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Essay 3

Bob Dylan has been called a number of things in the years following his explosive success in the 1960s, one of which being the most influential figure in pop culture history. While this is a bold and potentially contested statement, it cannot be argued that the landscape of the music industry and pop culture itself would look much different if it weren't for Bob Dylan.

The 1960s was a tumultuous decade in itself, considering the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, rise of counterculture, and political tensions and tragedy. It was a decade that began with great promise and hope on the horizon, yet never came to fruition. Musically, new genres had developed and commercial success was the end-all and be-all. However, Dylan came to the scene with no intentions of continuing down the same path as those who came before him. Spearheading the folk movement, Dylan wrote intellectual, topical songs that had depth and resembled true poetry more than simple lyrics. He used his platform through which to shed light on social issues and broaden the conversation surrounding heavy and ever-present subjects, such as the war or racial tensions.

In the earlier days of Dylan's success, he played strictly acoustic. The rejection of electric guitars became a staple of the folk genre, as the acoustic guitar was known as "the people's instrument". Dylan often performed with only his acoustic guitar, harmonica, and layered lyrics that spoke poignantly of the world around him. One of his best known songs, "Blowin' in the Wind", poses hypothetical questions about the relationships between peace, freedom, and equality. Many view this song as a metaphor for the Civil Rights movement, drawing parallels between the lyrics and the struggle of Black Americans in the 1960s. Dylan does not answer said

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questions, but instead ambiguously suggests that the answers are “blowin’ in the wind” as if to say that they are out there, just barely out of reach. The root concept of this song is a general wondering as to why things are the way that they are, which can be applied to many things, making this song so meaningful.

Later into his career, Dylan made the widely controversial choice to transition from acoustic guitar to electric in 1965. Prior to this, he was known as a significant leader of the folk movement and was characterized for his stripped down, acoustic sound. Therefore, the switch to electric rocked the music industry as well as pop culture, and resulted in a number of upset fans. However, despite the backlash, Dylan’s electric era was a perfect illustration of his persistence in swimming upstream and consistently doing what he wanted, regardless of public opinion. He unapologetically took the world's expectations and assumptions of who he was and turned them completely upside down, in true Bob Dylan fashion.

Out of this electric period came “Like a Rolling Stone”, which went on to become not only one of Dylan’s most signature tracks, but also one of the greatest songs ever recorded. It is a confrontational conversation, pointing out the subject’s flaws and fall from grace. While unconfirmed, it is rumored that the subject of the song is Edie Sedgwick, an iconic actress and model of the 60s whose relationship with Andy Warhol became a point of contention.

Finally, there are countless covers that have been recorded of Bob Dylan’s discography. Understandably so, given his lyrical genius, widespread influence, and ability to unite people in a time of great division and pain. The title track of Todd Haynes’ 2007 Bob Dylan biopic, *I’m Not There*, was covered by Sonic Youth for the soundtrack of the film. Originally by Bob Dylan and

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The Band, this particular song has become something of an enigma. It is one of the most intriguing Bob Dylan songs, as it was not officially released until its appearance on the *I'm Not There* film soundtrack. Only one recording of this song exists and Dylan has never performed the song live, making it a rare, highly sought-after bootleg. Additionally, the original lyrics were very difficult to decipher. Between all of these factors, "I'm Not There" is one of the most mysterious yet beautiful Dylan songs in his collection. Sonic Youth's take on this track puts a new spin on Dylan's standard style, giving it the distorted, post-punk, noise rock sound that they are known for.

Bob Dylan was not only a musical legend, but also an intellectual, literary genius at the height of his success and beyond. Even more so, he became a commentator of the current state of the world in a way that the people could relate to and root themselves in when everything seemed to be out of their control. He used his musical talent and accomplishment to address the issues of society and highlight the work that needed to be done.

Despite the fact that his musical style changed in the transition from acoustic to electric, so many similarities still remain that allow the listener to find the common thread that holds his discography together. The subject matter is never shallow and consistently cuts to the core of the prevailing issues in society. Dylan's distinct voice is also an unmistakable similarity across each of the many songs throughout his catalog.

My personal favorite Bob Dylan song is "Like a Rolling Stone". Although it can be argued that this is too easy of a pick, I prefer to see it as a timeless classic that never fails to put me at ease.

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