

5-2022

## Bob Dylan and American Folk Music: The Pigeonhole Effect

Thomas J. Murray

*College of the Holy Cross*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/oflifeandhistory>



Part of the [American Popular Culture Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Murray, Thomas J. (2022) "Bob Dylan and American Folk Music: The Pigeonhole Effect," *Of Life and History*. Vol. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/oflifeandhistory/vol3/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Of Life and History* by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

# **Bob Dylan and American Folk Music: The Pigeonhole Effect**

Thomas J. Murray '21

Bob Dylan's decision to adopt electric guitar remains among the most consequential events in the history of modern Folk Music. This paper seeks to understand why Bob Dylan did what he did and argues that the decision cannot be understood without a deeper examination of both Dylan's life and that of America.

## **I. Musical Progression**

Originally from Duluth Minnesota, Robert Zimmerman was born into a modest working-class family. By the time he was in college, Zimmerman yearned for a new life and an altered path of living. Bob Dylan initially emerged as a stage name for the budding folk sensation, but gradually grew into a full persona. Dylan knew he could not stand small town life, nor could he stand the average day to day work for a paycheck. Fed up with parental expectations, the bubble of academic life, and the dry routine of society, Dylan traveled east to New York City with plans to play folk music. Upon arriving in Greenwich Village, New York City, Dylan found himself amidst the sprawling folk scene at its apex in the early 1960s.

The scene in Greenwich Village helped shape Dylan into a professional musician. Dylan found immense influence in folk greats such as Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, and Dave Van Ronk. Guthrie and Houston became idols for Dylan as he drew a lot of his early musical influence from their material. Van Ronk on the other hand, acted as a form of mentor, helping Dylan navigate the social scene to sharpen his musical talents. The years 1962 and 1963 proved to be formative years for both Dylan's musical improvements and his association within the Folk movement.

Looking into Bob Dylan's discography, one can follow the musical progression of a flourishing artist. Dylan's first album titled *Bob Dylan* contained only two original pieces out of the twelve songs on the album. The original songs, "Song to Woody" and "Talkin' New York" paid homage to his initial experiences in Greenwich Village, New York City. "Talkin' New York" represents Dylan telling his personal story of arriving in New York City trying to make it as a musician. The song tells a narrative of gradually getting gigs at folk clubs, eventually getting a record contract, and ultimately leaving New York City for better things in the West. "Song to Woody" is an ode to Dylan's idols and influences in folk music. Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, and Leadbelly are some of the greats mentioned which Dylan drew influence from in his early music. The songs and styles of these musicians are what Dylan practically copied when he ran the Village circuit of music clubs and cafes.<sup>1</sup> The content of Dylan's first album makes sense in terms of his musical career as he was still grappling as a musician. At the ripe age of 20, Dylan mostly looked to his idols and his village contemporaries for inspiration. Without a name

or much of a personal style, *Bob Dylan* did not sell well as an album. The musician was still finding himself and gradually discovering his identity.

Dylan's ultimate breakthrough was his second album *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* produced by John Hammond of Columbia records in 1963. The album represented a rather defining moment for Dylan as it put him on the map in the Folk movement. The album consisted of 13 songs, 11 of which were original content while 2 were covers. *Freewheelin'* signified a large jump for Dylan both as a musician and as a figure in the folk world. Songs such as "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and "Blowin in the Wind" became folk classics for youth and activists in the movement. The songs held immense popularity because they touched upon key political and international issues of the time. "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" was influenced by US relations with Cuba and the struggles during the Cold War. The song asks a young child what they see, and then answers with imagery like "a dozen dead oceans," ... "hammers a-bleedin," ... and "ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken."<sup>2</sup> The song could be read as a forewarning for nuclear scare, which struck a chord in the widespread folk movement. "Blowing in the Wind," released as a single, contained line after line of questions directed towards war, peace, and power. Lyrics such as "how many deaths will it take till he knows that too many people have died?"<sup>3</sup> were so powerful that it practically became the theme song for anti-war groups of that time.<sup>4</sup> The songs and their content fell in line with Dylan's personal progression as a songwriter. Dylan said that songwriting "happens to you by degrees."<sup>5</sup> It is not something that one can flip a switch to turn on, but is a gradual development. *Freewheelin'* became such an integral part of the Folk movement that it propelled Dylan to the forefront of public attention. So much so that he received a title of "The Crown Prince of Folk" at the 1963 Newport Folk Festival.<sup>6</sup> With the success of *Freewheelin'* and the topical themed songs of Dylan's next two albums, the Folk movement put Dylan on a pedestal. *Freewheelin'* was instrumental in the development of Dylan as a musician because it exposed him to the greater public as well as cemented him as a leader of folk genre.

