Bob Dylan sells his songwriting catalog to Universal for a reported $300 Million

Matthew Brennan
15 December 2020

Last Monday the Universal Music Publishing Group (UMPG) announced it had secured a financial deal with American singer and songwriter Bob Dylan, now 79, for the rights to his entire songwriting catalog, which spans 58 years and more than 600 songs. Numerous media reports have indicated the deal is worth some $300 million.

The arrangement will allow UMPG, owned by the largest music company in the world, Universal Music Group (valued at $33.6 billion), to have exclusive intellectual property rights to Dylan's music. Songs such as "Blowin' in the Wind," "Chimes of Freedom" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'" can now be used in any manner UMPG chooses without the artist's input or ability to veto a given decision. One entertainment page noted cheerfully, "Universal will now make money whenever a Dylan tune is streamed, played on radio, or used in an ad, film or TV show."

Several other artists and bands—including Stevie Nicks (reportedly for $80 million), David Crosby, Chrissie Hynde, Blondie, Imagine Dragons (for $100 million) and others—have also signed over their entire catalogs to publishing companies or private equity firms.

Crosby (of the Byrds and Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young fame) has explained he felt compelled to sign the agreement because traditional sources of income for musicians were drying up during the COVID-19 pandemic. This increasingly untenable situation, as reported recently in the WSWS, is felt far more crushingly of course by musicians and artists who were barely scraping by, which encompasses the vast majority.

Among their financial concerns, the companies are looking to gain exclusive control of revenue sources and channels on the increasingly profitable online music streaming services. Advertisement-supported services such as YouTube, Spotify and Vevo, among others, currently account for nearly 80 percent of all recorded music revenue, according to a report by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), at around $11.1 billion in 2019.

Increasingly dependent on ad-driven algorithms and per-play profits, these companies no doubt view control over artist output and audience access as vital to their ability to monopolize and monetize this resource.

The Dylan-Universal arrangement is far and away the most notable among the various artist deals, in particular because of the singer-songwriter's cultural legacy as the "voice of a generation."

The whole business is quite degrading.

One can feel the corporate grip tightening over artists and artistic life as a whole. The publishing rights purchases come at a time when genuinely independent, oppositional and rebellious art is badly needed.

The rapidly changing moods of broad masses of people–subjected to the murderous "herd immunity" polices, with their aim of normalizing death and social misery—must intersect with the insight and courage of artists coming into opposition with the existing social order.

Not surprisingly, the establishment, with no interest in seeing artistic development thrive, or any slowing down of its profit-driven activities, seeks to dominate and make cash out of the existing outlets and platforms for such artistic-popular connections.

Whatever the financial needs of the artists themselves, there is no possibility of such agreements being a healthy development for growth and creativity.

The potential of wide access to online music resources, with the ability to engage a broad spectrum of sounds and feelings, will be further stifled by the ruling elite, and the technologies developed entirely (or to whatever extent circumstances permit) in its interests.

Given the present climate, why shouldn't a weapons manufacturer such as Lockheed Martin, responsible for incalculable war crimes, purchase or "rent" Dylan's 1963 protest song "The Times They Are A-Changin'" to celebrate their "first female CEO" Marilyn Hewson in online ads? An even more likely eventuality is that Dylan's songs will be strategically placed and promoted round-the-clock on major streaming services to the exclusion of a wider array of new and emerging artists.

And what is one to make of Dylan's evolution himself?

Now that he has signed away the ability to use or control his own music as he sees fit, one senses only the formal conclusion to a decades-long process of social and artistic retreat. It does not appear as though he has anything critical left to say. From an artistic and personal standpoint it is a sad affair.

For a number of years, Dylan was able to convey something truthful, which resonated especially with large numbers of young people, about American life and society in the early and mid-1960s, the period of the Civil Rights movement and important political and cultural shifts. To the pleasure of many, Dylan articulated disdain for official hypocrisy, including a mockery of anti-communism, and a more free-spirited attitude toward personal and social relationships that belied the establishment's stupid and empty claims about the greatness of the "American way of life."

Certain early Dylan songs between 1962 and 1966 captured emerging angry moods with memorable imagery, including "Masters of War," "Chimes of Freedom," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," and "With God On Our Side."

Other songs of the time, perhaps less well worked through, nonetheless had a defiant and gripping quality to them, such as the already mentioned "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and "Blowin'

© World Socialist Web Site

in the Wind," "Only a Pawn in Their Game" and "Subterranean Homesick Blues." In 1963, Dylan refused to perform on the *Ed Sullivan Show* when CBS officials did not allow him to sing "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues," which satirized Cold War hysteria in the US. A number of his love songs, with their footloose and occasionally self-critical edge, also carried real weight.

