

Bob Dylan

Also known as: Robert Zimmerman, Robert Allen Zimmerman

Born: May 24, 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota, United States

Occupation: singer, songwriter, musician

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Throughout a career that has seen the better part of three decades, Bob Dylan (born 1941) has been pop music's master poet and an ever-changing performer.

In the early 1960s Bob Dylan was heralded as the spokesman for his generation, writing and singing folk songs that were as deep and moving as those of any artist since his idol, Woody Guthrie. At the 1965 Newport Folk Festival Dylan shocked his following by going electric and venturing into **rock** and roll. He proved to be equally superior in that field also and by 1968 he was trying his hand at folk-**rock**, creating an impact that touched even the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. As the 1980s came around Dylan was undergoing a spiritual rebirth and his writing reflected a religious conviction that was truly heartfelt.

Began Exploring Folk Music

Born Robert Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota, Dylan was raised in the northern mining town of Hibbing from the age of six. His earliest musical influences, Hank Williams, Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf and John Lee Hooker, were brought to him via the airwaves of a Shreveport, Louisiana, radio station. He played in a variety of bands during high school, including the Golden Chords, before enrolling at the University of Minnesota in 1959. It was at college that he changed his name to Dylan (probably after the poet Dylan Thomas) and began creating his own mythological background, which made him out to be everything from an Indian to a hobo to Bobby Vee. After hearing the Kingston Trio and Odetta he began to explore folk music, learning older tunes and sitting in at local coffeehouses around campus.

Just one year into college, Dylan dropped out and hitchhiked to New York to meet legendary singer Woody Guthrie, who was in an East Coast hospital suffering from Huntington's disease. "Guthrie was my last idol," Dylan said in *Rock 100*. "My future idols will be myself." Obviously in little need of self-confidence, by April 1961 he was gigging at Gerde's Folk City in New York's Greenwich Village. With the folk scene booming, Columbia executive and talent scout John Hammond had just signed Pete Seeger; Dylan followed soon after.

His debut LP, *Bob Dylan*, was released in March 1962. Recorded for a mere \$402, the album featured acoustic reinterpretations of old folk songs, but also included two Dylan originals, "Song for Woody" and "Talking New York." Within a year his second LP, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*--containing self-penned compositions only--was released. Protest tunes like "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," "Masters of War," and "Don't Think Twice, It's Alright" were making listeners more conscious and aware, both politically and personally. The trio of Peter, Paul & Mary recorded a version of "Blowin' in the Wind" from the LP that helped put the spotlight on Dylan. In July of that year at the Newport Folk Festival he was crowned leader of the folk movement with Joan Baez as the reigning queen. The new voice of youth, "Dylan's albums were listened to as if they were seismic readings from an impending apocalypse," reported *Rock 100*.

Unique Phrasing

The Times They Are a-Changin', with its title track and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," broke in the new year of 1964. Imitators of his guitar/harmonica rig and odd singing (talking?) voice were sprouting up everywhere. "It's phrasing," Dylan told *Rolling Stone*, "I think I've phrased everything in a way that it's never been phrased before." In addition to his unique voice, lyrics, and meter, Dylan's physical image was just as intriguing with his wild conk of hair, stovepipe legs, and facial scowl. As much as the public and critics adored him, they also were frustrated as attempts to gain insight were met with toying word games and sometimes downright humiliation. Dylan began to question his role as guru on his fourth LP, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, moving away from political themes and towards personal love songs. "My Back Pages" and "It Ain't Me Babe" signalled that a different Dylan had now arrived.

Bringing It All Back Home (1965) was a half-acoustic, half-electric outing that featured Dylan classics "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm," "Mr. Tambourine Man," and "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)." Dylan's first step into **rock** was also his first million-seller. Even so, his die-hard fans were not prepared for Dylan's performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, when he appeared onstage backed by the electric Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Cries of "sell-out" and "gone commercial" filled the air as he was booed off the stage only to return for a final acoustic number, "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue." Anyone who doubted his commitment only needed to check out the next LP, *Highway 61 Revisited*, which was able to leap off the turntable courtesy of Michael Bloomfield's stinging guitar lines. The album featured the songs "Desolation Row," "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues," "Queen Jane Approximately," and perhaps Dylan's most popular tune yet, "Like a Rolling Stone" (which went all the way to number two).

