

Bob Dylan: Nobility, Lyrics and Ghosts

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Introduction

The news that Bob Dylan had been awarded the 2016 Nobel Prize for literature prompted a healthy response. Comments ranged from the congratulatory to the critical, the latter, while acknowledging Dylan's talent, argued that his work could not be considered as literature. The former stoutly defended the Nobel committee's decision, often citing the importance of Dylan in personal biographies and championing his right to be acknowledged as a poet.

The award and subsequent debate have resonance with a number of topics that deserve further consideration. In the following, I examine Dylan's unique status in the history of rock that often focuses on his songwriting, particularly his lyrics, and the manner in which he influenced other musicians. I also consider how responses to Dylan's Nobel can be construed as illustrating the gap that continues to exist between the supposed high cultural value of literature and the low value of rock music. Further, I explore how continued acknowledgement of Dylan's work can be viewed as affirming a rock 'golden age' that peaked in the 1960s and which, for some commentators, results in contemporary replication of the past that acts to hold back innovation. This is most noticeable in the concept of hauntology, which, in this context, promotes a desire to resurrect a time in which music really mattered.

These musings are interspersed with my personal experience of Dylan's music that while rendering me unqualified to hold an objective view, enable an understanding of the polar positions often taken in any discussion of Dylan and his work and his ability to delight, dismay, enthrall and frustrate in equal measure.

Don't ask me nothin' about nothin' I just might tell you the truth

(Dylan, 1965)

The recent bestowing of the Nobel award for literature to Bob Dylan has generated a significant amount of comment relating to the suitability of the recipient to receive such an honour (see, for example: North, 2016; O' Hagan, 2016; Sheffield, 2016; Stanley, 2016).

Dylan, after all, is a musician: during the mid 1960s, he categorized himself as a 'song and dance man'¹ and his works reach the public via the practices of the music rather than the publishing industry. The Nobel committee's explanation that the award had been given 'for

¹This response was given in answer to the question 'Do you think of yourself primarily as a singer or a poet' at a press conference in San Francisco, December, 1965. Online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-cPoZZVm3Dk>

having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition' (Nobel Prize, 2016) served to further muddy the waters, as did the committee's insistence that Dylan was a poet and, therefore, a worthy and deserving winner.

Commentary on the award, congratulatory and critical, coalesced around two themes: whether Dylan could be considered a poet and the notion that song lyrics can be considered as literature. While some literary luminaries applauded the choice of the Nobel committee, others were less enthusiastic. Salman Rushdie, for example, welcomed Dylan's award by noting that 'The frontiers of literature keep widening, and it's exciting that the Nobel Prize recognises that' (Rushdie, 2016). Irving Welsh, however, on hearing the news described it as '...an ill-conceived nostalgia award wrenched from the rancid prostates of senile, gibbering hippies' (Welsh, 2016).

The main reason advanced by those critical of the Nobel Committee's choice was that Dylan's work does not constitute literature (see Furedi, 2016; North, 2016). This resonates with the notion of a divide between the high cultural value of literature and the contrasting low value of rock music. This position is interesting as Dylan has been considered as bridging the perceived divide between vapid music and music as an artistic medium (see Snellgrove, 2013). Dylan's detractors argue that his work cannot be considered as literature as removal of music from his lyrics renders them less powerful. Danny Karlin, a leading expert on Robert Browning, observed that if Dylan's lyrics had been published as poems rather than songs, 'nobody would have taken a blind bit of notice' (Morris, 2011).

It should be noted that Dylan has, throughout his career, divided opinion. There are those, for example, who are instantly turned off by the very sound of his voice. There are others who simply cannot see what the fuss is about. In 1969, Nik Cohn dismissed Dylan as '...a minor talent with a major gift for self-hype' (Cohn, 1969; 2004). His recent Nobel, however, is not without precedent: he has been the recipient of a number of awards throughout his career including two honorary doctorates from the universities of Princeton and St Andrews, a Pulitzer Prize under the 'Special Awards and Citations' category, the Presidential Medal of Freedom and a number of Grammy awards. Dylan was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988. His output has also been the subject of academic study and, on the occasion of his 70th birthday in 2011, the University of Mainz, the University of Vienna, and the University of Bristol organized symposia on his work.

The advice of Nobel Committee permanent secretary Sarah Danius to those unfamiliar with Dylan's work to begin with his 1966 album *Blonde on Blonde* however, could go some way to explaining Welsh's remarks (Ellis-Peterson and Flood, 2016). Was the choice of Dylan for this award simply an exercise in re-affirming both his status and the era of arguably his best known and acclaimed work as a rock 'golden age'?

