University of Iowa: School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Journalism and Bob Dylan
19:169:EXW (3 semester hours)

Spring 2014 Syllabus

Mondays: 4:30-7 pm
Professor: Don McLeese

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Office hours: Wednesday 4:30-5:30 (office and online); Monday—Friday 9-10 a.m. (online)

Or by appointment (email is generally the most efficient way to reach me).

The above office hour information reflects my classroom teaching assignment in Des Moines. I’m also available plenty of other times—just make an appointment. And I’m obsessive about monitoring email.

I’ll send those students in Iowa City an APB any time my schedule has me on campus, and I’ll be happy to meet with students then. (I’ll have to be there at least once a month for faculty meetings and will likely be there more often for other commitments.)

I’ll also be happy to meet with any of you who happen to be in Des Moines, for whatever reason, at whatever time and day (other than when I’m teaching).

COURSE OVERVIEW
On Wikipedia (a source I suggest you never use for an academic paper), you can find the following:

From August 15, 2002 until April 19, 2012, Dylan had been introduced at the beginning of every concert with an announcement made by a member of his stage crew, the stage manager, Al Santos:

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the poet laureate of rock 'n' roll. The voice of the promise of the 60s counterculture. The guy who forced folk into bed with rock. Who donned makeup in the 70s and disappeared into a haze of substance abuse. Who emerged to find Jesus. Who was written off as a has-been by the end of the '80s, and who suddenly shifted gears releasing some of the strongest music of his career beginning in the late '90s. Ladies and gentlemen — Columbia recording artist Bob Dylan![7]

This introduction was adapted from an article by Jeff Miers about Dylan that had appeared in a local newspaper, The Buffalo News, on August 9, 2002.

This introduction cuts to the heart of this course—the relationship between Bob Dylan and journalism, and the manners in which his artistic identity has been mediated through those who would analyze and interpret it. Why would Bob Dylan chose to use that introduction, based on (but unattributed from) an obscure review, for over a decade? Did he appreciate the way it encapsulated his career and legacy? Did he find it funny, simplistic, reductive, wrong-headed? Is he making fun of the journalist? Or is he making fun of himself?

The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind. Perhaps no other artist, musical or otherwise, has changed the world in which we live more than Bob Dylan. And none have adopted and shed more personae, throwing the very essence of artistic identity into question. He warns those who would dare to understand him too quickly, too simplistically:

Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
Those lines are from “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” an anthem Dylan recorded in 1963, when he was 22 years old. At the time, Dylan likely had no idea of the changes to come, how radical and quick and significant and tumultuous they would be. But he was already challenging those who would categorize him too quickly, as a folksinger, a protest singer, the voice of his generation. More than 40 years later, that wheel’s still in spin.

So, we’ll be considering Dylan through his various phases and guises over the decades: Woody Guthrie wannabe, civil rights and anti-war activist, rock revolutionary (and folk traitor), speed freak, motorcycle accident casualty, seminal country rocker, born-again Christian, folk traditionalist (again, toward the latter stages of his career) and an ever-touring senior citizen enjoying a creative resurgence that no one anticipated.

We’ll also see how an artist who has often sustained a guarded, even adversarial relationship with fans, the press and the culture at large has become surprisingly accessible over the last decade or so—writing his memoirs (the first volume, which we’ll read here), hosting his own “Theme Time Radio Hour,” participating in Martin Scorsese’s “No Direction Home” documentary (highly recommended for viewing, though we won’t do so in here, unless it pops up on YouTube).

And we’ll ask ourselves, over and over, through all the complications and contradictions that we confront, who or what is the “real” Bob Dylan? Is there a common denominator or connectivity? Does even Bob Dylan understand the significance of Bob Dylan or know what those songs are about?

And maybe here’s the crux of Dylan’s music, more than the meaning of verses that might mix poetry with drug-addled gibberish: How does it feel?

As with a lot of my courses—and a lot of Bob Dylan’s songs—we’re likely to raise more questions than we can ever hope to answer. (“How many roads must a man walk down, before you call him a man?”). We will examine Dylan from many perspectives—yours, mine, that of journalists and academics, Dylan’s own. We will listen to a lot of Dylan (singing and talking), read a lot about Dylan, write a lot about Dylan. And we will emerge from this collective experience different from the way we were when we started, recognizing that the world is different, and our lives are different, in the wake of Bob Dylan’s impact and influence.

This course will shape itself as we reveal—individually and collectively—what we know and what we need to know. I’ll likely stick to the reading and other assignments on the syllabus no matter what, but what you bring to this course will determine how we will proceed in class—how much you need in the way of crash-course introduction, how deep we can go how quickly. You will not be evaluated on how much (if anything) you know about Bob Dylan at the beginning of this course, but I anticipate that all of us (including me) will have a deeper and different perspective by the end.
Our class sessions each week will be discussion intensive as well as filled with music and other clips to which we will respond (through discussion and written assignment). You will have a two-part midterm (in class and outside) and a final writing assignment.

