

Talk in Recognition of Bob Dylan's 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature
February 15, 2017
Dylan Fest, Hillel Center at Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

When I woke up on October 13th to see who had won the Nobel Prize in Literature, I was at least relieved that I'd heard of the winner this time—Bob Dylan, unlike seven of the previous 10 winners who were all new to me. While I have been a fan of Bob Dylan for 25 years, I made no secret of the fact that I was not a fan of Bob Dylan winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. Who would I suggest? Wendell Berry, J.K. Rowling, Haruki Murakami, Milan Kundera... But that can be a topic for another day.

However, when I heard a member of the Nobel committee, Sara Danius, interviewed about choosing Bob Dylan (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5qVWCBKh14>) I was at least impressed by her reasons:

He is a wonderful sampler, a very original sampler, he embodies the tradition, and for 54 years he has been at it and constantly reinventing himself, creating a new identity....[Interviewer then comments: "He has not written novels, nor poetry in the usual sense, you have widened the horizon."] Well, it may look that way, but really we haven't. In a way, if you look back, far back, 2500 years or so, you discover Homer and Sappho, and they wrote poetic texts that were meant to be listened to; they were meant to be performed, often together with instruments, and it's the same way with Bob Dylan.

So, I want to focus on three things about Dylan that I consider worth discussing: (1) He is a sampler, (2) he is constantly reinventing himself, and (3) he is a performing artist. Whether these qualify him for a Nobel I will leave to others to decide.

(1) "He is a sampler." The best illustration of this was Dylan's XM Radio show, "Dreams, Themes and Schemes," for three seasons, 2006-2009. In the course of 100 shows he gave a master class on American music, revealing along the way a number of his influences. But in addition, it was just great radio—with the kind of between-song banter that once livened FM radio. Certainly, in these shows he "embodied the tradition" of American music. But I don't think this is what the Nobel Committee had in mind—or is DJ-ing now going to become part of the canon of literature?

But by "sampling" I assume they mean taking other songs into his own compositions. Of course, in academic parlance, that would be called "plagiarism." In fact in 2006 *The New York Times* published an article exploring similarities between some of Dylan's lyrics in *Modern Times* and the work of the Civil War poet Henry Timrod. His 2011 album "*Love and Theft*" generated controversy when *The Wall Street Journal* pointed out similarities between the album's lyrics and Japanese author Junichi Saga's book *Confessions of a Yakuza*. And even the acceptance speech he gave in 1991 for a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award consisted of a single memorable line, which on further examination, turned out to be a quote from 19th-century German Jewish intellectual, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. So, while Dylan clearly does embody important traditions, I'm not sure that we academics can be fully comfortable with that.

Nevertheless, the best illustration of his "embodying" the tradition is his 1983 composition "Blind Willie McTell." While this was intended for the *Infidels* album, it was not included, and was only later released in the first installment of the on-going official Bootleg Series. The title lets you know right away that he is looking back at the blues tradition, and so far as the tune goes, he draws on Rabbit Brown's song "James Alley Blues," and the traditional "St. James Infirmary." The lyrics

offer an apocalyptic vision of the US south in the aftermath of slavery. I am guessing that this song may not be familiar to many Dylan fans. It is a great performance with just piano and guitar. [Play here: 5:51—stop at 2:48.] While Dylan has taken images from Biblical and blues sources, he has made it all his own.

(2) “He is constantly reinventing himself.” This is clearly true. He is famous for “going electric” in 1965-1966, for turning Christian in 1978-1979, and now for going soft with his crooner albums. But what interests me more is that he has over the years re-invented his own songs—generally in performing them in concerts. During his 1966 tour, which added an electric set to an opening acoustic set, Dylan prefaced his song “I Don’t Believe You” with this: “It used to be like that. Now it goes like this.” He has also changed the lyrics to songs over time, most famously the lyrics to “Tangled Up in Blue.”

Dylan does not recreate the original versions of his songs in concert. I would like to play clips from a few versions of “It’s a Hard Rain Gonna Fall” over the years. I’ll assume you are familiar with the original version, which is played on acoustic guitar in 3/4 time. Here’s a version from December 2, 1975, where it has been turned into a full band performance in 4/4 time. [6:00—stop at 1:18.] Here is my favorite performance of this song, a full band version with gospel backing, back in 3/4 time, from November 12, 1981. [6:10—stop at 1:55.] There is a performance with an orchestra in Japan in 1994, which is really quite good. But I’ll skip to a performance in 2012. I have stopped going to Dylan concerts as of a few years ago, and this is the last concert bootleg I bought from recent concerts. His voice has deteriorated. I don’t hold that against him. But more importantly it feels like he isn’t taking his material seriously. He now dresses like a riverboat gambler, and it all feels ironic to me. Anyway, this is from July 16, 2012. It is closer to a chant than a song. [6:46—stop at 1:15.] We don’t need to listen to more than that. Finally, I recommend to you Patti Smith’s wonderful rendition of the song at the Nobel induction ceremony in December. [8:22—stop at 1:22.] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=941PHEJHCwU>
This flawed performance by Patti Smith redeemed the award. Her rendition was moving in a way that Bob himself could not have touched in the last 20 years.

(3) “He is a performing artist.” I first really came to appreciate Bob Dylan, and also seek out bootleg recordings of his performances, because of a series of three books by Paul Williams, called *Bob Dylan: Performing Artist*. I wonder if his lyrics work except by being performed. Not being a poetry critic, I won’t weigh in on that. What is clear to me is that the lyrics are not separable from the Dylan tunes. But I will leave it to you to judge that. Just yesterday Kathy gave me a cd of seven Dylan lyrics put to music by the classical composer John Corigliano, who knew of Dylan’s renown, but did not know the music. I know—that’s hard to believe. But he composed musical settings for the lyrics. In the liner notes he comments that popular songs are musically repetitious, in the sense that each verse, regardless of the meaning content of the verse, is sung to the same tune. Whereas he has made the music reflective of the content of the verse. He did not select “Hard Rain” for a setting, and perhaps you are tired of that anyway. So here is his setting of “Blowin’ in the Wind,” with which I am sure you are all familiar. [6:17—stop at 2:24.] No comment.

I will end with my all-time favorite Bob Dylan song, from 1981, “Every Grain of Sand,” in which he channels William Blake. [3:38]

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