

“The Album That Introduced the World to Bob Dylan” by Rhys Wynn-Williams



The term genius is one of the most misunderstood and misused words in the English language. Genius is not an opinion, but rather a fact. It's not something that one simply uses as a substitute for words like “talented” and “creative”. By connecting the word genius to people and things that are simply above average, the word itself is diluted and loses any impact or significance. That being said, Bob Dylan is a lyrical genius. With a limited vocal range and standard guitar playing, it's Dylan's powerful and poetic lyrics that made his breakout album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* one of the greatest and most influential of all time.

Released by Columbia Records on May 27, 1963, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* was recorded in eight separate recording sessions throughout the end of 1962 and early 1963. The album reached number 22 on the American charts in 1963, and hit number 1 in Britain a year later. This was exceptional success for a Folk album at this time, as the genre had a passionate, but relatively small audience.

So why was *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* so successful? Why did a young, unknown artist whose previous album had only sold 5000 copies become an international sensation with his second? Although the question is relatively simple, the answer is a multi-faceted one. Moreover, the

facts we know aren't sufficient enough to provide a complete answer, so one has to extrapolate. What is known, however, is that Dylan became more interested in politics, moved in with his girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, and became close friends with prominent folk artist Joan Baez. The relative effect of each of these individual changes is up for debate, but we know that it was a combination of the three that allowed for immense growth in Dylan's songwriting. Rotolo was an extremely left wing political activist, and living with her would have undoubtedly helped Dylan stray away from the traditional blues themes that had been so unsuccessful in his first album; and write on current issues instead. As Dylan put it, "Suze was into this equality-freedom thing long before I was. I checked out the songs with her." Baez, who helped write many of the songs, was also very politically active, and her influence on Dylan and his album is irrefutable.



Dylan with Joan Baez

The album's success can not only be attributed to its powerful protest songs, but also to its depth and range. Dylan displayed eloquent vitriol, hopefulness, and wry humor in equal measure. Most albums follow a theme, or a core ideal; you have melancholy albums, aggressive albums, or upbeat albums, and all the songs within the album fit that one theme. Whereas, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* effortlessly leaps between messages and moods without seeming disjointed. As you listen, you hear wistfulness boil to hatred, and humor morph into regret, yet as you traverse the full range of human emotions you still feel that you're listening to a singular album.

"Blowin' in the Wind" is the opening track of the album, and the most successful. Without addressing specific examples, Dylan discusses racism and war, urging people to take action against them. These issues had been sung about for years, but what makes this song exceptional is the elegant simplicity of the lyrics, the vague yet powerful rhetoric, and the overarching wistful tone.

“Masters of War” takes a sharp departure from the wistfulness of “Blowin’ in the Wind” and displays the most vitriolic loathing Dylan could muster. Directed at arms manufacturers that often foment conflict for their own personal gain, “Masters of War” features louder vocals, faster pace and biting lyrics such as “You aint worth the blood that runs through your veins” and “I hope that you die, and your death will come soon.”

“Hard Rains a-Gonna Fall” is the most complex song on the album. The lyrics are very abstract, and the specifics of theme are left up to interpretation. The episodic nature and flowing, idiosyncratic lyrics give the song a very poetic feel. Upon hearing it, famous beat poet Allen Ginsberg praised “I think I wept. ‘Cause it seemed the torch had passed to another generation. From earlier bohemian, or beat illumination. And self-empowerment.” Indeed, the song had such a profound effect that folk icon Pete Seeger believed it would stand as Dylan’s greatest.



Dylan playing with Pete Seeger

“Don’t Think Twice, it’s All Right” addresses Suze Rotolo, who part way through recording had gone to Italy for a vacation, but decided to stay indefinitely. In the album sleeve notes Dylan writes, “It isn’t a love song. It’s a statement that maybe you can say to make yourself feel better. It’s as if you were talking to yourself.” The song is written to portray the complex emotional range Dylan went through. The lyrics artfully dance between resignation, bitterness, regret, and loss. Fellow Folk singer Dave Van Ronk encapsulated the song when he heralded it as “self-pitying, but brilliant.”

The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan stands not only as one of the greatest Folk albums of all time, but as one of the most influential albums ever, regardless of genre. It was the album that introduced the world to Bob Dylan, a man who would come to be known as the ‘Spokesperson of the generation.’ It changed song lyrics as we know it, comparing the depth of Dylan’s lyrics to that of popular pop music at the time would be akin to comparing the writing of Poe to a Preschooler. With this album, Dylan showed the upcoming generation of musicians that lyrics could mean something, and he inspired bands like the Beatles to write their own music. It’s difficult to overstate how profound an effect a 22 year old from Minnesota had on music as we know it.