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Argumentative Essay

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The Social Impact of Bob Dylan

In the twentieth century, popular music became widely available with the marketing of recorded media. It spread different styles of music and ideas of the musicians performing it to a mass audience. Never before had musicians been given such a soap box to deliver their art and message in some cases. Many have influenced the generations listening to them at the time and those that listened later. Of the twentieth century, one had the greatest influence. His name is Bob Dylan.

Many types of media and experiences would shape Dylan into the social figure he would become. Through his music and actions, Dylan has influenced many generations of musicians, scholars, activists, Americans, foreigners, poets, filmmakers, presidents, and still does so. He has been honored for his work and impact throughout his career. There are even college courses, textbooks, and online media databases of any kind of thinkable Dylan media.

 When running for office, Jimmy Carter mentioned the impact of Dylan’s work on him as is shown in Gibney’s film “Gonzo:”

My own interest in the criminal justice system is very deep and heartfelt. Not having studied law, I've had to learn the hard way. I read a lot and listen a lot. One of the sources for my understanding about the proper application of criminal justice and the system of equity is from reading Reinhold Niebuhr, one of his books that Bill Gunter gave me quite a number of years ago. The other source of my understanding about what's right and wrong in this society is from a friend of mine, a poet named Bob Dylan. After listening to his records about "The Ballad of Hattie Carol" and "Like a Rolling Stone" and "The Times, They Are a-Changing," I've learned to appreciate the dynamism of change in a modern society. I grew up as a landowner's son. But I don't think I ever realized the proper interrelationship between the landowner and those who worked on a farm until I heard Dylan's record, "I Ain't Gonna Work on Maggie's Farm No More." So I come here speaking to you today about your subject with a base for my information founded on Reinhold Niebuhr and Bob Dylan (Gibney).

Bob Dylan was the most socially and culturally impactful musician of the twentieth century and is still relevant today.

 In the documentary “No Direction,” Dylan’s early life is mapped out by Martin Scorcese. Dylan was born May 24, 1941 to Jewish parents in Minnesota. He was primarily raised in the small iron ore town of Hibbing. Bob was led to a life of music by rock and roll, which was getting its start on the radio, when he was a teen. Also, an old record player found in their home, and a Hank Williams record. Two items, which Dylan said, “Had mystical overtones (Scorcese).” He started several bands and even entered one into the school talent show. The principal had the curtain pulled during his rendition of a Little Richard song. In his senior year book, he said his plans were, “To Join Little Richard (Scorcese).”

 After graduating and going on to college, Sounes follows Dylan’s change from a rock and roll wannabe to a folk singer. Influenced by the bohemian culture of Minneapolis, Bob began to model himself after Woody Guthrie, and others from this discipline. Guthrie was a very politically outspoken folk singer primarily in the 1940s. He was a different sort of folk troubadour. Guthrie was a self declared communist, who wrote for a paper called “The Daily Worker,” a communist paper. On his guitar, he had affixed a sticker saying, “This machine kills fascists (Scorcese).” In the 50s he was blacklisted and said, "I ain't a Communist necessarily, but I been in the red all my life (Marqusee 238)." Dylan was fascinated by his work and fashioned his being after him. One of the first things he did when he moved to New York to pursue music, was find Guthrie in a New Jersey mental hospital (Sounes).

 Dylan is very well known for his political/finger pointing songs. One of the best examples is the song “When the Ship Comes.” Along with Joan Baez, Dylan would perform this song in front of the Lincoln memorial, at the same podium which Martin Luther King had just delivered his most famous speech from about a dream (Sounes). The song mirrored, for the people there, the struggle against society for their civil rights. He would also perform “Pawn in their Game,” a song that claimed the death of Medgar Evers was just a microcosm of the problem society has with its inclination towards hate and lack of acceptance.

 Dylan’s affect on other musicians can be seen in a lot of places. In 1969, Johnny Cash said, “Last week in Nashville, Bob Dylan, one of the top writers, well I don’t have to tell you who Bob Dylan is. The greatest writer of our times, was at our house, and he and I sat down and wrote a song together (Darlow).” Johnny and Bob kept track of each other during their careers. After a recording session that the two shared, Johnny took Dylan aside and gave him his guitar. This was an old tradition among country singers, and meant that the giver thought highly of you (Scorcese). Johnny performed other songs by Dylan and vice versa for the rest of his career. Peter, Paul and Mary, a group formed by Dylan’s manager, performed the song “Blowin’ in the Wind” by Dylan. Almost every time you watch something about the 60s on the history channel, or elsewhere, you hear the Dylan song. Another is “Mr. Tambourine Man” performed by The Byrds.

