

The Endless Appeal of Bob Dylan

Written by Sean Murawski // SM Music

He is the man who cut the sixties in half. There were those who *got it*, and those who didn't. There is an elegant mystery about Bob Dylan, which is something he probably bites on and chews away at for a while if he's in a certain mood. We all want to be somewhat mysterious, as if we're hiding something.

Except Bob Dylan has never really hid anything. It's all there, in the songs. Somewhere in there— 41 albums, countless bootlegs, live shows, documentaries, memoirs— somewhere in there, is Bob Dylan. He is difficult to decipher, but he's there. And yet, somehow, in 2024, he still feels like this mythical figure. He still seems like the one we'll never truly understand.

I suppose I was compelled to write about Bob Dylan because, in all truth, I sometimes fall into the category of those who really....*don't get it*. He doesn't have the sultry voice of Marvin Gaye. He can't play the guitar like Jimi Hendrix. At times, I feel that plenty of Bob Dylan songs sound better when they're sung by other people. As sacreligious as it may seem, his voice has rarely offered me anything more secure or soulful than any one of my favorite singers.

And yet, here I am, in 2024, impatiently awaiting *A Complete Unknown*. The long awaited Bob Dylan biopic, starring Timothee Chalamet as Bob Dylan, is something I am greatly looking forward to. When I saw the trailer, I immediately realized what the appeal of Bob Dylan is. For all of the criticism he may receive about his voice, or his songs, or his attitude, or his gusto, Dylan is a master at being unique, one of one. The reason other people sing Bob Dylan's songs is because they want to sound like him. They want to touch some of his magic, even indirectly. He is the consummate singer-songwriter. He is a rebel and a punk, a rocker and a crooner. He carved out his own league when he realized he was out of everyone else's. He is the most studied figure in popular music on purpose— when someone is that incredible, there is an innate push to know more about them.

I am not a Bob Dylan fanatic, but at the same time, I am obsessed with him. He has written a handful of songs I consider to be masterpieces, and even the ones that aren't masterpieces still intrigue me. The endless appeal of Bob Dylan is that there is so

much to learn about him. He is never-ending, and there will forever be a quest to match him. Even the most futile missions must be pursued.

Bono said it best: "The reason I'm never bored of Bob Dylan is because there are so many of them." My favorite version of Bob, like many others, is the version around 1965-66. This is precisely when he cut the sixties in half. "Like A Rolling Stone" is perhaps rock's greatest song ever, and it came from a folk artist. It's howling and filled with attitude, a rock and roll middle finger. In some people's eyes, it was revolutionary. In the eyes of others, he was betraying the folk community—he had become the establishment, the very thing he was critiquing in early folk anthems like "A Hard Rain's-a Gonna Fall" or "A Pawn in Their Game." He angered both sides, while playing loud, biting back, and doubling down—in other words, he beat punk music to the punch by about a decade.

He became a tangled, lovesick mess on 1975's *Blood On the Tracks*. A decade after *Highway 61 Revisited*, when his rock and roll maniac alter ego escaped, he was back to basics. In the late 1980s, he joined The Traveling Wilburys. If life is all about the company you keep, how about this lineup: George Harrison, Roy Orbison, Tom Petty, and Jeff Lynne? What about his friends and frequent collaborators: Joni Mitchell, Roger McGuinn, Joan Baez, Daniel Lanois, and Johnny Cash?

Everyone, selfishly, wanted a piece of Bob. They wrote with him because they wanted to glean some wisdom. They went into the studio with him because they wanted to capture a piece of his soul. They went to school with Bob—they wanted to minor in whatever voodoo he was majoring in. They jammed with him to connect and they listened to his music to explore. They became fans and admirers forever, because enough is never enough. Not with Bob Dylan.

We look back at Bob Dylan because, at the base of his foundation, he is the first singer-songwriter to really break into the mainstream past the folk box. Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, while amazing and influential artists, are folk heroes. When Bob Dylan picked up the electric guitar and toured with a band—*The Band*—he was no longer a folk hero. He became a much bigger monster. The songs were still great, even if they weren't folk songs. "Queen Jane Approximately," "Visions of Johanna," "Knocking On Heaven's Door,"--- his zone was expanding. His scope in the world of popular music was overbearing. He was influencing The Beatles and Sam Cooke. He was a real life troubadour. In many ways, he was everything rock and roll was meant to be. Folk music resisted. They wanted their hero to fly beside them, not above them.

Like every other musician biopic, *A Complete Unknown* will likely have its doubters and its critics. Like *Bohemian Rhapsody* or *Rocketman* of recent years, this film is not meant to be a tell-all, down-to-the-grain truth piece. Of course, there will be overarching themes and retellings of true events, but everything will be dramatized for the sake of film and excitement— it's the nature of the art. For me, the goal of these musical biopics should be to expose a new generation to someone they should know more about. If younger generations leave the theaters (or their couches, it's 2024) to go listen to Bob Dylan or watch his interviews, it is an absolute slam dunk. Maybe it makes them pick up a guitar, like Dylan and several others made me do years ago. Maybe it makes them move to New York or read more literature or buy a harmonica (okay, maybe not that last one.) *A Complete Unknown* will probably not summarize the entire story of Bob Dylan, and that's okay. It is nearly impossible to do that. You can write a novel about just one year of Bob Dylan's career (I would choose 1965 ...no, 1966... maybe 1975....).

The exploration of Bob Dylan's music has plenty of avenues branching off. He is the gateway drug to the singer-songwriter world. He is the ground zero for all modern songs. Even Paul McCartney and John Lennon, perhaps the two most successful songcrafters of all time, owe a lion's share of their influence to Bob Dylan. He made songs less about sound and more about substance. Forget what your voice *sounds like*— what are you actually trying to *say*? How are you trying to say it?

It's very easy to get caught up in hyperbole when talking about music. Most of the time, we are all throwing the kitchen sink when describing what music means to us and how it affects us. We are all extravagantly screaming things that could be said quietly or even whispered, and yet with Bob Dylan, all of this feels pretty close to the truth. It all feels like we mean every word we say, like we don't sensationalize his importance one bit. The great artists will get you to do that— they will get you to tell the truth because that's what they do. They will bring you to the honesty. Their songs help you settle down in destinations you've only passed through before.

The Dylan fanatic in me wrote this. He isn't here all the time, and I don't even know if he'll be here tomorrow. But when he is here, he is present and searching. He is listening, exploring, and wanting more. We all want to be a little mysterious, but for Bob Dylan, the mystery must be boring. It must be a drag to have everyone dig you without really understanding you. Then again, to be understood is to be figured out. To be figured out is to be packaged and set aside— to be dismissed. I doubt Bob Dylan will ever reach that point.