Well before the electric powered 1965 performance at the Newport Folk Festival, Bob Dylan's music maintained a gradual progression away from the traditions of folk. The two albums after *Freewheelin'*: *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, are complete with original material. *Times* spoke on the racial struggles of America with civil rights themed songs such as "Only a Pawn in Their Game" and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carrol." This could partly be attributed to Dylan's experiences with Joan Baez and Pete Seeger in Southern black voting drives. Dylan again, expresses his Folk roots and song writing through his experiences. One of the most controversial songs coming from Dylan at this time is "Mr. Tambourine Man". Scholars have debated the meaning of this song, and many point to it as his attempt at getting away from folk music. At the 1964 Newport Festival Dylan sang the yet unreleased "Mr. Tambourine Man." Irwin Silber writing for the folks music centric magazine *Sing Out!* commented how the song was "inner directed, inner probing, self-conscious."<sup>7</sup> Silber was correct in that Dylan pointed his songs inward. Donald Brown chalks up Dylan's new point

of view to his use of marijuana, explaining that the disconnectedness and zaniness of the song coincided with his drug habits.<sup>8</sup> While that is an interesting claim to make, Dylan actually admits that he had been a drug user since his earlier days in Greenwich Village.<sup>9</sup> The change in pointedness of his songs likely has to do with reasons stemming from both artistic and outside forces.

On July 25, 1965, Dylan made a statement that he is taking his music outside the realm of folk. The change was a culmination of events and forces that acted on Dylan since he stepped foot in Greenwich Village in 1961. Dylan took the stage wearing a black leather jacket, a “sellout jacket”<sup>10</sup> in the eyes of folkies. Even though the electrified single “Subterranean Homesick Blues” was released four months before in March, the electric guitar still came to many as a surprise.<sup>11</sup> To some in the crowd the guitar and music was invigorating, a new form of engagement that got the people going. To others, the electric instruments were alienating, and they felt disconnected from the music.<sup>12</sup> That sense of alienation holds true for Dylan as well. His material changed as he developed artistically along the shifting landscapes around him. Looking at his musical progression provides logical reasoning as to why he went electric. However, in order to obtain a deeper understanding as to why, one must investigate the outside forces acting upon Dylan. Bob Dylan felt isolated and constrained by the folk movement he was a part of and the events happening around him

## **II. Outside Forces**

Scholars often investigate Dylan’s decision to go electric through a musical lens, using his albums as a sign post to trace his career. The protest songs, the folk movement, were vehicles that Dylan could follow to live his dream of becoming a musician. Dylan said that he became involved in Folk music because he believed it was a way he could make it in the music industry.<sup>13</sup> This possibly exemplifies Dylan’s true intentions. Greenwich Village attracted Dylan because it was the happening place at the time and it held the key for his success. He excelled at folk music, but he did not want to confine himself to that world. His music was his form of poetry, and his artform was one that did not like restrictions. Seen that way, Dylan adopting electric guitar and alternate musical forms seems like a logical progression of his career. However, the period in which he was operating at the time certainly accelerated the process.

Being associated with Pete Seeger and Joan Baez propelled Dylan to such widespread scrutiny that it marked the beginning of the end of his pure folk days. Both figures were at the forefront of the folk movement and used their music for social progression. Attending voting drives, race rallies, and activist rallies cemented them as role models for folk disciples. Dylan’s close relationship with Joan Baez and association with Pete Seeger left the followers of folk music expecting Dylan to be just like his contemporaries. Dylan admitted that he utilized Baez for success and recognition. He said that she brought him up, and that he “rode on her”<sup>14</sup> for her place in the movement. But this was all in hindsight. Sitting on his private jet in 1966, Dylan remarks on his success in the folk movement. He was pushed away by the constraints and claustrophobia induced by the people around him. He looks back at the

time in a cynical, self-deprecating manner as if he feels bitter about how the events turned out. He may have been around Baez and Seeger for the increased recognition, but he did not purely use them for personal gains.