You will notice that I’m not forcing you to listen to any Dylan outside of class—this is a course in journalism, not music appreciation—but I would strongly encourage you to do so. Your reading will be enriched immeasurably by your listening to the music. The online technology we use limits me to YouTube clips in class, but the music is out there for you to sample, stream, download, purchase, whatever. If nothing else, an upgraded Spotify account for this semester would be a worthy investment. (Though, again, I’m trying to be reasonable by not forcing you to purchase anything other than the textbooks.)

I will augment what’s on the syllabus with other readings and with more writing assignments, often based on what we watch, listen to and discuss in class. I expect you to be here, and I need you to be here, actively participating.

Many have spent a lifetime listening to, reading about and even writing about Dylan. We have a semester, which could spark a lifetime’s interest. There is no limit on how much listening, reading and reflecting you can do.

This course can and will be what you make it.

TEXTBOOKS

Chronicles by Bob Dylan (Chron)
Bob Dylan by Greil Marcus: Writings 1968-2010 (Greil)
Dylan's Visions of Sin by Christopher Ricks (Ricks)
Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews by Jonathan Cott , editor (EI)

The abbreviations in parentheses are how the reading assignments are referred to in the syllabus. Readings listed for each class session should be done before that class date. You can find used copies of each of these fairly cheap on Amazon or elsewhere. I don’t care whether you purchase the hardback or paperback.
As you’ll see from the syllabus, your assignments outside class are reading intensive. The Greil and EI anthologies are comparatively breezy; the Ricks is not. Dylan’s memoir is engaging and illuminating while (as always) raising as many questions and issues as it resolves. Because these books have different perspectives and are organized differently, some weeks the readings will connect with each other more closely than others, though you’ll be amazed at (and expected to respond to) all sorts of connections by the end.

For all the reading we’re doing in this course, we are just scratching the surface. I will compile a list of other books that could have served as texts here and encourage you to read as much as you’d like. Graduate students will be required to write an additional paper on reading one or more of these books and how such reading enhanced or altered their understanding of Dylan. (Undergrads can do the same for extra credit.)

**Final grades will be determined as follows:**

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION 30%
SHORTER PAPERS AND IN CLASS ASSIGNMENTS: 20%
MIDTERM(S): 25%
FINAL WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT: 25%

All writing assignments are due in the ICON dropbox at the beginning of class on the due date. Those late will be docked a letter grade per day. (A paper due Monday that deserves an A will receive a B if I don’t get it until Tuesday, etc.)

Attendance (whether in the classroom or online) is MANDATORY, as the course will be much more interactive than lecture oriented, with written assignments as well as discussion part of the class sessions. Particularly with once-a-week classes, each week represents a significant portion of the course. If you can’t attend and have a good reason, please let me know as soon as you can (before the class you miss rather than after).

There will be no final exam.
Administrative Home

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall, or see the CLAS Academic Policies Handbook at http://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook.

Electronic Communication

University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Faculty and students should use this account for correspondences (Operations Manual, III.15.2, k.11).
Accommodations for Disabilities

A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Academic Honesty

All CLAS students or students taking classes offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty: "I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the IOWA Challenge. I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others; nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of Academic Honesty." Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

CLAS Final Examination Policies

The final examination schedule for each class is announced by the Registrar generally by the fifth week of classes. Final exams are offered only during the official final examination period. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. All students should plan on being at the UI through the final examination period. Once the Registrar has announced the date, time, and location of each final exam, the complete schedule will be published on the Registrar’s web site and will be shared with instructors and students. It is the student's responsibility to know the date, time, and place of a final exam.

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint

Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit with the instructor (and the course supervisor), and then with the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).
Understanding Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Reacting Safely to Severe Weather

In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Department of Public Safety website.

CALENDAR (subject to change, as we assess progress and need)

Week one
1/20: No class. MLK day

Week two
1/27: Getting to know you. Now get to work

Week three:
2/3: Read Chron Ch 1, EI Intro and 1-2, Greil “Where I Came In,” Ricks “Sins, Virtues, Heavenly Graces.”

Week four:
2/10: Read Chron Ch 2, Ricks “Songs, Poems, Rhymes”

Week five:
2/17: Read EI, 3-6, Ricks “Envy” through “Greed”

Week six:
2/24: Read Ricks “Sloth,” Greil “Blind Steamer Trunk” and “Part One,” EI 7-9, Chron Ch 3

Week seven:
3/3: Read EI 10-11, Greil “Part Two”
Week eight:
3/10: Read EI 12-14, Ricks “Lust” through “Pride.” Take part one of short-essay midterm during classtime.

Week nine:
3/17: SPRING BREAK

Week ten:

Week eleven:
3/31: Finish Chron and be prepared to discuss as a whole. Ricks “Prudence,” Greil “Parts Four and Five,” EI 17-20

Week twelve:
4/7: Read Greil “Part Six,” Ricks “Temperance,” EI 21-23. Discuss final writing assignment

Week thirteen:
4/14: Read Greil, “Part Seven,” Ricks “Fortitude,” EI 24-26

Week fourteen:

Week fifteen:
4/28: Finish Ricks and EI

Week sixteen:
5/5: That’s all folks. Final session together. Some of you will be done; others will see where you need to be in order to be done.

NO FINAL. HAVE A GREAT SUMMER!