 The Beatles were greatly affected by Dylan, too. In Inglis’ journal about their interactions he talks about their first meeting and the change in the Fab Four. The meeting was arranged by a journalist that had interviewed both of them, and led to the Beatles first dabbling in drugs, and a change in their music. Inglis says, “There is little doubt that the combination of the wearying effects of a lengthy and arduous U.S. tour, their abrupt transition from consumers of alcohol to consumers of cannabis, and their recognition of Bob Dylan as a lyricist and composer whose achievements seemed to rival their own, decisively shaped their future musical output and personal ambitions (Inglis 63).” Paul said it got him to really think for the first time and that he would never be the same. Harrison, and Lennon especially, were affected by the meeting (Inglis).

 Inglis continues. On their next album, the Beatles moved away from their simple pop songs to songs about melancholy and self scrutiny. On the song “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away” Lennon has been quoted about Dylan’s influence on the song, “That’s me in my Dylan period again. I am like a chameleon, influenced by whatever is going on (Inglis 64).” Inglis says, “Of all the Beatles’ LPs, it is ‘Rubber Soul’ that provides the most unequivocal example of the manner in which their mid 1960s musical output derived from their contact with Bob Dylan. On individual tracks-Harrison’s ‘If I needed Someone,’ McCartney’s ‘I’m Looking Through You,’ and Lennon’s ‘Girl’ and ‘Norwegian Wood’ –in both lyrical and/or melodic for, clear parallels are apparent (Inglis 66-67).” Many other acts such as Kris Kristofferson, The Band, Bruce Springsteen, and U2, make mention of Bob Dylan in about every interview you see with them.

 When you open the book “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream,” you can note Hunter S. Thompson’s acknowledgment of Dylan’s part in the book. It reads, “To Bob Geiger, for reasons that need not be explained here-and to Bob Dylan, for Mister Tambourine Man (Thompson). Allan Ginsberg was another writer affected. Ginsberg is in what many consider to be the first music video for “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (Scorcese). In an interview in “No Direction Home,” Ginsberg recalls the first time he had heard “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” He said it was, “the passing of the torch of Bohemian illumination and self empowerment (Sorcese).” Ginsberg said the song brought him to tears. Ginsberg would go on to become one of Bob Dylan’s stage performers during his troubadour show “The Rolling Thunder Review” (Sounes).

 In the area of film, Dylan has worthy mention. The first groundbreaking film was “Don’t Look Back,” by Pennebaker. “Don’t Look Back” is considered to be the first rock documentary. It follows Dylan on his last tour through England, before his 1966 motorcycle crash. (Sounes) Oscar winning director Martin Scorcese produced a documentary for the BBC about Dylan in 2007. An abstract film offering was Haynes “I’m Not There.” A slew of actors signed up for the project that was very low budget and obscure. The film is an amalgamation of Dylan through the years played each by someone different, and is twisted to make somewhat of a biography. The actors included are: Richard Gere, Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Cate Blanchett, and others. Kris Kristofferson narrates the movie, which begins with a motorcycle wreck and Dylan’s corpse being examined (Haynes).

 Many political activist groups have shown signs of the Dylan’s influence. The Weathermen, whose Bill Ayers has been in the news recently, were named such after posting an article featuring a lyric by Dylan as a subtitle. In “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” the line goes, “you don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.” The Weathermen took this as meaning their government and society told them how it should be, when it was obvious it to them it should conduct itself differently (Marqusee).

 The black panthers are another political group that felt the influence of Dylan. In Marqusee’s book he explains how he affected them. When creating their newspaper “The Black Panther,” they played “Ballad of a Thin Man” repeatedly as they worked on the paper. Two early members have given quotes as to the how the song championed their thoughts. Bobby Seale said:

This song Bobby Dylan was singing became a very big part of that whole publishing operation of the Black Panther paper. This record became so related to us, even to the brothers who had held down most of the security for the set. The brothers had some big earphones…that would sit on your ears and had a kind of direct stereo atmosphere and when you got loaded it was something else! These brothers would get halfway high, loaded on something, and they would sit down and play this record over and over and over, especially after they began to hear Huey P. Newton interpret that record (Marqusee 222-3).

After asking Newton, “What the hell is a geek?” Newton told him told him it was a circus performer who ate chickens live and:

He doesn’t like eating raw meat or feathers but he does it to survive, But these people are who are coming in to see him are coming for entertainment, so they are the real freaks. And the geek knows this so during his performances, he eats the live chicken and he hands one of the members of the audience a bone, because he realizes that they are the real freaks (Marqusee 222-3).