Dylan's association with the Civil Rights movement and race relations was completely out of his own accord. Dylan genuinely wanted to write and perform songs about the experiences he witnessed. Practicing the traditional folk that shaped him, he wrote "Only a Pawn in Their Game" and "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carrol." However, once the people in the Movement started to expect more from Dylan, he felt as if he should move in the opposite direction. The constraints brought by expectations gave Dylan a sense of claustrophobia within his art form. In 1964, when asked about his role in the Civil Rights movement, Dylan exclaims, "But I'm not part of no Movement. If I was, I wouldn't be able to do anything else but be in 'the Movement.' I just can't have people sit around and make rules for me. I do a lot of things no Movement would allow."<sup>15</sup> Dylan participated in the movement because he identified with some of the members who were leaders. Specifically, Jim Foreman, leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. Dylan identified with him for his youth and his will to succeed. Being labeled as a leading figure in the Civil Rights movement alienated Dylan from the movement itself, much like how the folkies alienated Dylan from folk music. When asked about his "controversial" views on Civil Rights, he explained that they are not controversial at all and that he is being misunderstood. He asks "What is a Negro? I don't know what a Negro is."<sup>16</sup> He goes on to say that he has had many black friends who were living well and living poorly. Some of the ways in which blacks were labeled by society, like poverty, was happening all around. What Dylan was trying to say was that he sees the problem at its core, and he sees people as people, and that categorizing a select group of people clouds the real problem.

Yet another example of Dylan feeling constrained by the forces around him also relates to the Civil Rights movement. In 1963 Dylan was nominated for the Tom Paine award; an award presented by the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee commemorating figures on their actions for civil rights in the US. Dylan attended a high-class, formal dinner to accept his award and raise donations for the organization. Upon arriving at the event, Dylan was not allowed to bring his friends with him as they were not dressed for the occasion. Once settled in, Dylan continuously felt uneasy because the people surrounding him were not his contemporaries, but old, rich men and women. Dylan felt little to no connection with any of his audience and therefore botched his acceptance speech. He made such a statement that the audience "booed and hissed"<sup>17</sup> Eventually, Dylan was driven away from the civil rights movement altogether. He exclaimed that "those people that night were actually getting me to look at colored people as colored people."<sup>18</sup> Dylan experienced first-hand what it felt like to have an outside force categorize him into a specific role, or ideology. He saw who held the power to do so and he felt incredibly disconnected. In an apology letter to the ECLC, Dylan underscored his highlighted individualism and not following herd mentality. He spoke of Lee Harvey Oswald, the man who just a

month before shot dead President John F. Kennedy. Dylan exclaimed that he identified with Oswald in his speech, not for his deeds but for his stand alone being. "It is so easy to say 'we' and bow our heads together. I must say 'I' alone and bow my head alone"<sup>19</sup> explains Dylan in his letter. When defending his statements about current relations with Cuba, he explains that he just wanted to speak out on the right of free travel. Dylan explains that he has been told about places and people his whole life, and he strongly dislikes it. He wants to "now see and know" for himself.<sup>20</sup> Dylan then goes on to say that he does not apologize for the words in his speech. He says that his words stand alone, and he writes, talks, and sings, for himself and what he believes. He does not apologize "for being me nor any part of me." Dylan portrays an intense sense of individualism, a revulsion towards mass society, and the need to be recognized. Like his music, Dylan took his speech in a totally sporadic direction. He wanted to make such a statement that he would free himself from the reigns of the people in the room. He was claustrophobic of the people, of the labels that were forced upon him, and the times he was living in.

The forces acting upon Dylan attempted to pigeonhole and corral him into certain ideals and images from early in his career. Dylan struggled with expectations of people around him while trying to build a successful musical career. Whether it was the people in the Folk movement, greater social forces, or the music industry, Dylan knew he was being stifled as a musician. For a while Dylan maintained an image of a Folk great in order to advance his career, but eventually he got fed up. The spectacle at the 1965 Folk Festival just happened to be the final cry for Dylan's freedom. As early as 1962 Dylan was experimenting with electric instruments and a backing band. In the same interview on his jet, Dylan explained that he went electric when working on *Freewheelin'*. He had cut four blues-based songs with a backing band because it was a piece of his music which he was interested in.<sup>21</sup> The albums were ultimately left off the album by the accord of the record label, Columbia Records. The action represents a concrete example of Dylan being corralled into a certain mold of which he had no choice. If the label were to put the electric songs on the album, then the Folk classic would have been tainted in the eyes of the movement. Dylan arguably would have never made it as big as he did because he would not have been uplifted by Folk leaders. In the same interview, Dylan continues to discuss what it was like to be steered towards an image of peoples liking. "I hate all the labels people have put on me... because they are labels. It's just that they are ugly, and I know, in my heart, that it's not me... I have not *arrived* at where I am at now, I have just *returned* to where I am now"<sup>22</sup> When he says he has "*returned*" to where he is, he means he has returned to electric guitar. Not only has he returned to electric guitar, but he has returned to being a free musician able to take his art where he wants to. *Freewheelin'* propelled him to such heights in his career that he followed and became wrapped up. His music compensated for the people around him instead of himself, which was very unlike Dylan. His roots were always straddled between traditional Folk and individuality.

