



## THE EARLY YEARS: BRINGING A ROCK AND ROLL ATTITUDE TO FOLK

### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did Bob Dylan's early experiences with Folk and Rock and Roll music influence his songwriting?

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Artists from the Beatles to Bruce Springsteen have cited Bob Dylan as one of the most important influences on their music making and songwriting, noting that Dylan helped them see the possibilities of a different kind of lyric writing that was more intimate, personal, and autobiographical than what they found in early Rock and Roll songs.

Much of what Dylan was doing stemmed from his early experiences with the Folk music scene in New York City and as a self-styled disciple of the legendary Folk singer Woody Guthrie. But it is often forgotten that Dylan's first forays into popular music came as a member of several Rock and Roll bands in high school in Minnesota, where his yearbook picture noted that his dream was "to join Little Richard." If Dylan is known as an artist who injected lyrical complexity and seriousness of purpose into mainstream Rock and Roll, his early career also reflects the injection of a Rock and Roll sensibility into the Folk idiom.

In this lesson, students explore how Dylan's early musical experiences reflect an artist with an uncanny ability to create something new out of what had come before, and how he sowed the seeds of a Folk/Rock and Roll hybrid that would have enormous influence on American popular music.



## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- A basic definition of Folk music
- Dylan's early experiences as a Folk musician and his emulation of Woody Guthrie
- Dylan's early experiences with Rock and Roll as a musician in high school

### 2. BE ABLE TO (SKILLS):

- Extrapolate meaning from a timeline
- Interpret original quotes and archival interviews
- Compare and contrast songs for style and meaning
- Compare and contrast traditional Folk and Rock and Roll music
- Common Core: Students will explore the definition of Folk and contrast it with Rock and Roll (CCSS Language 5)
- Common Core: Students will analyze text, video and songs for themes and identify supporting ideas and details (CCSS Reading 2; CCSS Writing 2; CCSS Speaking and Listening 3)

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY:

1. Write the words "Folk Singer" on the board. Inform students that you will play the opening of a famous Folk song, Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land." As they listen, students should write down words that describe the song and the singer. They may wish to focus on the instruments they hear, the style of singing, the ideas of the song, etc.
2. Play the first 35 seconds of the song. Poll sample student answers and post on the board.
3. Display the image of the cover for Dylan's first record, released in March 1962.



## MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY: (CONTINUED)

### 4. Briefly discuss:

- What kind of singer does the album cover suggest Bob Dylan might be?
- What do you see in the picture? What instrument does Dylan have? Can you imagine the person in the picture singing a song like “This Land is Your Land?” Why or why not?
- What words would you use to describe the album cover? [Note to Teacher: Add some of these sample words to the list on the board.]

5. Explain to students that Folk music is difficult to define, but it is often thought of as traditional music from a particular community that is passed down from generation to generation and sung by ordinary people who do not necessarily have polished singing voices, as opposed to recorded music that is created for commercial purposes. In American culture, Folk music has often told long, personal stories, and has often been played by a singer accompanied by a guitar. Make sure students understand that early in his career, Bob Dylan was known primarily as a Folk singer.

### PROCEDURE:

1. Distribute Handout 1: Early Bob Dylan Timeline, and discuss:

- What kind of music was Dylan playing in high school?
- How many years does he seem to have spent doing this?
- Does this surprise you, based on what you saw on the album cover from 1962? Why or why not?

2. Why do you think Dylan might have been drawn to this music in high school? Why might he have wanted to become another Little Richard?

3. Distribute Handout 2: Excerpts of Lyrics for Songs in This Lesson. Play the clip of Little Richard performing “Tutti Frutti” for the class. Discuss:

- How is this song different from “This Land is Your Land”?
- In subject matter?
- In its instrumentation?
- In the vocal performance?
- In its general sound and mood?

4. Display the quote from Bob Dylan below, from the liner notes of his 1985 compilation Biograph, and discuss the questions that follow:

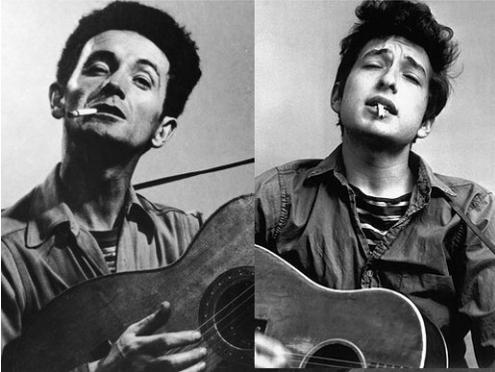
*“The thing about Rock and Roll is that for me, anyway, it wasn’t enough... There were great catch phrases and driving pulse rhythms... but the songs weren’t serious or didn’t reflect life in a realistic way. I knew that when I got into folk music, it was more of a serious type of thing. The songs are filled with more despair, more sadness, more triumph, more faith in the supernatural, much deeper feelings.”*

- What did Dylan feel was limiting about Rock and Roll?
- What are the lyrics of “Tutti Frutti” about? Are they “serious”? Does they “reflect life in a realistic way”? Why might a song like this have been “not enough” for Dylan?
- What did Dylan think he could find in Folk music? Why might he have been drawn to Folk singers such as Woody Guthrie?
- According to the timeline, what happened to Dylan when he attended the University of Minnesota? Why did he go to New York in 1961?

