

## BOB ENNOBLED

### BOB DYLAN AND THE NOBEL PRIZE

I am a Dylan fan and I know many of his songs by heart. I have seen him perform and have heard him mangle his own work in Birmingham, England, and then delight the Hammersmith Odeon. I have watched him forget some of the words to 'Mr Tambourine Man' in the Leisure Centre at Bournemouth. Indeed, since about 1963 and *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* I have spent many leisure hours and vital pounds, first of pocket money and then of earned income, keeping up with much of Dylan's copious output. I've even tried to read his 'novel' *Tarantula*.

While I am aware of his vocal and musical limitations and the way he can move from brilliant to dire, I love some of his songs, his phrasing and intonation this side of idolatry and sometimes beyond. I think the first four Dylan tracks I bought were on an 1963 EP called Dylan (Extended Play: remember those?) which rotated on the turntable at 45 rpm as his astonishing twenty-one-year old-voice sang: 'Don't Think Twice, it's alright', 'Blowin' in the Wind', 'When the Ship Comes in' and then was it 'Corinna, Corinna'? His way with song words has long held my qualified admiration and I enjoyed reading his *Chronicles (Volume One)* when they came out in 2004. For me, even with Dylan at his uneven best, it's the words that matter most and the way he delivers them in the best of his supremely memorable songs.

If I had to name my current top ten of his tracks, chosen with particular attention to the words and to do so rapidly from memory, I'd probably go for the following: 'Boots of Spanish Leather', 'One Too Many Mornings', 'Mr Tambourine Man', 'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll', 'It's All right Ma (I'm only bleeding)', 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall', 'Hurricane', 'Every Grain of Sand', 'Desolation Row', 'Positively Fourth Street' and then wonder how much I'd left out or missed, particularly from the later work: 'Man in a Long Black Coat', or that lovely early song about nature from *Biograph* 'Lay Down Your

‘Weary Tune’, ‘Like a Rolling Stone’, ‘Farewell Angelina’, ‘Tomorrow is a Long Time’, ‘The Ballad of Hollis Brown’, ‘Chimes of Freedom’ and so beguilingly on.

I once chose ‘Mr Tambourine Man’ as one of two desert island discs but I can think of better musical company than Bob’s nasal incantations of that surrealistic, dreamy, druggy escapism intoned repeatedly on the desert turntable, taking me disappearing down the smoke rings of his or my mind in the foggy ruins of time.

And now here we are in 2016 and Bob Dylan (75) has won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He won the award for ‘having created new poetic expressions within the American song tradition.’

As a lapsed Classicist, I am well aware of the traditional links between poetry and song. Indeed, the first essay I was set to write at university asked ‘Who was Corinna?’ Not Bob’s friend but an even more fragmentary lyric poet than Sappho, apparently. After all, odes mean songs and the ancient lyre gives us the modern lyric, lyrics and lyricists. Some of my favourite poems are or have been song words of various sorts: ‘Fear no more the heat of the sun’ (Shakespeare), ‘Sir Patrick Spens’ (Anon) and ‘Roman Wall Blues’ (Auden), for just a few examples.

However, do Dylan’s lyrics really read well as literature when divorced from the music and singing that has carried them into the world? For me, the honest answer is no. He’s a brilliant wordsmith as a song-writer but surely a real poem must stand on its own and carry its own verbal music inside those very words alone. Try reading the lyrics of a Dylan song which you have not already heard and it can be or seem inert and inept. The printed versions can be useful in deciphering the mumblings of the great Bob but, for me, it is not like reading a brilliant collection of poems, such as the best by Yeats or Heaney who both won Nobel prizes for Literature or indeed by Frost, Auden or Larkin who didn’t. Try reading the collected Dylan *Lyrics* from cover to cover, as I have, and it is a dilution not a distillation. Among the mercurial brilliance and wit in Bob, there is also bullshit, doggerel, dross, padding, plodding, repetition, rubbish and banality. Verbally and vocally, he can be an infuriating and disappointing imperfectionist.

My argument therefore is that, while Dylan's lyrics are 'literary' and 'poetic', they are not what I would call literature. His words simply don't read well enough. In announcing the award, somewhat defensively, the secretary of the Nobel Committee, Professor Sara Danius, mentioned Homer and Sappho, those ancient Greek singer-songwriters, as precedents in this context. Epic poet 'Homer' was copious and lyric poet Sappho survives in fragmentary form. Since we know so little about the music presumed to have accompanied their work, however, it seems a specious or at least an evasive literary parallel or precedent to the 'American song tradition'. What we need to compare with Dylan's work in this context are the outstanding lyric poets in our own language(s) and era who have or have not won the Nobel Prize for Literature since its inception in 1901.

Eliot (though I hope not for his worthy but dullish later plays), Yeats, Heaney: yes, yes, yes. At their brilliant best, they are each supreme exponents of the poetic art, incontrovertibly in my view. After winning the Prize in 1923, W.B. Yeats wrote a sequence of poems 'Words for Music Perhaps' and apparently there are over sixty poems by Yeats which have the word 'song' in the title. For me and for many, he is a supreme lyric poet but not a lyricist where the lyrics need the breath of music, song and performance in order to live in the mind. My view is that with only one clear exception that I can recall, namely his 'Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie' (available on Bootleg Series 1 -3, Vol.1), what Dylan has been writing all these years is Words for Music Without a Doubt. As Germaine Greer has said, 'the music does what the words alone cannot do'. In other words, they need the melody, rhythm and delivery of the performance to lift them, even the puff and blow of that regrettable or execrable harmonica.

If I was going to give a Laureateship to an American poet, I would have given it years ago to Robert Frost before he died. Can't think which living American poet deserves as much in my book: Mary Oliver? Billy Collins? Not Ashbery, nor Olds. The stipulation in Alfred Nobel's will is that the award should go to the writer of 'the most outstanding work in an ideal direction', which must be a difficult aspect to judge, particularly in translation. Much though I admire their work, I find it difficult to see Nobel-winning playwrights Beckett and Pinter as operating in an 'ideal direction', whatever that means. Incidentally, if I had to

recommend a living author now writing in English, I'd probably vote for Tom Stoppard for such a lifetime achievement award, although I imagine he might refuse it on the grounds of not needing any money derived from a fortune based on the sales of dynamite and armaments.

One of my favourite comments on Bob Dylan's work came when the *Daily Telegraph* jazz critic Philip Larkin chose to review the album *Highway 61 Revisited* in 1965:

*I'm afraid I poached Bob Dylan's Highway 61 Revisited (CBS) out of curiosity and found myself well rewarded. Dylan's cawing, derisive voice is probably well suited to his material – I say probably because much of it was unintelligible to me – and his guitar adapts itself to rock ('Highway 61') and ballad ('Queen Jane') admirably. There is a marathon 'Desolation Row' which has an enchanting tune and mysterious, possibly half-baked words.*

Apparently, Woody Guthrie said somewhere of the young Bob Dylan that he might make it as a song-writer but he wouldn't succeed as a singer. Dylan himself is the source of many witty and thought-provoking responses, particularly in interviews: for just one example, 'If I answered that question I would be lying.'

Dylan has been widely honoured and richly rewarded as a songwriter but does he really deserve a Nobel Prize for *Literature*? I'd be lying if I said that what he writes is literature, even though he has indeed 'created new poetic expressions within the American song tradition.' Nevertheless, I am also conscious of

*... Ezra Pound and T.S.Eliot  
Fighting in the captain's tower  
While calypso singers laugh at them  
And fishermen hold flowers...*

Now why did Bob Dylan sing that verse and why does it spring so readily to mind?