Bob Dylan going electric was an act of defiance, but also an act of freedom. Dylan wanted to defy the labels and expectations that were forced upon him. He wanted to go electric to free himself

from the claustrophobic folk movement, music industry, and social activists. Through the few interviews Dylan gave, he portrays himself as a pessimistic, lonely individual who seems bitter about his place and the people around him. In 1964 he worried about how “few people are free”<sup>23</sup> with themselves and their lives. By 1966 he had such a damper on the world that he didn’t believe in happiness,<sup>24</sup> believed people are just as deadly as heroin, and even talked about suicide.<sup>25</sup> The Folk movement and the machine that is the music industry ate a young Dylan up and made him a sorrowful person. The act of going electric represented more than just a musical shift for an artist. It was an act of freedom from social and artistic constraints disillusioning an artist and their work.

Examining Dylan’s plight in the American Folk scene illustrates the dangers of strict categorization when it comes to ideas, knowledge, and concepts. Giving something a category or a name incites a form of disconnection between the entity being categorized and the power giving the name. The disconnect creates expectations and preconceptions of the category, which confuse what is really going on. Dylan felt an immense disconnect from what was going on around him. The categorization made him feel like a caged animal, someone who cannot be free. Examining Dylan through a musical lens shows a growing artist who used his music as an art form to progress his career. The decision to go electric was one to expand his art into new areas and ultimately put music first. However, analyzing Dylan’s decision to go electric requires a deeper look into social and political forces acting on Dylan. While focusing on advancing his career, Dylan experienced claustrophobia to the things around him. People placed expectations and labels on him, which stifled his art form and his free thinking. Dylan’s plight in the American Folk Music revival can be used as a mini case study as to what was going on in 1960’s social America. Effects of the Cold War, involvement in Vietnam, and an expanding mass media fueled the emergence of the counterculture. Popular music of a certain period can be like a mirror to the struggles of the people and the musicians making the art.

#### **Footnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Petrus and Ronald D. Cohen, *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 256.

<sup>2</sup> Bob Dylan, *A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall*, 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Dylan, *Blowin’ in the Wind*, 1963.

<sup>4</sup> Maurice Geracht, personal interview, March 6, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*, (New York NY, Simon & Schuster, 2004), 51.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Brown, *Bob Dylan: American Troubadour* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Petrus and Ronald D. Cohen, *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 288.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Brown, *Bob Dylan: American Troubadour* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 36.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Dylan, “One Foot on the Highway...” interview by Robert Shelton, March 1966, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 80.

<sup>10</sup> Bob Dylan, “Bob Dylan Interview” interview by Nora Ephron & Susan Edmiston, August 1965, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 65.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Geracht, personal interview, March 6, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Dylan, “Bob Dylan Interview” interview by Nora Ephron & Susan Edmiston, August 1965, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 63.

<sup>14</sup> Bob Dylan, “One Foot on the Highway...” interview by Robert Shelton, March 1966, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 80.

<sup>15</sup> Bob Dylan, “The Crackin’, Shakin’, Breakin’, Sounds” interview by Nat Hentoff, October 24, 1964, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 28-29.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Dylan, “One Foot on the Highway...” interview by Robert Shelton, March 1966, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 86.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Petrus and Ronald D. Cohen, *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 283.

<sup>18</sup> Bob Dylan, “The Crackin’, Shakin’, Breakin’, Sounds” interview by Nat Hentoff, October 24, 1964, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 30.

<sup>19</sup> Bob Dylan, letter to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, December 19, 1963.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bob Dylan, “One Foot on the Highway...” interview by Robert Shelton, March 1966, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 81.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Dylan, “One Foot on the Highway...” interview by Robert Shelton, March 1966, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 81.

<sup>23</sup> Bob Dylan, “The Crackin’, Shakin’, Breakin’, Sounds” interview by Nat Hentoff, October 24, 1964, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 25-26.

<sup>24</sup> Bob Dylan, “One Foot on the Highway...” interview by Robert Shelton, March 1966, *Younger Than That Now: The Collected Interviews with Bob Dylan*, (New York, NY: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2004), 74.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 80.