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Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads

By Greil Marcus



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Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads By Greil Marcus

Greil Marcus saw Bob Dylan for the first time in a New Jersey field in 1963. He didn't know the name of the scruffy singer who had a bit part in a Joan Baez concert, but he knew his performance was unique. So began a dedicated and enduring relationship between America's finest critic of popular music—"simply peerless," in Nick Hornby's words, "not only as a rock writer but as a cultural historian"—and Bob Dylan, who in 2016 won the Nobel Prize for Literature. In **Like A Rolling Stone** Marcus locates Dylan's six-minute masterwork in its richest, fullest context, capturing the heady atmosphere of the recording studio in 1965 as musicians and technicians clustered around the mercurial genius from Minnesota, the young Bob Dylan at the height of his powers.

But Marcus shows how, far from being a song only of 1965, "Like a Rolling Stone" is rooted in faraway American places and times, drawing on timeless cultural impulses that make the song as challenging, disruptive, and restless today as it ever was, capable of reinvention by artists as disparate as the comedian Richard Belzer and the Italian hip-hop duo Articolo 31. "Like a Rolling Stone" never loses its essential quality, which is directly to challenge the listener: it remains a call to arms and a demand for a better world. Forty years later it is still revolutionary as will and idea, as an attack and an embrace. How Does it Feel? In this unique, burningly intense book, Marcus tells you, and much more besides.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Marcus's engaging exegesis on the musical and cultural ramifications of Dylan's 1965 six-and-half-minute hit is not just a study of a popular song and a historic era, but an examination of the heroic status of the American visionary artist. Recorded when American popular music was "like a running election," Dylan's "music of transformations" induced a conflicted, confused America to look at its social disasters of racism, drug abuse and Vietnam, Marcus says, while simultaneously permitting it to strip away its illusions and hope for a better future. Ostensibly about a rich young socialite's fall from grace, the song's lyrics are open to many interpretations, which may have helped make it such a phenomenon. Marcus displays a comprehensive knowledge of American popular and political history, tracing the song's roots back to Robert Johnson and Hank Williams and spotting its influence on such disparate artists as Frank Zappa, the Village People and various contestants on *American Idol*. Part scholarly discourse and part beatnik rambling, the book is chockfull of lively metaphors and includes 20 pages of studio outtake banter. Marcus successfully convinces readers that (in the words of hit songwriter Gerry Goffin), "Dylan managed to do something that not one of us was able to do: put poetry in rock n' roll and just stand up there like a mensch and sing it."

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review In *Invisible Republic* (1997), Marcus delved into the legendary series of "underground" recordings by Bob Dylan and the Band known as the Basement Tapes. Here he narrows focus to a single song of Dylan's, "Like a Rolling Stone," recorded four decades ago but every bit as potent and compelling today. Nearly everything about it was groundbreaking, from its six-minute length to its solidification of Dylan's controversial move from folk to rock, and nothing Dylan recorded before or since has had its musical impact. Marcus provides a detailed account of the recording session, of course, but goes far beyond the standard behind-the-music approach, placing the song in the context not just of Dylan's work but of American music overall, from the folk and blues that informed it to the music that followed it, by Dylan as well as others, including such obscure and bizarre covers of "Rolling Stone" as an Italian hip-hop treatment. Marcus' vast understanding of American culture and intimate knowledge of Dylan's career make this an eye-opening read, and if his sometimes hyperbolic approach will strike some as overselling the song's significance, how many other pop recordings could withstand such intense--and loving--scrutiny? *Gordon Flagg*

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Review

"'Like a Rolling Stone' is Marcus at his companionable best," -- *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 22, 2005

"A fascinating, transporting read." -- *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 12, 2005

"Engaging cultural history... highly recommended for all libraries." -- *Library Journal*, April 1, 2005

"Greil Marcus's unique command of both literary and musical references makes him unquestionably the best of Dylan's legion of critics." -- *Time Out New York*, 8/4/05

"Marcus approaches his topic with enthusiasm and enough breezy style to make it fan-friendly." -- *Orlando Sentinel*, April 24, 2005

"Marcus displays a gift for couching the musical culture in its political era." -- *Washington Post Book World*, April 6, 2005

"Marcus has contributed something of his own blood." -- *Boston Globe*, April 17, 2005

"Worth the time of any reader fascinated... by popular culture." -- *The New York Sun*, April 12, 2005

"[Marcus'] ability to... describe the combined meaning and effect of a song is what makes his book worth reading..." -- *Contra Costa Times* 7/10/05

Like a Rolling Stone contains some of Marcus best writing since 1975ssssssss epochal *Mystery Train*. -- *No Depression*, July/August 2005

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ilene Venne:

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Robert Caceres:

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Eleanor Bender:

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