

Beatles, Bobs, and Byrds: The Folk Rock Explosion of 1965

Exploring the triangle of influence that transformed popular music

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Writing



Bob Dylan (middle) on stage with The Byrds at Ciro's in Los Angeles, 1965

April, 1965

“Wow, man, you can dance to it!”

Robert Zimmerman had released four albums by the year 1965, but he had never put out a song that you could dance to. Most of his music—released under the name Bob Dylan—was acoustic driven. Folk music. He

wrote stories. He wrote laments on exes (“Don’t Think Twice, It’s Alright”) or political anthems (“A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”).

However, by March 1965, he had released his fifth studio album, *Bringing It All Back Home*. The album encompassed two sides— one acoustic and one electric, which was new territory for Dylan. Long known as a folk hero, Dylan’s venture into electric rock and roll music would be a shock to the folk community, some of whom would

promptly dismiss him as a sellout and as “part of the establishment.” Even so, it was an acoustic track on the album, “Mr. Tambourine Man,” that would attract the attention of an up and coming rock and roll group in Los Angeles.

Well, not quite rock and roll, at least according to them. “We were *not* a garage rock and roll band,” said bassist Chris Hillman of his band, The Byrds. “We didn’t have a blueprint.” The Byrds, like everybody else in the early 1960s, were enthralled with the next new phenomenon in music, The Beatles. Soon after The Beatles played their American debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in February 1964, folk music began to move electric. Roger McGuinn, guitarist and de facto leader of The Byrds, began to envision his ideal group— a hybrid of folk music and rock and roll.

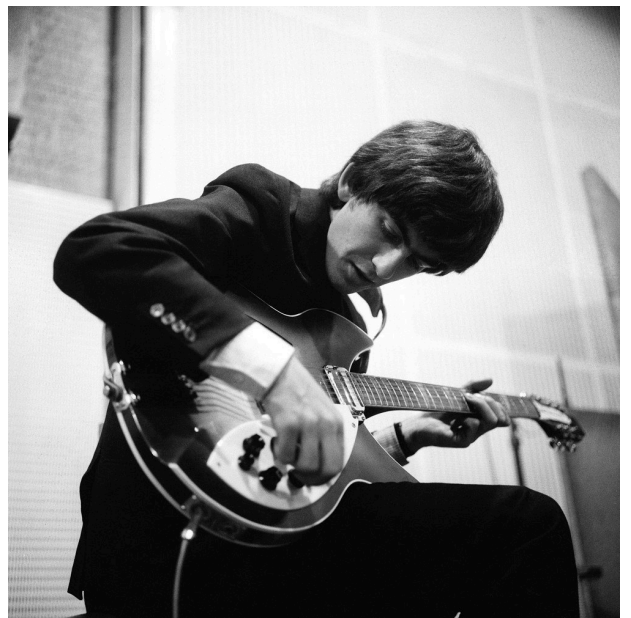
In the studio, Jim Dickson, The Byrds’ manager, recognized that the group needed to get their foot in the door. He believed there was a way to get onto the radio while also maintaining their folk authenticity. He had heard Dylan’s “Mr. Tambourine Man” and helped to conjure the band’s imagination into a new version— one that you can dance to. A version with groove, a version with drive and purpose. This version, released as a single in April 1965, hit #1, and prompted Dylan to jump on stage mid-performance with The Byrds at Ciro’s, a rock club on the Sunset Strip. The Byrds prompted not just a scene, but a musical movement, in southern California. Of course, it didn’t come overnight. In fact, it wasn’t just Dylan who inspired them. It also had a lot to do with those four boys from Liverpool.

.....*Summer 1964*

“Jingle-jangle morning...”

About a year before The Byrds hit the charts with their signature “jingle-jangle” sound, they had to first figure out exactly *how* to accomplish it. The answer, it turned out, was on The Beatles’ 1964 hit record and in its accompanying film, *A Hard Day’s Night*.

