

At 60, Dylan remains on poetry's razor edge.

Still blowing in wind

By Tom Chaffin

In Montreal back in the early '80s, I was having dinner with the poet and singer Leonard Cohen, and we were talking about Bob Dylan. A critic had panned Dylan's latest album for having "only one masterpiece."

"My God," Cohen exclaimed. "Only one masterpiece. Does this guy have any idea what it takes to produce a single masterpiece?" Beyond that, Cohen added, "I think anything he does merits serious attention."

Today Bob Dylan turns 60, and I find myself agreeing. No other contemporary poet has drawn such an unflinching bead on our age and its perils.

One goes to different poets at different times for different reasons. Go to Shakespeare for insight into the human psyche and just about anything else, T. S. Eliot for the grand sweep of history, Wallace Stevens for epistemological ruminations, Yeats for the vagaries of memory and aging.

Dylan achieves his greatest powers as a social visionary. Those powers gathered force in three classic rock albums from the 1960s: *Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*. Alternately snarling and elegiac, the three collections made Dylan an international icon. With their shifting perspectives, haunted visions of an impersonal, uncertain future, songs such as "Like a Rolling Stone," "Desolation Row," and "Ballad of a Thin Man" seemed then — seem still — to capture the spirit of our day and time.

In this age of the Internet and cloning, Dylan's vision still has much to contribute. He's never been a Luddite. But in an age in which too many of us revere computers — and capitalism — with the sort of unquestioning veneration that cargo-cultists reserve for a beached Cessna, Dylan still understands that relations between people matter more than those between people and machines, and people and institutions.

Contrary to what many critics have assumed, Dylan never made himself an apologist or advocate for any particular vision of the future. Yes, he supported the '60s civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements — both, by the way, arguably conservative (pro-U.S. Constitution, anti-interventionist) causes. For the most part, however, he merely described the world he envisioned and warned against what seemed, to him, its bland inevitability.

Unlike other '60s icons as, say, Herbert Marcuse and Marshall McLuhan, Dylan, with his abiding skepticism of ideologies and schemes, never offered a systematic vision of a literal future. To the extent that he de-



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scribed any future, it remained bleak and vaguely rendered. Typical of great poets, even when he tried, he made a poor ideologue: Over the years, he flirted with various belief-systems. But he has never been able to stick with any of them for long. Four decades after Dylan recorded his first album, when many of his early fans have embraced capitalism with a zeal that would have embarrassed their parents, his skepticism about the marketplace remains undiminished. He remains very much a lone wolf.

Beyond all of his eccentricities and changes in style and focus, his oeuvre remains a sustained meditation on the nature of, and limits to, human freedoms — political freedom, economic freedom, existential freedom, spiritual freedom. To see Dylan, then, as a protest singer or rebel-poet misses the point. Yes, he saw that the times were changing, knew that something was happening, understood that his Mister Jones didn't have a clue. But nowhere did Dylan advocate or welcome change for its own sake.

We cannot ask poets to give us new worlds — only to give us insights into those in which we live. Dylan has managed, still manages, the latter task peerlessly, and decades after he first brought it all back home, that's more than enough.

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