

Obama bestows the Presidential Medal of Freedom on singer Bob Dylan

David Walsh
1 June 2012

It is certainly permissible to be disgusted by the ceremony in the White House May 29 during which President Barack Obama, most notably, bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom on singer Bob Dylan, but to borrow Spinoza's phrase, it is perhaps better "to understand."

Dylan (born in 1941), a significant and oppositional cultural figure in the early and mid-1960s, along with novelist Toni Morrison and eleven others received the medals at Obama's hands the same day the *New York Times* reported the president's personal and apparently eager supervision of a "kill list," a regularly updated chart of those to be illegally assassinated by the US military or CIA.

Would this further and appalling confirmation that Obama was a war criminal have deterred Dylan, Morrison or any other of this year's honorees from appearing at the White House? Most likely not. Administration officials no doubt make certain that those slated to receive the awards can be counted upon.

No one in Obama's entourage would care to see a repeat of the 1968 incident in which singer Eartha Kitt, invited to a White House luncheon, told Lady Bird Johnson—the president's wife—to her face, "You send the best of this country off to be shot and maimed [in Vietnam]. No wonder the kids rebel and take pot."

Of course, among the recipients of the Medal of Freedom this year, in any case, were the current president's fellow war criminals former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Israeli President Shimon Peres (not in attendance).

The Presidential Medal of Freedom, established by President John F. Kennedy in 1963, to replace the previous Medal of Freedom, initiated by President Harry S. Truman in 1945, was closely identified with the Cold War in its first decades of existence. The award goes to those who have made "an especially meritorious contribution to the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."

Previous award winners include presidents Kennedy (posthumously), Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush; vice presidents Nelson A. Rockefeller, Hubert H. Humphrey and Dick Cheney; and numerous foreign leaders, among them Anwar el-Sadat (also posthumously), Margaret Thatcher, Helmut Kohl, Václav Havel, John Howard, Tony Blair and Angela Merkel. The armed forces and CIA are naturally also well represented.

The 2012 ceremony in the East Room of the White House had

the peculiarly scripted and embalmed character of nearly every public event in Washington. All of the leading figures involved said things they were expected to say and didn't mean, and, for the most part, no one believed a word of what anyone else said.

This starts with Obama, a despicable figure without a trace of principle, an individual who, as the *Times* noted in the aforementioned article, "approves lethal action [i.e., murder] without hand-wringing." At Tuesday's award-giving ritual, the president declared, "Together, the honorees on this stage, and the ones who couldn't be here, have moved us with their words; they have inspired us with their actions. They've enriched our lives and they've changed our lives for the better."

Speaking of Dylan in particular, Obama told his audience: "I have to say that I am a really big fan ... I remember, you know, in college listening to Bob Dylan and my world opening up because he captured something about this country that was so vital."

Is there any particular reason to believe this assertion? Obama was in college in the late 1970s and early 1980s, hardly Dylan's heyday. It makes little difference. If Dylan's music "opened up" Obama's world in a positive sense, that was hardly the only, and certainly not the determining influence, in the future politician's life.

Obama did not hand out any Presidential Medals of Freedom in 2010 and 2011, but this is an election year and every little bit helps. The president reportedly handpicked the list himself this year, and it shows signs of his relentless, though third-rate cunning.

Various constituencies were meant to be flattered and courted. The honoring of Dylan, Morrison, Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers, John Doar, former assistant attorney general for the civil rights division, and a number of others was aimed at baby-boomers and sections of what passes for a liberal intelligentsia in America. This is the social layer wealthy and complacent enough to delude themselves that anything important separates the Democrats from the Republicans.

The medals given to Albright and Peres were intended to help shore up Obama's support among pro-Israel and pro-war sections of the Jewish population. Awards to former astronaut John Glenn, former basketball coach Pat Summitt and (posthumously) to Girl Scouts founder Juliette Gordon Low (who died in 1927) savored of the president's efforts to emphasize his "All-American" sensitivities.

All in all, an entirely cynical affair, which discredits all of those

who participated.

As for the path by which Bob Dylan found himself in the East Room of the White House ... truly, a lengthier piece than this would be required to explain that adequately.