By that point in time, The Beatles’ 12-string sound was most prominent on the title track, as well as “You Can’t Do That.” The sound was quite “jingle-jangle,” as The Byrds would sing just a year later on “Mr. Tambourine Man.”



George Harrison studies his Rickenbacker 12-string during sessions for A Hard Day’s Night, 1964

McGuinn's first instinct was to install a magnetic pickup in his Gibson 12-string acoustic, but according to him, the sound "...wasn't quite the same one we were hearing on their records."

It took the group going down to a theater for a viewing of *A Hard Day's Night* to firmly piece together how The Fab Four were able to summon that noise. McGuinn remembers seeing George Harrison turn sideways on screen while holding his guitar, and realizing the model of Rickenbacker he was holding had 12 strings, not six. "I knew right then the secret of their wonderful guitar sound," said McGuinn, who promptly went and bought one for himself at a local guitar shop after viewing the film.

Harrison acquiring his own model for *A Hard Day's Night* came when the owner of Rickenbacker, Francis Hall, arranged a meeting with Beatle manager Brian Epstein in early 1964 to discuss the possibility of the group playing his guitars. The Beatles were the biggest band— the biggest *thing*— in the world, and they were becoming a hot business commodity. Bobble heads, posters, and merchandise were all great vehicles for revenue, but a Beatle holding your guitar on stage in 1964 would be priceless.

Harrison fell ill and could not attend the meeting, but John Lennon returned from the meeting with a Rickenbacker 360 12- string, which Harrison quickly took a liking to. In fact, he liked it so much that he took it back to London with him, just in time to begin recording for *A Hard Day's Night*.

The sound on this album sent musicians like Roger McGuinn into a frenzy. Flash forward a year later, and McGuinn's 12-string sound was enough to propel their version of "Mr. Tambourine Man" to #1 and launch The Byrds into stardom. The Byrds became the front runners of the Laurel Canyon movement that would bring about artists like Buffalo Springfield, Love, The Doors, Joni Mitchell, and the Eagles.

However, it was the writer of "Mr. Tambourine Man" who would once again transform the landscape just a few months later.

July, 1965

"How does it feel?"

Through several accounts, the night of July 25th, 1965, at the annual Newport Folk Festival was plenty of things: it was raucous, it was divisive, it was monumental. Whatever the case, it was *loud*.

Most of that volume came from the stage, where Bob Dylan plugged in a Fender Stratocaster and played his brand new single, "Like A Rolling Stone." He was backed by

organist Al Kooper and guitarist Mike Bloomfield of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, who had played on the studio recording that was released just five days earlier.

A lot of the volume, however, was also coming from the crowd. What exactly the noise was is up for debate in many camps, but there was noise. “The reaction was very intense,” says author Elijah Wald, who penned a book about this very moment in history, entitled Dylan Goes Electric!: Newport, Seeger, Dylan and the Night That Split the Sixties. “How much booing there was is hard to say....There was a very mixed reaction. There were people who loved it.”

Dylan opened the set with his rollicking electric number “Maggie’s Farm” off of *Bringing It All Back Home*, and he returned after ending his set with a tongue-in-cheek encore: “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” on a borrowed acoustic guitar.

It was “Like A Rolling Stone,” though, that would capture the minds, souls, and most notably, the radio airwaves, of the coming months. The song itself was brash, clocking in at a relatively whopping six minutes and thirteen seconds. “There is nothing more exciting on this Earth than an exploding, smash hit single,” noted Tommy James of

Tommy James and the Shondells (who knew a thing or two about hit singles in the mid-1960s). “It was like an atomic bomb.”

Even earlier in the recording process, the song was taking shape in all of its glory. It was fierce and driving; it was relentless in its lyricism and craft; it was an ambitious rock and roll howl.