1966's Masterpiece *Blond on Blonde*

His masterpiece, *Blond on Blonde* (1966), is considered by some to be the finest **rock** album in history. A double LP recorded with Nashville session men, it is filled with an amazing display of Dylan's songwriting abilities: "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," "Absolutely Sweet Marie," "Rainy Day Women No. 12 & 35," "Memphis Blues Again," "I Want You," and others that firmly established Dylan as the most prolific stylist of all time. Just when it seemed he was in full force, Dylan was seriously injured in a motorcycle accident on July 29, 1966. He would spend the next year and a half recuperating from a broken neck in upstate New York. He recorded tracks with his

backup group, the Band, but they would not be released until 1975 as *The Basement Tapes* (an LP that was bootlegged endlessly during the nine-year delay).

After flirting with death, Dylan's comeback album, *John Wesley Harding*, relied more on religious themes and a mellower country flavor. "All Along the Watchtower" became a hit shortly after for Jimi Hendrix while the entire mood of *JWH* sent an influential wave out that touched other artists of the time. Dylan carried the country style even further on *Nashville Skyline*, recording a duet with Johnny Cash, and the easy-going "Lay Lady Lay." His next release, however, was a commercial and critical disappointment. *Self-Portrait* was a double album consisting mainly of non-originals that seemed to be almost intentionally bad. *New Morning*, also from 1970, did not fare much better; Dylan's talent seemed to have peaked.

In 1973 Dylan's Columbia contract expired and he signed with Asylum just after releasing his soundtrack to the movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, which included one of his biggest hits, "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." (Dylan also played the part of Alias in the film. Actor Sam Shepard told Rolling Stone that Dylan "knows how to play a part. He and Billy Graham are the two greatest actors in the world.") As if in retaliation for his leaving, Columbia released *Dylan*, a collection of studio outtakes and cover tunes that accomplished little more than embarrassing Dylan. His two Asylum LPs, *Planet Waves* and *Before the Flood*, were both recorded with the Band, the first being a studio album and the second featuring live recordings of the ensuing tour in early 1974.

Recordings Reflected Religious Beliefs

In 1975 Dylan re-signed with Columbia and recorded one of his best records yet, *Blood on the Tracks*, which seemed to harken back to his earlier style. "Tangled up in Blue," "Idiot Wind," "Shelter From the Storm," "Meet Me in the Morning," and "Buckets of Rain" amongst others had critics gushing with joy over yet another Dylan comeback. He then hit the road with a musically varied ensemble called the Rolling Thunder Revue: Mick Ronson, Joan Baez, T-Bone Burnett, Roger McGuinn, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, and David Mansfield, all blasting off on Dylan classics and material from his newest LP, *Desire*. That album topped both the British and U.S. charts riding a crest of popularity created by "Hurricane," Dylan's thumping plea for the release of the imprisoned boxer Ruben "Hurricane" Carter. In 1976 the live *Hard Rain* album captured the revue on vinyl. Two years later he would release another fine studio effort, *Street Legal*, featuring "Where Are You Tonight," "Baby Stop Crying," and "Changing of the Guards."

Dylan's next phase can be summed up in three albums, *Slow Train Coming*, *Saved*, and *Shot of Love*, and one word: Christianity. In 1979 he became "born-again," as writers coined it, studying the Bible at the Vineyard Christian Fellowship school in California. Although raised a Jew, Dylan took his new-found belief to the point of righteousness. "Dylan hadn't simply found Jesus but seemed to imply that he had His home phone number as well," wrote Kurt Loder in his *Rolling Stone* review of *Slow Train Coming*. The LP revolved around Dylan's beliefs, but it also rocked with the aid of Dire Straits guitarist Mark Knopfler. Critics and the public were split over the newest Dylan. Jann Wenner explained his view of this period in *Rolling Stone*: "Dylan created so many images and expectations that he narrowed his room for maneuverability and finally became unsure of his own instincts."

