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Dylan Thomas: Poetry's rock star



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On his death anniversary today, we explore how Dylan Thomas influenced and changed the course of popular music

To begin at the beginning: It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent and the hunched, courtiers'-and- rabbits' wood limping invisible down to the sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea.

These are the first lines of Dylan Thomas' play *Under Milk Wood*. If I had written something like this for my school essay, I'm sure I would have got a 'D'. My English teacher's constant instruction was to "keep it simple and short" and Dylan Thomas' writing was anything but that.

His prose is more like poetry, but the words somehow come together and paint a vivid picture. The words "sloeblack, slow, black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea" could

well have been the lyrics of a Bob Dylan song.

Paul McCartney once said, “I am sure that the main influence on both {Bob} Dylan and John {Lennon} was Dylan Thomas. That’s why Bob’s not Bob Zimmerman – his real name. We all used to like Dylan Thomas. I read him a lot. I think that John started writing because of him.”

Dylan Thomas influenced two of the greatest songwriters in history. At a time when it was not fashionable for rockstars to bare their souls, Dylan Thomas inspired Bob Dylan and John Lennon to write some of the most lyrically rich and achingly personal songs that rock has ever seen. Be it Lennon’s childhood memories in ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ or the stoned, hallucinatory ramblings of ‘Mr. Tambourine Man’, if you scratch the surface of a Dylan or Lennon song, you can hear the whispering of Thomas.

The Beatles even had an image of Dylan Thomas on the cover of the *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* album. John Cale of the Velvet Underground set a number of Dylan Thomas’ poems to music, and in 1989, Cale used Dylan Thomas’s poem ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ in his album *Words for the Dying*. Dylan Thomas inspired a generation of poets and songwriters like Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Paul Simon and Leonard Cohen, and put the poetry back in song-writing.

But Dylan Thomas was not just a rock star’s poet; he was a rock star himself in an era much before the terms Rock and Rock n Roll were invented. He was a radio star who read out poetry on the BBC, he made records of his writings and sold close to half a million of them, he toured the U.S. four times, performing his poetry coast-to-coast to sold-out venues, he drank, partied hard and lived the hedonistic life of a rock star.

He dropped out of school at the age of 16 and two-thirds of his work was written before he was twenty. Poems like ‘Do not go gentle into that good night’ and ‘And Death shall have no dominion’ are still read out at funerals 70 years after they were first written.

Our band recently composed a tune to one of his poems, and we were about to put it up on YouTube, when we realised that the copyrights to quite a lot of Dylan Thomas’ work is now owned by Mick Jagger.

Dylan Thomas would have been 101 if he were alive today. Like Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain and John Lennon – he died a rock star’s death at the age of 39, when he collapsed in a New York hotel after a binge of drinking and a shot of morphine. His last words were, “I’ve had 18 straight whiskies; I think that’s the record”.

With this wild, ‘bad boy’ image, he was hardly the perfect role model, and it’s no wonder that we were not taught Dylan Thomas in school. Our teachers, who were used to lecturing yawning students about the glory of Wordsworth chancing upon ‘a host of golden daffodils’, might have had a tougher time explaining the lines, ‘Though lovers be lost, love shall not; And death shall have no dominion.’

One of the themes that keeps surfacing in Dylan Thomas' poetry is death, and his most famous poem is the one he wrote for his dying father, the last verse of which reads "And you, my father, there on the sad height, Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray, Do not go gentle into that good night Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

Dylan Thomas "burnt, raved, raged and did not go gentle into that good night", and popular music is richer for that.

(The writer is the founder of the band Second Coming.)

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