“It was like somebody had let him out of a cage or something,” said Dion, who witnessed the song’s recording. Anyone who saw the recording process agreed; they were witnessing something special. One guitarist was



Bob Dylan looks out at the Newport Folk Festival crowd, 1965

invited by Columbia Records’ John Hammond to come sit in on the sessions. This guitarist had never seen anything like it, and he would later join Dylan’s band on his infamous tour of 1965/66,

where Dylan traversed the globe with a backing band and played to a shower of boos, jeers, and chants of “Judas!” That guitarist would end up writing classic songs like “The Weight” and “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,”--- The Band’s Robbie Robertson.

Subject to much interpretation, even beyond the content, just the sheer *amount* of lyrics in this song was staggering. Said Stevie Nicks of the E Street Band, “Wait a

minute, we can actually tell the truth? We can actually talk about our own lives?...People didn't do that very much."

Dylan had been moving in another direction for some time. *Bringing It All Back Home* had foreshadowed his fascination with electric rock and roll music. His songs were becoming more complex, his lyrical themes more broad. Verses were longer, choruses were more memorable, and instrumentation was becoming more sharp and grating. His lyrics in "Like A Rolling Stone" questioned ("How does it feel? To be on your own/With no direction home"); they scorned ("Nobody's ever taught you how to live out on the street/And now you're gonna have to get used to it"); and they lamented ("You're invisible now/You've got no secrets to conceal"). This was a man drawing a line between his soul and his mind and pressing record.

After "Like A Rolling Stone," and *Highway 61 Revisited* as a whole album, the waves were felt very far off Dylan's shore. The Byrds were not the only ones enthralled with Dylan's brilliant new hit song.

"It ("Like A Rolling Stone") was brought home to me by John Lennon, who just *adored* Bob Dylan," said Beatles producer George Martin. "Dylan would use phrases that John would pick up on."

The Beatles' *Help!* was released just weeks after *Highway 61 Revisited*, and Dylan's influence was evident, particularly on the Lennon-penned track "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away."

The Beatles and Dylan had actually met just a year earlier in August 1964, in New York, the occasion most famous for Dylan introducing The Beatles to marijuana. "We were smoking dope, drinking wine, and generally being rock 'n rollers and having a laugh, you know..." said Lennon. Dylan's influence on all of The Beatles was evident. His friendship with George Harrison would last up until the quiet one's death, most prominently in the rock supergroup The Traveling Wilburys.

"I could feel myself walking a spiral staircase as I was talking to Dylan," remarked Paul McCartney. "I felt like I was figuring it all out, the meaning of life." Dylan's realist lyrics were a sign of things to come. No longer would The Beatles be singing about simple "boy likes girl" tropes. Often, The Beatles would prioritize melody over lyrics; if it sounds good, who cares what the lyric is? But around 1965, The group began incorporating more truth and story into the lyrics. It mattered just as much *what* they were saying as *how* they were saying it.

If Dylan was feeding The Byrds and The Beatles, The Beatles were feeding right back, and by December 1965, the three groups would again converge in a sphere of

influence that would help kickstart one of the most creative and artistically fruitful periods in the history of popular music.

December, 1965

“Oh, what will you give me?”

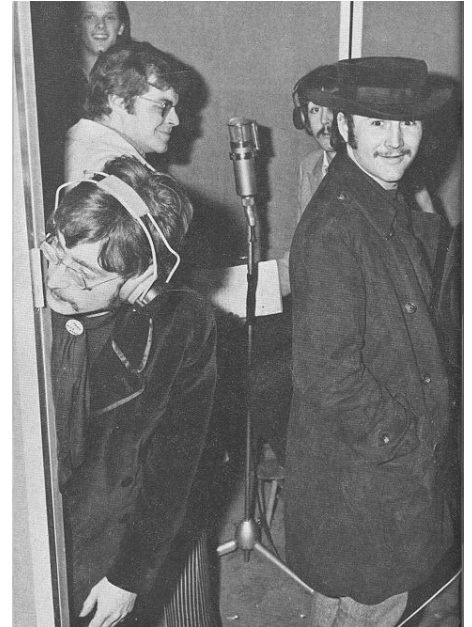
The Byrds held a distinction in the Laurel Canyon scene. Not only were they a seminal folk-rock juggernaut whose foundation would drive countless musicians westward to be rock stars, they were also one of the only artists in America—besides Bob Dylan, of course—to truly have a back-and-forth dialogue with The Beatles.