The justification prepared by the committee points to some unease as to how their choice would be received. The same justification however is interesting in that it foregrounds one aspect of Dylan's work – his lyrics. I will use the remainder of this piece to rehearse some thoughts about popular music lyrics, the impact of Dylan and the notion that popular music is unable to escape the influence of the 'classic era' and is currently locked into a cycle

of reproducing the past.

Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now
(Dylan, 1964).

My own introduction to pop and rock was via my brother's collection of singles and albums from the 1960s. I quickly became acquainted with offerings from the Searchers and the Hollies, but my favourites were the Beatles. This was probably helped along by their feature films, which at the time were shown regularly on British Christmas television. *The Monkees* TV show was also a staple of UK children's television at the time and I was delighted to discover some Monkees singles among the collection.² Then came Dylan.

My brother, by this time, had musically moved on. I don't recall the exact circumstances, but I was aware that he was listening to something that sounded very different to the British beat groups that constituted my musical diet. I decided to investigate: the first Dylan album that I listened to was *Bringing It All Back Home* (Dylan, 1965). This in itself was confusing: one side of the album bore some resemblance to the music I was used to listening to. There were drums and guitars – they sounded different, but they were definitely there. On the other side, however, the instrumentation was very different; it was sparse and spiky, punctuated with blasts of harmonica. In addition, side two comprised only four quite lengthy songs. It took some time for me to realize that something else was fundamentally different: the words (or lyrics as I would learn later was the preferred terminology) – they were unlike anything I had previously encountered. While my favourite British beat groups sang about love, heartache and holding hands, Dylan danced 'beneath a diamond sky with one hand waving free' (Dylan, 1965a). While not possessing the critical faculties to fully understand how different his approach was, it appealed to my own literary ambition and conceit; I became a Dylan bore.

I began to do some digging and found that there were several books written about Dylan; also that he had written one himself (this turned out to be quite disappointing, however; see Dylan, 1973). The books about him filled some gaps in my knowledge. I learned of his transformation from earnest folkie to electric rocker and the apparent consternation this had caused (this in itself is one of the most mythologized events in rock music history). I learned about a mysterious motorcycle accident that occurred at the peak of his fame in the mid-sixties and yet another transformation on his re-emergence two years later. I learned about his evasiveness; I learned that much of this evasiveness was caused by questions concerning his songs – particularly questions asking about meanings in his songs.

Because something is happening here but you don't know what it is do you, Mr. Jones?
(Dylan, 1965b)

² 56 episodes of *The Monkees* were originally broadcast on BBC1 between December 1966 and June 1968. The shows were repeated often throughout the 1970s.

Songs mean something? This was something that hadn't previously occurred to me – I re-visited the albums armed with my newly acquired knowledge. I became more confused: early Dylan albums were easier to access in terms of meaning, the finger pointing songs (for example: *Only a Pawn in Their Game*; *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll*; *Masters of War*) as Dylan would later refer to them, (Heylin, 2009), that formed the bulk of his output as he rode the wave of the protest movement of the early 1960s, were more direct, more obvious. His turn to rock signaled a lyrical departure, captured most vividly in the three albums recorded in the period 1965-66: *Bringing it all Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*. I had no idea if he was a poet, but he certainly had a way with words!

It was many years later that I learned of Dylan's voracious consumption of both musical and literary genres: his re-workings of the great American Songbook combined with techniques borrowed or stolen from Robert Johnson and Woody Guthrie informed his early protest songs (see Moore, 2006). We can speculate that knowledge of the French symbolist and American Beat poets contributed to his lyric writing when he became disillusioned with folk and turned to rock.³ From conversations with my brother, I learned that Dylan was considered 'important' although, this held little meaning at the time. Over the years, as I trod my own musical path, his name would often crop up: as an influence or as an example of music someone loved or, indeed, hated. I lost touch with his output however. Like many I suspect, experiencing his mid-60s work first meant that anything subsequent was heard with more than a little disappointment. The power of what Mick Brown called 'the amphetamine poetry of *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*' (Brown, 2011) made a lasting impression on me and I wanted to hear more. I hoped that each new album release would signal a return to 'that thin, that wild mercury sound...metallic and bright gold' that characterized his albums from 1965-66.⁴ It was not to be: Dylan had moved on, perhaps I had not.