Made MTV *Unplugged* Appearance

A rejuvenated Dylan appeared in 1983 on *Infidels*, produced by Knopfler with ex-Rolling Stone Mick Taylor on guitar. Dylan had joined an ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect, Lubavitcher Hasidim, and the songs reflected the move (although more subtly than during his Christian phase). In the mid-1980s Dylan continued to record and toured with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers and the Grateful Dead as his backup bands. In 1988 he appeared as one of the Traveling Wilburys alongside Jeff Lynne, Tom Petty, George Harrison, and the late Roy Orbison. More changes can probably be expected from this master of the unexpected; Dylan has stayed on top by keeping ahead of the pack, knowing where his audience wants to be next, and then delivering. Another important year for Dylan was 1995, as he reemerged as "the bard who matters most," according to the *Boston Globe*. The **rock** legend embarked on a U.S. tour, released an *MTV Unplugged* album, and a new CD-ROM entitled *Bob Dylan: Highway 61 Interactive*, all to favorable reviews.

On January 21, 2001, Dylan was given a Golden Globe for best original song in a motion picture for "Things Have Changed" from *Wonder Boys*.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name originally Robert Allen Zimmerman; born May 24, 1941, in Duluth, MN; son of Abraham (a hardware store owner) and Betty Zimmerman; married Sara Lowndes, November 22, 1965; children: five. Education: Attended the University of Minnesota for one year. **Addresses:** Home--7156 Birdview Ave., Malibu, CA 90265. Office--P.O. Box 870, Cooper Station, New York, NY 10046.

AWARDS

Grammy Awards, for album of the year (with others) for Concert for Bangla Desh, 1972, and for best **rock** vocal performance by a male for single "Gotta Serve Somebody," 1979; Rolling Stone Music Award, 1975, for artist of the year (tie with Bruce Springsteen), and for albums of the year for The Basement Tapes and Blood on the Tracks; awarded Commander Dans L'Ordre des Arts et Lettres by French Minister of Culture, 1990; Golden Globe for Best Original Song in a Motion Picture for "Things Have Changed" from *Wonder Boys*, 2001.

CAREER

Played **rock** and roll in bands in high school; changed name to Bob Dylan and began playing folk music in college c. 1960; moved to New York City and began playing the coffeehouse circuit, 1961; recording artist, 1962--; backing bands have included the Band, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, and the Grateful Dead; sang on the "We Are the World" single for Live Aid (African famine relief); recorded with Petty, George Harrison, Jeff Lynne, and Roy Orbison on the Traveling Wilburys LP, 1988.

WORKS

- **On Columbia, except where noted**
- *Bob Dylan*, 1962.
- *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, 1963.
- *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, 1964.
- *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, 1964.
- *Bringing It All Back Home*, 1965.
- *Highway 61 Revisited*, 1965.
- *Blonde on Blonde*, 1966.
- *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits*, 1967.
- *John Wesley Harding*, 1968.
- *Nashville Skyline*, 1969.
- *Self-Portrait*, 1970.
- *New Morning*, 1970.
- *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits, Vol. 2*, 1971.
- *Dylan*, 1973.
- *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, 1973.
- *Planet Waves*, Asylum, 1974.
- *Before the Flood*, Asylum, 1974.
- *The Basement Tapes*, 1975.
- *Blood on the Tracks*, 1975.
- *Desire*, 1976.
- *Hard Rain*, 1976.
- *Street Legal*, 1978.
- *Bob Dylan at Budokan*, 1979.
- *Slow Train Coming*, 1979.
- *Saved*, 1980. Shot of Love, 1981.
- *Infidels*, 1983.
- *Real Live*, 1984.
- *Empire Burlesque*, 1985.
- *Knocked Out Loaded*, 1986.
- (With Tom Petty, George Harrison, Jeff Lynne and Roy Orbison) *The Traveling Wilburys, Volume One*, Warner Bros., 1988.
- *Down in the Groove*, 1988.
- *Dylan and the Dead*, 1989.
- *Oh, Mercy*, 1989.
- *Under The Red Sky*, 1990.
- *World Gone Wrong*, 1993.
- *MTV Unplugged*, 1995.
- *Bob Dylan's Greatest Hits, Vol. 3*, 1995.
- (Dylan has also appeared on numerous albums by other artists; for a more complete listing check Bob Spitz's *Dylan, A Biography*, McGraw-Hill, 1989.)