It would be an error to let the singer-songwriter's disgraceful White House appearance, where he underwent the American equivalent of being knighted, cloud one's judgment. Nor should a more critical attitude toward his early career than was generally adopted at the time obscure his contribution.

For a number of years, 1963 to 1966 in particular, in six albums, Bob Dylan exercised among the young an enormous appeal and fascination, which is perhaps hard to convey today; a charismatic appeal that was not simply a media creation, but had some real basis in his talents, his independence from the commercial entertainment industry and in the conditions that then prevailed in the US.

At his best, and one has to sift through a good deal of dross to uncover that, his songs expressed hostility to the existing social atmosphere in the US, still largely dominated by Cold War anti-communism, hypocrisy and conformism. He inveighed against racism and social inequality, warmongering and other evils. Dylan also sang love songs that were more complex, open-ended and sometimes more self-critical than the usual fare. It was liberating at the time to listen to songs that were about taboo subjects in America and that went beyond the limits of the two- or three-minute pop song.

The strength of his better work, and this is something he clearly never understood, bore a relationship both to the period and the artistic-political influences he briefly experienced.

The social background was formed by the Civil Rights movement, including the massive March on Washington in August 1963, the first urban uprisings in Harlem and Philadelphia in 1964 and Watts (Los Angeles) in 1965, and the generalized failure of American society to live up to its postwar promise of providing decent living standards for broad layers of the population. A mood of disaffection, especially within the youth, had set in. How deep-going and enduring such moods would prove to be, especially among the middle class students, is another matter.

Dylan, as is well-known, admired singer Woody Guthrie, the left-wing folk performer identified with the struggles of the oppressed during the Depression, and also paid considerable attention at the time to other folk and popular strands of music. Moreover, few popular performers in US history, certainly not in several decades, had had some familiarity at least with serious artistic figures such as Brecht, Rimbaud and others.

In addition, through his interaction with fellow performers such as Dave Van Ronk—a sympathizer of the Trotskyist movement—and others, as well as his personal relationship with the daughter of former Communist Party members and herself at one point associated with the (Maoist) Progressive Labor Party, Dylan had a brush, in any case, with anti-capitalist positions.

This combination of increasingly volatile times, which demanded to be articulated, and an aggressive, intelligent, quasi-poetic rebelliousness created something unusual, which resonated with a good many people.

Much of Dylan's music does not stand up. It is too careless, self-

indulgent and often not interesting musically. The "poetic" qualities of his language, so highly praised in the 1960s, generally seem strained and unfocused, on occasion simply foolish, today.

In any event, the singer jumped ship politically decades ago, even before the mass anti-Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s, in which he played no role. Dylan responded to the narrowness of the Stalinist-influenced folk music world, and its disapproval of his particular musical-artistic evolution, by throwing the baby out with the bathwater in the manner of a rather conventional American anti-communist. He disavowed any interest in "protest" or politics, past or present, declaring a plague on everyone's house, and increasingly cast his lot in with the mainstream music scene. Of course some will disagree, but I find it difficult to point to an urgent or compelling album in the past 45 years.

Dylan's gravitation toward Christian fundamentalism, Judaism, Zionism and no doubt a good many more -isms over the past decades has been well recorded. His appearance at the White House on Tuesday came as absolutely no surprise, even if one cannot help but register disappointment in regard to someone who once genuinely stood out. The May 29 ceremony simply put the finishing and very public touch to a protracted process of moral and artistic decay.

In the end, objective social and historical processes have had their way with Dylan. In recent months, we have witnessed the spectacle of the memorial for Christopher Hitchens, the one-time supporter of the International Socialists in Britain who rallied to Bush's "war on terror" (a memorial attended by a number of artistic-intellectual would-be luminaries), and learned that filmmaker Kathryn Bigelow, once a radical "underground" artist, recently consulted on the friendliest terms with the US military and CIA.

The abrupt movement by elements of the protest generation into the firm embrace of the establishment reflects the emergence of irrepressible social contradictions and, in its own somewhat unhappy way, is a harbinger of upheavals to come.



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