Nonetheless, it was clear he had influenced my own approach to music: I paid as much attention to the words as I did to the music and was often drawn to artists who clearly, in my opinion, thought that lyrics were as important to the song as the tune (particular favourites include, for example, Elvis Costello, Howard Devoto and Andy Partridge). I was aware that Dylan was continuing to release music and touring almost endlessly. I attended a number of his concerts; the experience ranged from awe to disappointment. He has seemingly always been a contrarian and age has not mellowed this aspect of his personality: he rarely acknowledges an audience and re-arranges, sometimes beyond recognition, tunes that many hold so dear.⁵ It is as if, as Stephen Deusner observes, Dylan does not play for the crowd, he plays for himself (Deusner, 2016).

³ Dylan covers his listening and reading habits in detail in his autobiography *Chronicles Volume One* (2004). The Beat poet Allen Ginsberg can be seen in the background of Dylan's promotional film for the song 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' (1965c)

⁴ Dylan described this as the sound he heard in his head and wanted to achieve on his records during an interview with Ron Rosenbaum in 1978.

⁵ This is a continuing practice. At a review of the first Desert Trip festival, Stephen Deusner noted that '[Dylan] and his band play a low-key set that reshuffles tunes from nearly every stage of his catalogue, as though he's still trying to figure out what they mean.' *Uncut*, December 2016.

...Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, fighting in the captain's tower while calypso singers laugh at them and fishermen hold flowers

(Dylan, 1965c)

As I noted earlier, it had been impressed upon me that Dylan was 'important'; the Nobel award lends credence to this view. It transpired that his importance was rooted in the way that his lyrics had opened up possibilities for the popular song. As Carys Wyn Jones observed in her work on rock canons, Dylan's 1965 album, *Highway 61 Revisited* '...is associated with visionary revolution, a straightforwardly canonical marker of value' (2008: 53). Jones draws upon a description of the same album in Rolling Stone magazine in its '500 Greatest Albums of All Time' to reinforce the point:

...one of those albums that, quite simply, changed everything. "Like a Rolling Stone"... forever altered the landscape of popular music – its "vomitific" lyrics (in Dylan's memorable term, literary ambition and sheer length (6:13) shattered limitations of every kind.⁷

There are difficulties, of course, with this interpretation of Dylan's contribution. As Andy Bennett, drawing on Allen and Lincoln (2004) and Schmutz (2005), observes, the concept of 'retrospective cultural consecration' where consecrating institutions confer acclaim, historical importance and cultural value on particular texts needs to be taken into account. Bennett draws on Schmutz's assertion that this heritage rock discourse has its genesis in Rolling Stones 500 Greatest Albums, which acted as 'a critical driver of the retrospective cultural consecration and production of the rock canon' (2009: 479). This activity, which has been supplemented through the emergence of "prestige-granting" bodies and institutions including the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Bennett argues, 'is very much part of the ageing rock audience's reassessment of rock, not merely as something particular to their youth, but rather as a key element in their collective cultural awareness and a major contributor to their generational identity' (Bennett, 2009: 478).

There is a danger that this activity, along with increased access to music from the past via online services, could work to affirm the golden age of rock as the apex of popular music, as a period of revolutionary change that is unlikely to be repeated. This process is assisted by the baby boomers who grew up in the 'golden age' and who now occupy positions that allow them to influence how the history of rock is portrayed. It could be argued that Dylan's Nobel is an example of this process in practice.

So, caution must be exercised. It is interesting however, that Nik Cohn, who admits to being no fan of Dylan, noted that his songs:

...changed the whole concept of what could or couldn't be attempted in a hit song. Suddenly, pop writers could go beyond three-chord love songs, they didn't have to act mindless any more. Mostly, they could say what they meant (1969, 2004: 181).

⁷ Various Contributors, 'The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time', Rolling Stone, 11 December 2003, 83-178. In: Jones, C. W. (2008).

This, in a sense, returns to the high/low culture argument: did Dylan facilitate a movement in popular music that enabled it to be considered as something other than throwaway? As art even? Perhaps the innovative elements of Dylan's work, which could transfer to other forms including literature, influenced the Noel committee's decision. Much has been made, after all, of Dylan's influence on other writers and bands, notably the Beatles. Rock mythology holds that Dylan gifted the Beatles two important things, drugs and the idea that their status and songs could be used to tackle the issues that concerned both them and their audience. In short, Dylan is credited with freeing Lennon and McCartney from their Tin Pan Alley approach to songwriting ('songs for the meat market' as Lennon would later call them),⁸ arguably setting in motion the divide between pop and rock that began in the mid-to late 1960s.