However, as we noted when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016, Dylan's transformation from a sharp-eyed and anti-establishment artist into a relatively harmless icon has been a lengthy, drawn-out process, with much of the transformation well underway before the late 1960s.

A comprehensive review of Dylan's song material and artistic evolution is outside the scope of this article. But a few important elements can be pointed out.

The singer-songwriter's radicalism, no doubt sincere, had, even at its height, an amorphous and highly uneven character. There was a growing, generalized shift, as noted, especially among the young, associated with the struggle for African-Americans' basic rights, and mistrust of authorized nostrums. Elements of Beat Generation disaffection (Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, etc.) also entered into his art. In addition, a portion of his early outlook seems attributable to a semi-nostalgic looking back to the Depression-era leftism associated with figures in and around the Communist Party.

The issue of Stalinist influence seems to have played some role in Dylan's evolution and eventual disillusionment. He emerged during the "folk music revival," contemporaneous with the waning of the deadening atmosphere of the McCarthyite witch-hunt years. Important folk songwriters from a previous period, especially Woody Guthrie, were a strong influence on Dylan, even to the point of vocal mimicry. His early songs in fact sound like imitations of Guthrie's "folksy"-populist ballads.

With much unresolved in his thinking and artistry, when Dylan came up against the "leftist" folk music establishment in the course of attempting to expand his artistic horizons in 1964-65, he seems to have drawn sweeping conclusions about *any* social commitment. The artistic result, in songs such as "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Positively 4th Street," was a hard-driving musical advance, but unpleasantly pervaded with out-of-proportion bitterness and self-pity.

Even Dylan's most affecting folk songs from 1962 to 1966 suffer from inconsistency, even carelessness, in their conceptions. There is an aversion, particularly after 1963, to being too direct and clear in his song craft. He is quick to jump away from his images and social references, more comfortable in arcane double-meanings and clever turns of phrase.

Take for example "The Times They Are A-Changin.'" It is a moving observation of a mood that was undeniably present in 1963, that enormous shifts were taking place: "And admit that the waters/ Around you have grown/ And accept it that soon/ You'll be drenched to the bone/ If your time to you is worth savin'/ And you better start swimmin'/ Or you'll sink like a stone." However, the song ends up—weakly—appealing to the politicians ("Come senators, congressmen/ Please heed the call…"), which was not much help.

Well-known refrains from songs like "Blowin' in the Wind ("The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind"/ The answer is blowin' in the wind") and "Ballad of a Thin Man" ("Because something is happening here but you don't know what it is/ Do you, Mr. Jones?"), again, are evocative, but of what precisely?

As time went on in the mid-1960s, Dylan, now increasingly surrounded by a sycophantic entourage, seemed to become more and more satisfied with being an oppositional figure without being opposed to anything in particular, except the "unhip" and those not in on the secret, whatever that might have been. His persona or aura became the pivot point. And when an artist reaches such a stage, he or she is likely to deteriorate.

Blonde on Blonde (1966), which might be described as his last major album, is an artistically conceived and sharply delivered work, but by this point one would be hard-pressed to find a single song concerned with the fate of masses of people as many of his songs had been, in their own way, in the first four years of recorded music.

The remarkable singer and guitarist of the era, Dave Van Ronk, in a 1998 WSWS interview perceptively described some of the contradictions of early Dylan: "Nervous. Nervous energy, he couldn't sit still. And very, very evasive. You never could pin him down on anything; he had a lot of stories about who he was and where he came from. He never seemed to be able to get them straight. What impressed me the most about him was his genuine love for Woody Guthrie….[His music] had what I call a gung-ho, unrelenting quality, a take-no-prisoners approach that was really very effective. He acquired very, very devoted fans among the other musicians before he had written his first song."

That ambition, "nervous" energy and "unrelenting quality" had yielded positive, interesting results at one stage of Dylan's development, but at another helped allow him to shed any sense of social responsibility and dedicate himself to developing his own career and reputation. For all the media chatter about "protest" songs, for better or worse, it is worth remembering that the singer had abandoned any such stance well before the large anti-Vietnam War protests took place in 1966-68 and beyond.

Cutting himself off from the source of the inspiration for earlier impactful songs, the career ambitions and an unfocused iconoclasm were nearly all that persisted. With the exception of some of his more moving songs about love and heartache in a later period, evasiveness and vagueness would become Dylan's guiding principles.

The protracted process has led to the current news about the sale of his catalog. Now very wealthy, Dylan has nothing to say about events that are overtaking the events of his younger days.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site