsteen would reprise years later. Remarkably, Dylan tells the tale from the point of view of a woman.

Dylan’s ambition for success sometimes conflicted with his political and artistic principles. In 1963, when CBS told Dylan he couldn’t sing “Talkin’ John Birch Society Blues” on the popular *Ed Sullivan Show* because the song was too controversial—an indication that McCarthyism hadn’t completely faded—he walked out of the rehearsal and refused to appear on the Sunday night show. Yet Dylan was never comfortable being confined by the “protest” label. He disliked being a celebrity, having people ask him what his songs meant, and being viewed as a troubadour who could represent an entire generation. “The stuff you’re writing is bullshit, because politics is bullshit,” Dylan once told Phil Ochs, who continued to write and perform topical songs and identify with progressive protest movements. “You’re wasting your time.”

In December 1963, a few weeks after the Kennedy assassination, Dylan reluctantly agreed to accept the Tom Paine Award from the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee at a fancy event at the Americana Inn Hotel in New York. Nervous, Dylan got drunk and gave a rambling, semi-incoherent speech to the 1400 liberals and radicals in the audience. First he insulted their age: “You people should be at the beach. It’s not an old people’s world...Old people, when their hair grows out, they should go out.” Then he insulted their politics. “There’s no black and white, left and right, to me anymore. There’s only up and down, and down is very close to the ground. And I’m trying to go up without thinking about anything trivial, such as politics.” Then he mentioned Kennedy’s killer, Lee Harvey Oswald, and said, “I saw some of myself in him.” Some of the audience booed. Dylan later sent the group an incoherent letter of mock apology that was more a long prose poem defending his new anti-political mood. He no longer wanted to sing about “we,” he said. He wanted to write about “I.”

By his fourth album, the aptly titled *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, he had decided to look both inward for his inspiration and outward at other kinds of music. He began to explore more personal and abstract themes in his music and in his poetry. He also became more involved with drugs and alcohol. His songs began to focus on his love life, his alienation, and his growing sense of the absurd. In subsequent decades, Dylan would reinvent himself several more times. With occasional exceptions, he abandoned acoustic music for rock and roll, country, blues, and gospel. His hit “Like a Rolling Stone” from the 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited* revealed his talent as a rock musician. Several times he discovered Jesus. For a while he claimed to be an Orthodox Jew.

Even after 1964, however, Dylan occasionally revealed that he hadn’t lost his touch for composing political songs. His 1965 song “Subterranean Homesick Blues” references the violence inflicted on civil rights protestors by cops (“Better stay away from those/That carry around a fire hose”) but also reflected his growing cynicism (“Don’t follow leaders/Watch the parkin’ meters”). The extremist wing of Students for a Democratic Society took their name—Weatherman—from another line in that song (“You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows”). Other songs, such as “I Shall Be Released” (1967), the Guthrie-esque “I

Pity the Poor Immigrant" (1967), "George Jackson" (1971), "Hurricane" (1975), "License to Kill" (1983), and "Clean Cut Kid" (1984) indicate that Dylan still had the capacity for political outrage.

Dylan performed at several concerts to raise money for liberal causes – hunger in Bangladesh in 1971 and in Ethiopia in 1985, and the Farm Aid concert to raise money for U.S. family farmers later in 1985. In 1991, upon receiving the lifetime achievement award from the Academy of Recording Artists and Performers, while U.S. troops were fighting in Iraq, Dylan performed his "Masters of War." On election night 2008, Dylan was playing a concert at the University of Minnesota. As Barack Obama's victory was announced, Dylan said, "I was born in 1941. That was the year they bombed Pearl Harbor. I've been living in darkness ever since. It looks like things are going to change now." Then, deviating from his usual live encore of "Like a Rolling Stone," Dylan played "Blowin' in the Wind."

Dylan's off-and-on engagement with politics is intriguing. But his peace and justice songs have had a life of their own. "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are a-Changin'" in particular will forever be linked to the progressive movements of the 1960s and used to rally people to protest for a better world.

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Image: Bob Dylan at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (Rowland Scherman/National Archives and Records Administration/Wiki. Com.)

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