

📖 Topic Page: [Dylan, Bob \(1941 - \)](#)

Definition: **Dylan, Bob** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

US popular singer and composer, b. Robert Allen Zimmerman. During the 1960s, Dylan successfully combined social protest poetry and folk music on albums such as *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (1963). His switch to rock music initially alienated many fans. Classic albums include *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) and *Blood on the Tracks* (1975). Dylan's tunes include "All Along the Watchtower".



Image from: [Bob Dylan \(1941–\) in *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame*](#)

Summary Article: **Dylan, Bob**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

Born Robert Allen Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota, on May 24, 1941, singer and songwriter Bob Dylan is best known as the author of such anthems about modern injustice as *Blowin' in the Wind*, *Hard Rain's Gonna Fall*, "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and *Masters of War*.

In the summer of 1963 Dylan's song *Blowin' in the Wind* reached number two in the national pop charts. The chart success of *Blowin' in the Wind* seemed to confirm and legitimate the civil rights movement. Carl Oglesby, a former president of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), remarked that Dylan's early songs appeared so promptly as to seem absolutely contemporary with the civil rights movement. There was no time lag. He wasn't a songwriter who came into an established political mood, he seemed to be a part of it and his songs seemed informative to the Movement as the Movement seemed informative to the songwriter. For a group of people who, for the most part, were young, relatively affluent, educated, and white, Bob Dylan managed for a time to articulate their longings for a more ethical and just society. And he did it by writing pop songs that became commercial hits.

Bobby Zimmerman spent most of his early life in Hibbing, Minnesota, a small mining community of about seventeen thousand. Bobby's father was a part owner of an electronics firm that sold and serviced modern appliances on credit. When he was young, Bobby worked for his father, going to the homes of laid-off miners either to collect their overdue payments or to repossess the appliances. The Zimmermans were not particularly wealthy, but they were comfortable. It was not an atypical life for successful, assimilated Jewish merchants in the Midwest. Yet young Bobby despised the blank emptiness of it. When out of his radio came the music of Hank Williams, Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, and, most important, Little Richard, Bobby absorbed not only the sounds but the promises of independence, individuality, and freedom that they seemed to contain. Using the musical materials of Southern African American traditions, the skinny teenager transformed himself into a jumping piano-slapper, playing "Little Richard-style." In a classic move of American popular musical culture, Bobby began to remake himself, to transform himself into Little Richard, only an octave higher.

In the fall of 1959 Bobby moved to Minneapolis to attend the University of Minnesota, where he began introducing himself as Bob Dylan. He also began telling wondrous stories about having hoboed around the West and of having played the piano for Bobby Vee. At the same time he ceased imitating Little Richard and began to transform himself into a folksinger. Many young performers in the Dinkytown area of Minneapolis were tracking down old folk songs and constructing for themselves what they believed

to be an authentic connection to an American music unspoiled by commerce. Where Bobby Zimmerman had grown up wanting to become Little Richard, Dylan soon identified himself with Woody Guthrie. With Guthrie as a necessary link, Dylan began to study the music of, among other recordings, the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, compiled by Harry Smith and released on the Folkways record label. After a year of study and practice, Dylan moved to Greenwich Village in New York City.

There his ambition and his drive both impressed and annoyed fellow folksingers. Dylan's overt concern with his career was considered unseemly by the bohemians singing in coffee shops and bars. Almost too quickly Dylan began to receive the breaks that are necessary for success in the recording industry: he garnered rave notices in the *New York Times*; John Hammond, the famed record producer, signed him to Columbia Records; and perhaps most important, his manager, Albert Grossman, was also the manager for the folksinging trio Peter, Paul, and Mary. It was their recording of *Blowin' in the Wind* that established Bob Dylan as the songwriter of record for the folk revival and the civil rights movement.

Dylan's performance was the highlight of the Newport Folk Festival in the summer of 1963. Later that summer he participated in the March on Washington, singing *Only a Pawn in Their Game*. That fall he recorded "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll." While the words of this brilliant song maintained Dylan's commitment to folk songs of protest, the music suggested a feeling of exhaustion with the style; the song marks the momentary end of this line of Dylan's work (he would take it up again later in *George Jackson* and *Hurricane*) by a musical structure of ever-lengthening verses that questions the efficacy of civil rights marches and the validity of romantic images of cross-racial solidarity and perhaps even represents the inevitability of privilege along with its accompanying hatred and evil. From this point on, Dylan began to estrange himself from the civil rights movement. He would go on to write and perform intricately jeweled depictions of a self both lost and found in the swirling flows of the contemporary conflicts of American life. Yet even when he rejected the role of political spokesperson, the songs of Bob Dylan engaged the concerns that motivated many of his contemporaries. Todd Gitlin recalled listening to Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man* and thinking, This was the transcendentalist fantasy of the wholly, abstractly free individual, finally released from the pains and distortions of society's traps, liberated to the embrace of nature and the wonder of essential things, in an America capable of starting the world again.

Dylan's own ability to remake himself—to start again, to move from being a folksinger, to a rock star, to a devotee of country music; from a rediscoverer of Jewish roots, to a born-again Christian; and then back to being a fan of that traditional music [that] is too unreal to die; his unending quest to rediscover the authentic basis of his own artificially constructed self—is his greatest legacy to American culture. This is where his talent lies. Whether interpreting Little Richard, Woody Guthrie, John Lennon, Johnny Cash, or Jesus, Bob Dylan always performs Bob Dylan, and, in the process, reflects the complexities and contradictions of America's own ambiguous dreams.



Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, singing at Civil Rights March in Washington, D.C. 1963. National Archives.

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