



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Bob Dylan, New York City, 1961



PHOTO: AP

Joan Baez sang many of his songs and popularised them.



At the Concert for Bangladesh.

A SIMPLE TWIST OF FATE?

AMITAVA KAR

Bob Dylan redefines the boundaries of literature

An unprecedented situation has arisen since the Nobel Prize in literature was announced on October 13. Bob Dylan has neither responded to repeated phone calls from the Swedish Academy nor reacted in any way to the news. An academy member called his lack of response "impolite and arrogant".

Dylan's indifference should hardly come as a surprise. His aversion to the media is all too well-known by now. In a *60 Minutes* interview in 2004, his first television interview in about 20 years, journalist Ed Bradley asked him if he saw himself primarily as a poet or a singer.

"I think of myself mostly as a song and dance man, you know," he said unassumingly.

That was classic Dylan, trying to downplay his seriousness. "My stuff was songs. They weren't sermons," he said. "If you examine the songs, I don't believe you're going to find anything in there that says that I'm a spokesman for anybody or anything really."

People saw it, anyway. But did they also see him equally as a poet? Do song lyrics have the same artistic value as poetry or novels? Do lyrics like "Behind every beautiful thing there's been some kind of pain" and "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows" put Bob Dylan on par with Faulkner, Hemingway or Yeats? Do songs such as "Tangled up in Blue" and "Desolation Row" transcend popular music to become great literature?

Christopher Ricks, the venerated former Professor of Poetry at Oxford is one of those scholars who sought to elevate his work comparing the bard from the little town of Hibbing, Minnesota to those of great poets. In his 2004 book "Dylan's Visions of Sin," he persuasively compared Dylan with personages as distinct as Yeats, Hardy, Keats, Tennyson and Marlon Brando. "Dylan's in an art in which sins are laid bare (and resisted), virtues are valued (and manifested), and the graces brought home," he writes. "Human dealings of every kind are his for the artistic seizing."

Gordon Ball, an English Professor at Washington and Lee University who first submitted Dylan as a Nobel candidate in 1996, described his undertaking in an article published in the journal *Oral Tradition*: "I cited the almost unlimited dimensions of Dylan's work, how it has permeated the

globe and affected history."

Richard F. Thomas, Professor of the Classics at Harvard has been teaching a freshman seminar about Bob Dylan, raising a few eyebrows on campus. He uses the course, simply called "Bob Dylan," to put the artist in context of not just pop culture of the last fifty years, but the tradition of giants like Virgil and Homer.

University of Tulsa in Oklahoma is creat-

at the Zoo Amphitheatre in Oklahoma City in 2004.

With him it's always the explosive fusion of words and music, the latter being the igniting element. When he played "Like a Rolling Stone", it was unsettling to realise that the head-bopping music and the mind-bending words were products of the same disjunctive imagination. The song became a vortex. And when he roared, "How does it

spring next year. The archive would heighten their interests in him by giving them an idea about Dylan's continuous stream of writing and "ruthless self-editing" as confirmation that he is more than just a lyricist who has written books and stories that distinguishes him from others by the breadth of his influences, vacuuming up writings from the Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Chekhov and Steinbeck.

believed in, which was not only the American people but people of the world. And that drove him to make an on-stage comeback by joining the Concert for Bangladesh, organised by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar on August 1, 1971 in the aid of the displaced refugees of the Liberation War of Bangladesh, paving the way for multi-artist rock benefits concert. He sang some of his greatest numbers: "Blowin' in the Wind", "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall", "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry", "Love Minus Zero/No Limit", and "Just Like a Woman"—songs that capture a spirit of protest, dissent and independence and have over the years become anthems around the world.

He is one of the greatest singers of all time. We also know that he is a great writer. He went to a body of literature that highbrow literature wasn't touching, songwriters that carried our collective memory. Bob Dylan brought together two completely different traditions: Surrealism and folk music—our modern experience of images that are rushing at us from every direction and how folk tradition tells stories. I think about a song like "Cold Iron's Bound" which goes from something like folk to something really personal, something desolate. Beyond the words he has rearranged the way we think. The fact that he used his popular songs as a vehicle for these themes doesn't diminish them at all.

The questions posed by the latest Dylan coronation—and he has got many—go deep. We are faced, once again, with the complex relationship between word and music. What happens when they merge? How does one affect the other? When a sung text takes hold of us, which is the more powerful force? Do we have the capacity to comprehend the rare artist who transforms both worlds at once?

I wonder whether he knew this day would come. "It's a feeling you have that you know something about yourself—nobody else does—the picture you have in your mind of what you're about will come true," he said to *60 Minutes*. "It's kind of a thing you kind of have to keep to your own self, because it's a fragile feeling. And if you put it out there, somebody will kill it. So, it's best to keep that all inside." Is that why he is not picking up the phone?



Bob Dylan outside his Byrdcliff home, Woodstock, New York, 1968.

COURTESY: MAGNUM PHOTOS

ing an archive of the singer, an honour extended only to literary lions. Trucks full of manuscripts, notebooks, photographs and audio visual recordings have been arriving there since the Bob Dylan Archive was announced last March. About ten minutes from there via highway I-244 is the Brady Theatre where, in 2008, I saw him for the second time play a concert. The first time was

feel?," it seemed to summarise the very idea of his life's work in just four words, the delightful terror and powerful calling of trying to write, to play, and to sing how it actually feels.

Dylan's career-spanning collection of 6,000 items was procured by Tulsa University and the George Kaiser Family Foundation, and is expected to attract researchers by

Randall Fuller, Chair of English Department at the university, is writing an "intellectual biography" of Dylan. Fuller, whose interests include the works of Emerson, Whitman, and Dickens, sees him as someone "who is profoundly engaged by questions of human freedom, and is at the same time clear-eyed about its limitations." Bob Dylan devoted himself to what he

The writer is a member of the Editorial Team.