Selected compositions

- "All Along the Watchtower"
- "All I Really Want to Do"
- "Blowin' in the Wind"
- "Chimes of Freedom"
- "Desolation Row"
- "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right"
- "Highway 61 Revisited"
- "I Shall Be Released"
- "If Not for You"
- "It Ain't Me, Babe"
- "Just Like a Woman"
- "Knockin' on Heaven's Door"

- "Lay, Lady, Lay"
- "Like a Rolling Stone"
- "The Mighty Quinn"
- "Mr. Tambourine Man"
- "My Back Pages"
- "Positively 4th Street"
- "Rainy Day Women No. 12 & 35"
- "Subterranean Homesick Blues"
- "Tangled Up in Blue"
- "The Times They Are a-Changin'"
- "When I Paint My Masterpiece"
- "When the Ship Comes In,"
- "With God on Our Side,"
- "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere"

Other

- "Bob Dylan: Highway 61 Interactive," CD-ROM

FURTHER READINGS

books

- Christgau, Robert, *Christgau's Record Guide*, Ticknor & Fields, 1981.
- Dalton, David, and Lenny Kaye, *Rock 100*, Grosset & Dunlap, 1977.
- Dylan, Bob, *Tarantula*, Macmillan, 1970.
- *Bob Dylan: The Illustrated Record*, Harmony, 1978.
- Heylin, Clinton, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades; The Biography--Revisited*, Morrow, 2001.
- *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Rock*, compiled by Nick Logan and Bob Woffinden, Harmony, 1977.
- *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock and Roll*, edited by Jim Miller, Random House/Rolling Stone Press, 1976.
- *The Rolling Stone Record Guide*, edited by Dave Marsh with John Swenson, Random House/Rolling Stone Press, 1979.
- Shepard, Sam, *Rolling Thunder Logbook*, Viking Press, 1977.
- Sounes, Howard, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan*, Grove, 2001.
- Spitz, Bob, *Dylan, A Biography*, McGraw, 1989.
- *What's That Sound?*, edited by Ben Fong-Torres, Anchor, 1976.

periodicals

- *Boston Globe*, December 8, 1995; February 9, 1995.
- *Detroit News*, July 9, 1989.
- *Musician*, September 1986.
- *New York Times*, April 30, 1995.

- *Oakland Press*, July 2, 1989.
- *Rolling Stone*, March 11, 1976; September 21, 1978; November 16, 1978; July 12, 1979; September 20, 1979; September 18, 1980; June 21, 1984; Summer 1986; College Papers, Number 3.
- *USA Today*, May 5, 1995.
- *Washington Post*, May 17, 1995; February 8, 1995.

Recent Updates

July 22, 2003: Dylan's soundtrack album, *Masked & Anonymous*, is released. **Source:** Yahoo! Shopping, shopping.yahoo.com/shop?d=product&id=1921983242, July 22, 2003.

June 23, 2004: The University of St. Andrews in Scotland honored Dylan with an honorary doctor of music degree. **Source:** E! Online, www.eonline.com, June 17, 2004.

October 2004: *Chronicles: Volume One*, Dylan's memoir, will be published by Simon & Schuster, which will also issue *Lyrics: 1962-2001*, a comprehensive compendium of all Dylan's songs. **Source:** *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com, August 25, 2004.

January 2006: *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, a show by Twyla Tharp based on Dylan's songs, will open at the Old Globe Theater in San Diego, California, in early 2006. **Source:** *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com, August 31, 2005.

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