6. Display the picture of Dylan from the

**PROCEDURE: (CONTINUED)**

early 1960s and the earlier one of Woody Guthrie.



In light of these photographs, consider the quotes from Dylan below – the first from Dylan’s memoir, *Chronicle*, the second from an interview with journalist Robert Hillburn – and discuss:

- What does it mean to be a “disciple”?
- Why might Dylan have chosen Woody Guthrie as a mentor at this time in his life? What was he looking for?
- What did Guthrie’s approach to music and songwriting have to offer that Rock and Roll at the time did not?

6. Refer students to the excerpt of the lyrics for Dylan’s song “Talkin’ New York” (on Handout 2), which appeared on his first album, released in 1962. Play the clip of “Talkin’ New York” and discuss:

- Is this a Folk song? What elements does it contain that would make you consider it a Folk song? (You may wish to refer back to the list on the board.)
- What does the song teach us about the things Dylan was experiencing in New York?

- How do the lyrics to the song differ from those to “Tutti Frutti”?

7. Play the video clip of musician Steven Van Zandt discussing Dylan’s early years, and discuss:

- Van Zandt says that Dylan “took that Rock and Roll attitude into Folk music and really transformed it.” What does he mean by a “Rock and Roll attitude”?

- Do you hear a “Rock and Roll attitude” in “Talkin’ New York”? Why or why not?

8. Divide students into pairs. Refer students to the excerpt from the lyrics to “Like a Rolling Stone” (on Handout 2), which appeared on Dylan’s sixth album, *Highway 61 Revisited*, released in 1965. Play a clip from the song. Ask each pair to discuss the following questions:

- In what ways is the song similar to/different from “This Land is Your Land”?
- In what ways is it similar to/different from “Tutti Frutti”?
- Does the song have what Van Zandt described as a “Rock and Roll attitude”? Why or why not?
- Would you consider this a Folk song or a Rock and Roll song? Or does it have elements of both?
- What does the song suggest about Dylan’s ability as a songwriter to weave elements of different types of music together to create something new?

### SUMMARY ACTIVITY:

1. Ask students: Based on what you have seen and heard, should Dylan be considered a Folk singer, as he was in 1962? How was his early music different from that of traditional Folk singers such as Woody Guthrie?
2. How did Dylan's early experience with Rock and Roll influence his music?
3. Play the clip of musician Dion DiMucci discussing Dylan's influence on Rock and Roll and discuss:
  - How did popular music change in the early 1960s, according to DiMucci?
  - According to DiMucci, what role did Dylan play in this transformation? What does DiMucci mean when he says that Dylan "brought thinking in singlehandedly"?
  - How does DiMucci describe Dylan's impact on other musicians in the 1960s?
4. Why do you think Dylan is regarded as such an influential figure in the history of popular music? What role did his ability to break out of the boundaries of traditional musical forms play in his success?

### WRITING PROMPT:

If Rock and Roll influenced the kind of Folk music that Dylan wrote and performed, how in turn did Dylan's style of Folk music influence Rock and Roll?

### EXTENSION ACTIVITY:

Have students read Bob Dylan's first interview, which appears on the Dylan chapter homepage. Ask them to write a short response to the interview, addressing these questions: What kind of impression does Dylan make? How does it change your impressions of Dylan to know that he's fabricating many of his answers -- saying, for example, that he'd lived in New Mexico and traveled with a carnival? Why might he have invented such answers? What does this suggest about a figure who'd become known for cultivating an aura of mystery and for a shifting public persona?

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

*College and Career Readiness Reading Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 for Literature and Informational Text*

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

*College and Career Readiness Writing Anchor Standards for Grades 6-12 in English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects*

Writing 2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 6-12*

Speaking and Listening 3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

*College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language for Grades 6-12*

Language 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

### SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

### NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

*Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

## Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

## RESOURCES

### VIDEO RESOURCES

- Steven Van Zandt – Bob Dylan’s Early Years
- Bob Dylan – Like a Rolling Stone (1965)
- Woody Guthrie – This Land is Your Land (1944)
- Dion Dimucci – Bob Dylan’s Influence on Rock and Roll
- Bob Dylan – Talkin’ New York (1962)
- Little Richard – Tutti Frutti (1957)

### FEATURED PEOPLE

- Bob Dylan
- Albert Grossman
- Woody Guthrie
- Little Richard

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1: Early Bob Dylan Timeline
- Handout 2: Excerpt of Lyrics for Songs in This Lesson