Bob Dylan, the Beat's Nobel Prize
by Joseph Blake

It's too bad that Allen Ginsberg didn't live to see his friend Bob Dylan given the Nobel Prize for Literature. While lit-crit prats like Russell Smith and Irvine Welsh took cheap shots at Dylan's award by poking fun at the Swedish judges and Bob's first-generation of fans, most of Dylan's peers from Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits to Bruce Springsteen and Steve Earle spoke glowingly of Dylan's artistry and the award's fitting tribute for his long career. Sharing a stage with Dylan at the Desert Trip festival the night of the award, Mick Jagger called Bob "our own Walt Whitman."

When I studied with Ginsberg at Naropa, one of his most important teachings was that poetry was stillborn on the page. Poetry had to be spoken...or sung. Ginsberg used many instruments including his beloved harmonium and finger cymbals to back his poems and songs, "to bring them into the world."

Ginsberg praised Dylan's work for "returning poetry to the human body through the medium of music" and also lauded Dylan's "chains of flashing images." The older poet saw a direct line from Kerouac and the Beat Movement back to Whitman's work and Blake's sung poems in Dylan's songs

For his part Dylan has written "I didn't start writing poetry until I was out of high school. I was 18 or so when I first discovered Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Frank O'Hara and those guys." On the *Bringing It All Back Home* album cover notes, Dylan's fifth LP released in 1965, Bob wrote, "why allen ginsberg was not chosen to read poetry at the inauguration boggles my mind."

*Bringing It All Back Home*'s first cut, *Subterranean Homesick Blues* is a seminal speed rap that would make any Beat poet proud. The song's video also includes a cameo appearance by Ginsberg. The LP is a brilliant melange of the musician's country, blues, rock, and Beat influences. The LP also includes his monumental hit *Like A Rolling Stone*, a record that transformed radio playlists and brought song writing into a new era.

Springsteen has said that "Elvis freed your body. Bob Dylan freed your mind." In his new autobiography Springsteen writes "Bob Dylan is the father of my country. *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Bringing It All Back Home* were not only great records, but they were the first time I can remember being exposed to a truthful vision of the place I lived."

Before Dylan unleashed these mid-60's masterpieces and the mercurial, double-record *Blonde on Blonde* (all three released in 16 months! Talk about following Kerouac's dictum "first thought, best thought"?), before *Desolation Row* with "Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot fighting in the captain's tower", Dylan had already remade folk music in his own image with dozens of powerful songs like *Blowin' in the Wind, The Tims They Are a Changin',* and *Masters of War.*

Against a backdrop of civil rights marches, Vietnam war, black power, student revolt, urban rebellion, and the unraveling of the American Empire, Dylan sang a soundtrack of original genius. By the late 1960's he hid out in Woodstock with The Band to produce pop's first bootleg hit LP, *The Basement Tapes/Great White Wonder*, and in the midst of rock's love affair with psychedelic excess, the stripped-down, Bible-inspired *John Wesley Harding*. He married rock and country forms, even changed his trademark, crowing vocals to offer a melodious, country croon on *Nashville Skyline*, foreshadowing the Americana movement in alt-rock 30 years later.

A trio of fundamentalist Christian recordings including the masterful song, *Gotta Serve Somebody* served notice of another musical turn in the early 1980's. By the end of that decade and 30 years into his career, Dylan was touring with the Grateful Dead and launching what would become his "Never Ending Tour", a schedule of over 100 live performances/year that has continued to this day. at 75, he keeps a touring schedule that would kill younger musicians.

Over his long career's studio albums, Dylan has released dozens more live recordings, compilations and official bootleg albums along with a pair of albums in the 1990's where Dylan covers folk, blues and country tunes by the likes of Blind Willie McTell, Dock Boggs and the Mississippi Shieks, songs reflecting what critic Greil Marcus calls "old weird America."

These seemingly simple but mysterious songs of longing and ambiguity foreshadow Dylan's late-season masterpieces, a series of mature, spooky gems beginning with 1997's award-winning *Time Out of Mind.* That evocative, Daniel Lanois-produced recording and Dylan's self-produced *Love and Theft* (2001) and *Tempest* (2012) are three of my favourite Dylan albums, messages from a wise old man from the deep darkness of his soul.

From the Desert Trip stage the night of his Nobel Prize award announcement, Dylan finished his set with *Ballad of a Thin Man* with its sneering "Something is happening, but you don't know what it is- do you Mr. Jones?" He came back out with his veteran, cowboy band to encore on a thunderous *Like A Rolling Stone* before ending the show with a reading of *Why Try To Change Me Now,* a song from his recent Sinatra-inspired LP. Dylan's been closing his shows nightly with that old song.

After causing consternation for a couple of weeks with his silence regarding the award and ignoring the Nobel committee's invitation to a celebratory party, Dylan finally told the Swedish Academy, "I appreciate the honour so much. The news about the Nobel Prize left me speechless."

Leonard Cohen put the award in a clearer perspective, writing that Dylan's Nobel was "like pining a medal on Mount Everest for being the highest mountain."

Bob's a great word-slinger whose songs borrow from Rimbaud and Baudelaire, Shakespeare and the Bible. His music is a mash-up of Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams, Little Richard, Charlie Patton, Howlin' Wolf and Smokey Robinson...and much, much more. For me, Dylan's alongside Picasso and Louis Armstrong as the most important artists of the 20th Century...and he's still going strong two decades into the 21st. He's earned his Nobel Prize and our love.