

Letters on Obama's Medal of Freedom and Bob Dylan

7 June 2012

Following is a selection of letters from readers on "Obama bestows the Presidential Medal of Freedom on singer Bob Dylan," published June 1.

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Enjoyed your article on Dylan. Shame on him for accepting such an award. His early music had quite an impact. Some of his lyrics; "Chimes of Freedom", "My Back Pages", and "Masters of War" to name a few, still give me goose bumps. Sadly, he has become an "old fart", renouncing any connection with his past.

The late (and missed) Beat poet Greg Corso said it best, in his poem "I am 25"—"I HATE OLD POETMEN! Especially old poetmen who retract—who consult with other poetmen—who speak their youth in whispers, saying, I did those then, but that was then". These lines seem to fit Dylan to a T.

EB

3 June 2012

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Thank you for this article, David. It expresses what I felt when I first saw the story on the *Guardian* web site. I loved his stuff up to *Blonde on Blonde*. Then, after his accident, I liked him less and less. There were a few good songs and then I stopped listening. His wandering among the various "isms", as you call them, symbolized to me a weakening of his mind. The religious stuff nauseated me and I tuned him out. What a sad fall from someone who had inspired me from my teenage years.

Carolyn
California, USA

1 June 2012

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It's like the man said...

"I used to care, but things have changed."

L

1 June 2012

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As for myself, I definitely had a reaction of disgust when I saw Dylan standing there with Obama. David Walsh has written a very insightful and clear-eyed article on Bob Dylan's evolution and significance. A longer article would indeed be appropriate and welcomed.

I have listened to all of Dylan's albums many times, and I have to agree that his only vital work is to be found in his early albums. During his subsequent career, he did occasionally release good or interesting rock records that could be quite emotionally mature by any regular pop music standard. Since the 1960s however, he has had precious little to say about anything important, and sometimes he has been downright reactionary and incoherent (e.g., the three Christian albums).

In particular, by the mid 1960s, Dylan developed a kind of fraudulent method for writing ultra-surrealistic lyrics with which he tried to conjure the illusion of being profound. While passable when used especially skillfully, as it was with his mid-60s albums, it became obviously absurd on many of his later albums. Dylan is a fascinating and complex character who is worthy of the many documentaries and films focusing on him. Few of these, however, really ever get to the bottom of his artistic and personal development. Regrettably, Dylan seems to have ended up as a prop for the same people he railed against in the early 1960s.

Terrence M
Massachusetts, USA

1 June 2012

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Hello David,

Your comments on Dylan were spot on. A couple of his songs are memorable, but I never could stand his painfully mannered singing style, and many of his song lyrics seemed obscurantist at best.

I've often wondered why so few popular culture practitioners grow as artists during the long course of their lives, but I suppose that is a topic for another day.

Yours,

Colin

Amsterdam

1 June 2012

* * *

Dear David Walsh,

Thank you for your article discussing Bob Dylan's protracted artistic decay, but I feel I must take issue with a few of your thoughts and criticisms concerning Dylan's early years as an artist and performer. From the release of his debut album in 1962, through *Blonde on Blonde* in 1966, Dylan was a central figure in popular music and contemporary politics; dubbed "The Voice of a Generation" by pop culture, before pop culture was a mainstream term, and his discography backs that title up. This man was arguably the greatest songwriter in the history of popular music as his 60's-era classics show, such as "Blowin' in the Wind", "Masters of War" and "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall". From

his second album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* alone marked the arrival of a major new artist and beyond that, a different kind of artist. Dylan shattered through the conventional song forms and created a whole new set of rules for artistic integrity and style. His penultimate period was from 1965-66 where he released *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde* within a year and a half of each other.

Anyone who knows anything about classic rock & roll will assure you that these records, along with The Velvet Underground's, The Beatles', and Captain Beefheart's, represent the best of American/British counter-culture and working class spirit of those times.

I believe that your criticism too easily dismisses his importance and unfairly criticizes Dylan for giving up his leadership and political influence. At some point we have to ask ourselves: how much should we expect out of one musician? It was his music that awoke many to the atrocities of US imperialism in Southeast Asia, and really at that point, it becomes up to the revolutionary leadership of the time to organize students and workers politically. If the 4th International was/is unable to provide artists of Dylan's (and Lennon's) stature enough political influence among the disaffected, then it is less his fault to refuse to continue to become the artistic leader of a Trotskyist movement that had less support than the Stalinists of that epoch.

For Dylan, I would argue that it became a matter of life and death for him in this era of political assassinations. I believe the greatest lesson every revolutionary needs to take from Dylan's artistic decay is that performers need the support of their audience and society at large. If they don't receive this support—in this case the political support to sing the truth without fear of having a bullet put through one's head—then most of these artists will be forced to publicly abandon their radical position as a matter of self-preservation. It was not his fault that he was 50 years ahead of his time. It is instead a part of the genius of his art that is yet to be fully appreciated by some.

Best,

Ric S

Florida, USA

2 June 2012



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