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The bittersweet sound of Dylan

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Read about how the acerbic style of the singer-songwriter, who turns 74 on May 24, influenced a generation of musicians who never thought they would fit in.

It was in 1972 when I first heard Bob Dylan. I was 8 years old and my uncle had taken me for the movie *The Concert for Bangladesh*, which was running at Casino Theatre. There's a vivid memory of a guy with wiry hair in a blue denim shirt. He had a harmonica stand around his neck and a box guitar. He sang a few simple, sing-along songs in a nasal, croaky voice. As soon as he started singing, "How many roads must a man walk down..." the crowd burst into applause that continued for the first few lines; this happened for every song he sang that night.

I was appalled by his singing. His voice was flat and croaky, but it looked like the crowd was enjoying it. My first taste of Dylan was like my first taste of whisky – bitter and quite awful.

My next encounter with his music was when I was in high school. A friend of mine had given me a copy of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which I copied onto a cassette that I had. The more I listened to that album, the more intriguing I found it. The lack of complicated musical arrangements coupled with his conversational style of singing was interesting. The songs were simple enough for me to figure out the chords and sing along. And I thought to myself, if Dylan could sing, so could I.

Bob Dylan changed the notion of popular singing forever. He inspired ordinary people with ordinary talent like me. No kid with a parched, cracked voice was going to be put off by the fact that he or she couldn't sing in the conventional sense. It was no longer about having a perfect voice; it was about believing in the honesty of what that voice was talking about. While listening to Dylan's songs, trying to figure out the words, I began to grasp what he was saying. The mystery of Bob Dylan was beginning to unravel. Words like "Through the wild cathedral evening, the rain unravelled tales", were to me, much more poetic and profound than the poetry of Keats and Yeats we were learning in school at the time.

The effect his music had on me during this period was like the second time I tried a shot of whisky: still bitter, but there was something interesting in it that made me feel it was worth exploring. Dylan's songs were never meant to entertain; they were meant to disturb, provoke and make you think. We keep that in mind whenever we sit down to write a song. A Dylan-influenced song we are writing, 'A Big Net to Catch Small Fish', is a sarcastic take on the Indian Judicial system, where the big fish always seem to get away while the small fry languish in prison. Dylan has inspired us to write songs about things that are real, things that mean something to us and reflect life in a realistic way. If there's one thing we've learnt from him, it's to avoid the pitfalls of dressing up a bad idea in a pretty chord progression.

A testimony to the timelessness of his song-writing is reflected in the fact that at our gigs, we have kids in their late teens requesting Dylan songs which were written thirty years before they were born. Bitterness is an acquired taste, but once you get used to it, it's addictive. I often ask myself, "Would these songs have sounded better if a great singer like Frank Sinatra had sung them?" My answer to that is a resounding no. A song like 'Masters of War', which Dylan sings with undisguised spite and scorn, would be ruined if someone sang it technically perfectly. It would be the equivalent of sweetening your single malt with a soft drink; your drink would taste sweeter, but you would ruin a good whisky.

Bob Dylan turns 74 on May 24. His new album of redone Sinatra standards debuted at No. 1 on the UK charts in February this year. More than four decades after the *The Concert for Bangladesh*, his voice has become coarser and his singing, croakier. But like good whisky, Dylan keeps getting better with age.

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