



Books & Writers



A Nobel Prize for Dylan: first ever for a songwriter

*“And I’ll tell it and think it
and speak and breathe it,
And reflect from the moun-
tain so all souls can see it,
Then I’ll stand on the ocean
until I start sinkin’
But I’ll known my song well
before I start singin.”*

--Bob Dylan, from “A
Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall”

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He has been the song-
writer of a generation.

He has won 13 Grammys
and written hundreds of
songs, released 50 albums
over 50 years and sold more
than a hundred million
records. He was awarded a
Pulitzer Prize in 2008 and a
Presidential Medal of Honor
in 2012.

For a small-town boy
from Minnesota, born Robert
Allen Zimmerman in 1941,
he has accomplished it all
without the self-promoting
fanfare that seems to sur-
round most of today’s musi-
cians (can you say Miley
Cyrus or Kanye West?).

Bob Dylan is a writer, a
poet, an artist and now, a
Nobel Prize winner.

There have been only 11
Americans selected as Nobel
Laureates for Literature—
and the names might be fa-

miliar to you: Sinclair Lewis,
Ernest Hemingway, William
Faulkner and Pearl Buck
among others, and, most re-
cently, the poet Toni Morri-
son, in 1993.

And, because of the times
in which he lives and how
publicly he has lived his mu-
sical life (he has toured con-
stantly for more than 30
years) Dylan is arguably
more famous than any former
Nobel Laureate in literary
history—although if Hem-
ingway had lived in a 24-
hour news cycle, you might
believe that he would have
eclipsed Dylan’s celebrity.

But Hemingway and the
others were established writ-
ers and, despite his influence
on American music and soci-
ety, Bob Dylan is first and
foremost, a songwriter.

This is the first time in
history—the first Nobel
prizes were given in 1908 -
that the Nobel Prize for Lit-
erature has gone to a song-
writer. Think about that.
Included in the list of great
American songwriters of the
past 100 years are George
Gershwin, Brian Wilson,
Johnny Mercer, Lennon/Mc-
Cartney, Joni Mitchell, Paul
Simon, Duke Ellington,
Buddy Holly, Woody
Guthrie, Johnny Cash and



*The cover of Dylan’s
album Highway 61 Re-
visited. Dylan’s body of
work and intricate lyrics
were noted this month,
when the singer/song-
writer was awarded the
Nobel Prize for Litera-
ture.*

too many others to mention
(did I leave out Leonard
Bernstein, Stevie Wonder,
Henry Mancini and Elton
John?). These were great
songwriters, but it has been
Dylan’s musical contribution
to American culture that has
separated him from the oth-
ers.

Dylan’s impact on the na-
tion has gone far beyond his
music. His lyrics, inspired by
the times in which we are liv-
ing, has given us a rare blend
of the following: folk tales
(“Lily, Rosemary, & The
Jack of Hearts”, “Maggie’s
Farm”); philosophy

(“Knockin’ On Heaven’s
Door”, “Mr. Tambourine
Man”); societal change (The
Lonesome Death of Hattie
Carroll”, “The Times They
Are A Changin’”, “A Hard
Rain’s Gonna Fall,”); love
loss (“If You See Her, Say
Hello” “Tangled Up in Blue”,
“It Ain’t Me Babe”, “One
Too Many Mornings”), Bib-
lical references (“All Along
the Watchtower”, “Gotta
Serve Somebody”) and a
blend of ever-evolving musi-
cal folk rock that included
what *Rolling Stone* magazine
called the greatest rock and
roll song of all-time, “Like a
Rolling Stone.”

Dylan’s presence on the
world stage has been nearly
constant since the mid-six-
ties, but he has remained an
isolated artist—far from his
fame—curiously contained
within his music, rarely
granting interviews. He just
keeps doing concerts, at
small venues like the Classic
Center in Athens (where I
saw him with my daughter in
the late nineties) to bigger
stages where millions of peo-
ple throughout Europe, Asia,
Australia and Africa know
his name. Like the late
Muhammad Ali, Dylan has
become a Citizen of the
World.