Harrison and Lennon attended The Byrds’ first London shows in the summer of 1965, and Harrison and McCartney made a surprise visit during the recording of The Byrds’ second album, *Turn! Turn! Turn!*.

Most notably, George Harrison’s love of The Byrds drove him to write the song “If I Needed Someone,” which would be released in December 1965 on *Rubber Soul*. He had heard an early recording of The Byrds’ “The Bells of Rhymney,” which contained a chiming, descending, 12-string guitar riff as an intro to the song. Harrison modified that riff, wrote a song around it, and it became the first Harrison composition that The Beatles played live.

Harrison was open about the ironic lift of The Byrds’ sound; after all, Roger McGuinn had lifted the guitar sound from Harrison in the first place in 1964. In a budding return of favor, Harrison sent an advance copy of *Rubber Soul* to The Byrds in Los Angeles, acknowledging their influence on the track.

Rubber Soul was a turning point for The Beatles. They were now true artists in every sense of the word, connected to the truth and in touch with the sounds around them. It was also the first appearance of a sitar on a Beatles record, a concept that The Beatles and The Byrds bonded through during The Beatles’ visit to Los Angeles. They were drooling over the music of Ravi Shankar, and Harrison lent his new talent to the group’s enigmatic “Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown).”



The Byrds' David Crosby visits The Beatles in studio, 1967

In a true circle game, the driving force behind the genesis of “Norwegian Wood” was Bob Dylan. “I am a chameleon, influenced by whatever is going on,” noted Lennon, who was the principal writer of “Norwegian Wood”, and The Beatles’ chief Dylan enthusiast. Dylan was a little less favorable in his take on the song, eventually saying “What is this? It’s me, Bob. John’s doing me.” He even went so far as to write “4th Time Around,” which is often considered to be a parody and mock of “Norwegian Wood.” It would be released a year later on *Blonde On Blonde*.

Looking beyond the year of 1965 would expand the reverence of these three artists, each in their own right a focal point of popular music’s rich history. The Beatles’ latter half of the sixties would prove revolutionary, both in songwriting and recording; Dylan would transform himself, hide away, and come back out a brand new man time and time again; The Byrds would continue to propel their sound and remain a flagship foundation of the “California sound” that dressed up the late sixties in a warm, 12-string chime sun dress.

It is *within* the year 1965, however, that the three groups converged on one road, albeit from different junctions. Folk rock became rock and roll; acoustic music became electrified; pop music went folk, and the circle went around again. The Beatles, The Byrds, and Bob Dylan were a revolving door of influence, spitting lines, sounds, and stories back and forth, across the pond, out west, and back again.

Their influence would reign beyond each other, as well. Michelle Phillips of The Mamas and the Papas once said that The Byrds scoring a hit with “Mr. Tambourine Man” inspired her and husband John to move west to pursue a career in music. Dylan’s lyricism and craft work has inspired generations of singer-songwriters, from Tom Petty to Bruce Springsteen to John Mayer. The Beatles’ relentless recording prowess and innovative studio experiments drove Brian Wilson to create what would become The Beach Boys’ finest album, *Pet Sounds*.

There is no understating the power of influence in music. Artists feed off of each other’s creativity; they strive for a friendly competition, a communal sense of inspiration. Inspiration and influence is the motor behind arguably music’s most important year; 1965, a year of change that would strap popular music to a rocket ship and orbit for decades to come.

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