Newton also said:

What Dylan is putting across is the middle class people or upper class people who sometimes take the afternoon off and put their whole family into a limousine and they go down to the black ghettoes to watch the prostitutes and watch the decaying community. They do this for pleasure…people who are disadvantaged…they’re not interested in them coming down for entertainment. But if they’ll pay them for a trick, they they’ll tolerate them, or else they’ll drive them out of the ghettoes. This song is hell. You’ve got to understand that this song is saying a hell of a lot about society (Marqusee 222-3).

Willie Nelson started a charity event based on the words of Dylan. On Farm Aid’s website, it is explained that it started because of something Dylan said. Farm Aid is a concert event that helps raise money for the American farmers. In 1985, he was performing at a Live Aid concert for Ethiopian famine relief. After playing “Ballad of Hollis Brown,” Dylan made a statement that stuck with Nelson, although it caused disgust by the audience. He said, “I’d just like to say that some of the money that’s raised for the people in Africa, maybe they could take just a little bit of it—maybe one or two million maybe—and use it, to pay the mortgages that some of the farmers here owe to the banks (Marqusee 314)”

 Dylan has had a huge effect on the academic as well. Cambridge recently put out a book to act as a companion piece for courses about the songwriter. Of the authors that have contributed, many study in the areas of sociology and psychology. Lee Marshall, who is a senior Lecturer in Sociology at Bristol University, wrote a whole section about his effect on the academy (Cambridge Companion). In the opening paragraph, Marshall mentions, that in 1970 that Dylan was given an honorary doctorate from Princeton University in the area of music. Another contributor is David Shumway. Shumway is a professor of cultural studies and director of humanities at Carnegie Mellon University, and writes about Dylan as a cultural icon (Cambridge Companion).

 Dylan’s effect on scholars has led to what some have dubbed Dylanology. David Yaffe, published an article in the Chronicle of Higher education about this. He says that when attending conventions of the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association, it’s not a hard task to find people who are well versed in Dylanology. Yaffe makes note of Christopher Ricks, a Boston University Warren professor of the humanities, who has written a book to be published about Dylan. Princeton historian Sean Wilentz is mentioned as working for [www.bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com). He goes on to talk with other professors about Dylan’s impact on music, poetry, and culture (Yaffe). In 2008 Dylan was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his profound impact on popular music and American culture, "marked by lyrical compositions of extraordinary poetic power (Gezari 480).”

 Bob is still relevant too. In 2006, he was the oldest person to have a number one album with “Modern Times.” He also picked up two Grammies, and an academy award for the album. His awards stack up pretty high if you look around his official website and through biographies. In May of 2009, the “Popular Music and Society” journal had a study, of the impact of Dylan on German and American citizens. One American respondent to their questionnaire said, “I think Dylan’s music has changed my chemical make-up (Kristen and Young 234).” The journal presented the cognitive effect of Dylan on a German citizen as, ‘‘Surely Dylan has changed my point of view concerning many topics. But first and foremost, he taught me to be alert (in all fields of life) and listen to your own voice, even against opposition (Kristen and Young 235).”

 Many will argue that other musicians have been more socially and culturally impactful than Dylan; whether it be The Beatles, Elvis, Hank Williams, Bob Marley, or a long list of others. John Lennon has a monument in central park. Bob Marley has one in Jamaica. Most of those people have embraced the influential positions they have held to impact the world. Dylan rejected it.

For Guthrie, music was a vehicle to spread his political ideas, and blatantly so. Dylan has done the same in his career, but was reluctant to take on the crown of leadership that many would try to bestow upon him. When pressed repeatedly to do so by legions of reporters, fans, and fellow singers; he has drawn back, and gone into hiding. In Haynes’ film “I’m Not There,” after enduring badgering about his role in the politics of the time, Jude wrecks his motorcycle (Haynes). Sounes acknowledges that in 1966, this happened to Dylan, and he pulled back from the public eye for about a year and half. Coming out only to honor Woody Guthrie, and appear on Johnny Cash’s television show, he was fed up (Sounes).

Reluctant or not, Dylan left a lasting impact on society. Jack White had a quote in Rolling Stone. He said, “I have three dads: my biological father, God, and Bob Dylan (Rolling Stone).” The current president has said this of Dylan’s music, “Maggie’s Farm’ is one of my favorites during the political season. It speaks to me as I listen to some of the political rhetoric (Barbarak).” One would imagine whether or not directly quoting Dylan, a college dropout, as an influence, people will continue to be influenced by him.

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