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Editor's Note

Aaron Jahoda's unique profile essay, "Sings With His Tongue on Fire," combines a series of approaches: he profiles the timelessness of Bob Dylan's music, examines how Dylan's poetic lyrics inspire his mother to create her own music, and he explores the many ways Dylan's work encourages his own musical endeavors. Jahoda introduces the reader to his complex profile by explaining the way Dylan's music makes him feel. Does his use of specific lyrics help his audience understand his experiences? The essay is distinctive because it moves beyond profiling a person or place; instead, the author challenges the reader to imagine a larger scope of what an artist's influence can create. As you read, keep in mind the author's impressions of Dylan: "Dylan's gift to the world is his lyrics, and they will live forever because of what they said and how they said it."

Sings With His Tongue on Fire**Aaron Jahoda**

There is something to the tone of his voice that makes me sad and happy at the same time. As Bob Dylan sings, his guitar droning in the background, the sound creates a kind of warm, fuzzy blanket. I feel enveloped and surrounded by it, and sometimes it seems to cut me off from the rest of the world. "Oh where have you been my blue eyed son. . . ?" I can see the boy that he is talking about, his brilliant eyes of course, but in my head, he also has Dylan's stern face and cheekbones. "I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children. . . ." What is frightening is the truth, and the fact that this line might mean more today than it did in Dylan's own time. The violence going on in Africa makes it so much more vivid. "I heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter. . . ." I always cringed at this point in the song. I was raised around musicians and poets, and too many of them had brilliant words that will never be heard because that is just how the industry is. These are just a few lines from Dylan's song "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," and each line brings out some story, feeling, memory, or thought from my life and my imagination. The power to draw out these vivid images in a listener is just one of the reasons that Bob Dylan's music is so amazing. His songs are powerful, his lyrics are poetic, his messages are strong, and he is the musician whose work I most identify with and am influenced by.

The most impressive fact about Dylan's music is how it remains relevant as time passes. No matter when they are listened to, his songs express things that are worth hearing, things that are important to people. My mother, Sharon Joy Jahoda, grew up with Dylan, not only listening to his music, but living through the same events that he was singing about. When she listened to

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“Blowin’ in the Wind” as a teenager, it was about Vietnam, the remnants of segregation, and the threat of a nuclear war:

How many times must a man look up/ Before he can see the sky? / Yes,
‘n’ how many ears must one man have/ Before he can hear people cry?
/ Yes, ‘n’ how many deaths will it take till he knows/ That too many
people have died? / The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind, /
The answer is blowin’ in the wind. (Columbia Records)

As she listens today, it is about the war in the Middle East, the continued presence of hatred and racism, and again the threat of global war. My mother observed that “the answer is always blowing in the wind; people are always searching for an answer” (Jahoda). This is why Dylan’s music was so important then, and is still so important now. Dylan sang about things in a way that did not just express an event, he sang about the ideas behind what was happening. In this way his songs are immortal, because they are about things that are inherent in the human condition.

Dylan’s songs will not only live on because of their meanings, they will also live on in the musicians that they have shaped. Personally, I feel more comfortable as a musician because of what Dylan did and how he did it. In a lot of his music, he plays without a band. He does not add multiple tracks to add instruments; he plays on one track with only his guitar, his harmonica, and his voice. The fact that he can use such a minimalist approach, yet still have his music sound full and complete is an inspiration. When I get frustrated that all I have are my guitar and my voice, I listen to one of Dylan’s songs. It reminds me that music can still sound vast and dramatic with only one or two instruments, and can be powerful in its simplicity. My mother, who is also a musician, was influenced in her own way by Dylan. She says that, “[Dylan] gave [her] permission to make [her] phrases as long as [she] wanted, to not be forced to have to sound ‘pretty’. He was concerned mainly with getting the message across, and not so much on just being able to rhyme” (Jahoda). Dylan’s uniqueness is what made other musicians, past and present, gravitate toward him. He broke conventions with his style, and because of this had an immeasurable impact on future music and musicians.

One of the largest parts of Dylan’s musical style is the fact that he was such a unique individual. The moment that people would start to classify him, he would make some extreme swing in songwriting. For example, Dylan was a very large part of the protest movement in the 60’s, performing at events such as the 1963 “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” (Where Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech). After this, however, Dylan seemed to become dissatisfied with the protest movement and its figureheads, which is evident in his 1965 song “Maggie’s Farm”:

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I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more./ No, I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more./ Well, I try my best/ To be just like I am,/ But everybody wants you/ To be just like them./ They sing while you slave and I just get bored./ I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more.
(Columbia Records)

One interpretation of these lyrics, which I personally agree with, is that this song was written to express Dylan's feeling of suppression by the protest music community. This is based on the real "Maggie's Farm," owned by Silas Magee in Mississippi, where Dylan played a famous civil rights rally in 1963 ("The Bob Dylan Who's Who"). Dylan was fighting back against the folk scene that he felt was starting to tell him who to be and what to play. Not coincidentally, the year he put out "Maggie's Farm" was also the year that Dylan started to play more electric Rock n' Roll. This is just one of the many examples of the quirkiness of Bob Dylan, and it serves to exemplify how he defied labeling and simply wrote what he wanted to write.

Lastly, the biggest reason that Dylan's music is so important to me is because it is really beyond music. Dylan's lyrics are nothing short of poetry, and in my mind, they separate themselves from the rest of music as a whole. While other musicians, especially in the 60's and 70's, were expressing themselves through their instruments, Dylan was putting his substance in his words. Good examples of some of his best lyrics are in his song "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)":

Disillusioned words like bullets bark/ As human gods aim for their mark/
Made everything from toy guns that spark/ To flesh-colored Christs that
glow in the dark/ It's easy to see without looking too far/ That not much/
Is really sacred. (Columbia Records)

I am not saying that he was not an effective musician; in fact, I think that his use of his guitar and harmonica was beautiful and framed his songs perfectly. It is just that Dylan's focus was the lyrics, while the music behind the lyrics was merely the medium of transferring the words to his audience. As my mother put it, Dylan's best attribute as a musician was "putting depth to a simple structure . . . he made basic three chord songs rich" (Jahoda). This richness is ultimately, what makes Dylan's music so endearing to me. His songs are not songs; they are works of art that make you think and make you feel.

Dylan's gift to the world is his lyrics, and they will live forever because of what they said and how they said it. His music was a large part of my mother's life, and in turn became a large part of mine. Who I have become as a musician, and no doubt as a person as well, was shaped by my love for Dylan's songs and the depth that was present in them. I think that, inevitably, Dylan will continue to inspire current and future generations with his music, and a last quote

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from my mother sums up why: “. . . He was unusual, his voice was unusual. He captured your imagination and attention, you couldn't forget him, and he made people notice. His poetry struck a note, it spoke to everybody: soldiers, farmers, activists. . . . the common person in general” (Jahoda).

Works Cited

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