The final words on Dylan's influence should perhaps again belong to Nik Cohn who observed '...his effect on pop remains enormous: almost everyone has been pushed by him...and almost everything new that happens now goes back to his source. Simply, he has grown pop up, he has given it brains' (1969, 2004: 185).

The ghost of 'lectricity howls in the bones of her face
(Dylan, 1966).

As the above illustrates, there is little doubt that Dylan is one of rock's most important and interesting figures. His refusal to stand still or rest on his laurels and his longevity mark him as something special; there is also little doubt that his work challenged the formulaic notion of pop and expanded the range of options open to his peers and those that followed. Even his look 'that classic mid-Sixties Dylan look – bird's-nest hair, dark shades, pipe-cleaner legs, Chelsea boots, razor-sharp cheekbones – is the coolest look ever' (Gill and Shepherd, 2016). Then there are the lyrics.



Dylan c. 1965/66 – 'the coolest look ever?'
Image credit: Hulton Archive/Getty Images

⁸ Lennon described his early song writing this way in an interview with Jan Wenner for Rolling Stone in 1971).

His status however, along with that of many of his contemporaries from the 'classic' age of rock is problematic. I have already commented on the notion of retrospective cultural consecration above but for some, the problem runs deeper. For these commentators, advances in technology along with political and economic strategies have combined to curtail creativity in pop resulting in an aural landscape that comprises regurgitations of sounds and styles from the past. These concerns often follow a central theme: that pop is obsessed with or, alternatively, haunted by, the spectres of its past. Jean Hogarty (2017) contends that a culture of retro and nostalgia has characterized the popular music of recent years. Borrowing from Mark Fisher (2014), Hogarty asserts that 'there is no now' in popular music terms and that we have entered 'the age of retro culture that is occupied by the ghosts of popular music's past' (Hogarty, 2017: 2)

This view has its roots in Derrida's notion of hauntology, which was originally posited to illustrate how Marxism would continue to haunt Western society and which is generally described as a paradoxical harking back to a lost future (Derrida, 1994). Hogarty argues that younger music fans demonstrate hauntological feelings in their desire to resurrect a time in which music really mattered and belief that 'contemporary music lacks originality and its own unique zeitgeist...' (Hogarty, 2017: 80). To achieve this, they 'immerse themselves in what they deign to be a more 'real' musical past' (ibid). This is echoed, to a degree, by the public outpourings of grief that have followed the deaths of several rock luminaries in 2016, the most notable being David Bowie. These reinforce the argument that musicians from the classic age are held in esteem not only by audiences that grew up with them, but also by generations following. Reasons for this could include the pervasive nature of the canon of rock greats, parental influence and encouragement and the ability to access the back catalogue of artists from the past.

The conferment of Dylan's Nobel laureate adds credence to these arguments, acting to reinforce the notion that the 'classic' era of rock was the time that mattered most, when all the battle lines were drawn and when music was revolutionary. This could be construed, as noted by Bennett above, as the continued influence of the baby boomer generation, hence Irving Welsh's acerbic response to the news of Dylan's award. Of additional concern, as Joseph Kotarba notes, is the presentation of rock nostalgia, which can be presented as a '...simulacrum (cf. Baudrillard 1983). It never existed in its original state as it is now presented to consumers' (Kotarba, 2013 :46).

It balances on your head just like a mattress balances on a bottle of wine
(Dylan, 1966a).

'He deserved it [the Nobel] for that line alone'
(Hamilton, 2016).

As is probably obvious, I do not have the benefit of an objective position when discussing Bob Dylan and his work. He was a looming presence in my formative musical years and influenced the way I listen to music: in many ways, he is to blame for the often-obsessive attention I pay to lyrics: I forgive him.

This is not to say that I am entirely comfortable with his latest honour: while I am a little skeptical about the claims that there is ‘no now’ in popular music terms, it does appear that the spirits and, in many cases, the performers of the ‘classic’ age of rock refuse to give way (Dylan is a case in point). As noted by advocates of the hauntological notion of pop, technology has facilitated this situation, providing almost unlimited access to music of the past. This can be viewed as either a blessing or a curse: providing rich seams for today’s artists to mine, or conversely, stifling creativity and reducing output to pale imitation or parody of what has gone before.

As Alan Moore observes, histories of popular music often tell the stories of musicians and their entourages, which ‘serves the cult of celebrity, a most pervasive characteristic of the age’ (Moore, 2006: 338). Although the latest feting of Bob Dylan ostensibly foregrounds his work, particularly his lyrics, there lurks the suspicion that it also reinforces the cult of the ‘classic’ era of rock, in itself as pervasive as Dylan’s place in my own biography.

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