When Robert Shelton, writing in the “New York Times” on September 29, 1961, described 20 year-old Bob Dylan “as one of the most distinctive stylists to play a Manhattan cabaret in months,” his work bearing “the mark of originality and inspiration” that was “all the more noteworthy for his youth,” fellow critics and many musicians were frankly perplexed. There was no shortage of talent playing the makeshift stages of the clubs that studded the crooked streets around Washington Square in Greenwich Village.

Dylan had just begun a two-week residency at Gerde’s Folk City, opening for The Greenbriar Boys, a skillful and established bluegrass trio. He had not yet recorded an album--and, indeed, Shelton’s review is regarded as a catalytic event: within a few days, the legendary John Hammond, Columbia Records A&R man and producer, had offered him a contract, though the precise sequence of events inevitably depends on who tells the story. Suze Rotolo, Dylan’s girlfriend at the time, and the young woman who would be immortalized on the “Freewheelin’” sleeve, remembered it as “over-the-top exciting,” writing in “A Freewheelin’ Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties”: “Robert Shelton had been around the clubs and bars for ages, seeing every new and old performer, but he’d never written a review quite like the one he wrote for Bobby…..”

“Bob Dylan” was recorded two months later. Released in March 1962, it received little critical attention and sales were so lackluster that Dylan was dubbed “Hammond’s Folly.” Sixty years later, of course, we can appreciate the album in its proper context--as Shelton writes in his biography “No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan,” originally published in 1986: “The first album was the last will and testament of one Dylan and the birth of a new Dylan.”

It turns out Shelton was perspicacious, hearing that night in 1961 what many others did not. His judgment was born out with the May 1963 release of “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan,” Dylan’s debut as a fully-fledged songwriter. Recorded over the course of 12 months, it was indeed a rebirth, light years away from what had gone before. Opening with “Blowin’ in the Wind,” which long ago became part of our cultural DNA, our lingua franca, it included two other of Dylan’s most celebrated protest songs: “Masters of War” and “A Hard Rain’s-a-Gonna Fall,” as well as one of his most enduring love songs, “Girl from the North Country,” and anti-love song, “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right.” There’s also a glimpse of Dylan the satirist in “Talking World War III Blues,” a role familiar to those who witnessed his early club appearances.

At the age of just 22, the man born Robert Allen Zimmerman had taken poetry off the bookshelves and loaded it on the jukebox. And what poetry! “A Hard Rain,” written in ten-cent notebooks in Village cafés as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis unfolded, compresses innumerable
song ideas. “I thought I wouldn’t have enough time alive to write all those songs so I put them
to this one,” Dylan explained, of a song in whose lyrics can be discerned echoes of Rimbaud
(“A Season in Hell”), Lorca (“War Goes Crying with a Million Gray Rats”) and Ginsberg
(“Howl”):

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son?
And where have you been my darling young one?
I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains
I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways
I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests
I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans
I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard
And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard
It's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

It’s Dylan’s own nightmare war vision: Picasso’s “Guernica” set to music, its melody from the
folk tradition but its lyric a break with the great American song tradition. New expression?
Certainly. “A Hard Rain” inspired a Canadian poet named Leonard Cohen to become a
songwriter.

Though many of the songs’ melodies had their roots in folk song and while the instrumentation
was mostly folk-like in its simplicity, just Dylan and his guitar, “Freewheelin’” opened a new
chapter not just for Dylan but for popular music. It closed the book on an ecosystem that was
dominated by Tin Pan Alley, the songwriting “industry” that had turned out hits good, bad, and
indifferent for decades. “The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan” launched the era of the singer-
songwriter. Nothing would ever be the same again. The tra-la-la days of the Brill Building--
referred to by Dylan in his spoken introduction to “Bob Dylan’s Blues”--were over.

Within a few weeks of the May 1963 release of Dylan’s sophomore album, Peter, Paul and Mary
had made “Blowin’ in the Wind” a hit, and theirs remains the most commercially successful
version of the song. It sold 300,000 copies in its first week, which meant that Dylan arrived at
the July 1963 Newport Folk Festival a conversation piece and left it a star--“crown prince to Joan
Baez the folk queen” as the media liked to put it. It is the most widely recorded and universally
recognized of Dylan’s songs, sung at demonstrations against the Iraq war when it was as fresh
and contemporary as at its first airing 40 years earlier. The rhetorical questions, the ever-elusive
answers, give the song a universality and ensure it will never be old or dated. In Douglas
Adams’ “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” the opening line is cast as “the ultimate
question.”

The album demonstrates the polarities of Dylan’s songwriting. On the one hand, “Girl from the
North Country” is one of his most tender love songs, its lyrics and melody gentle and caressing.
On the other, “Masters of War” is perhaps his bitterest protest song, a scathing denunciation of
the so-called military industrial complex. And then there’s “Oxford Town,” a song culled from
newspaper headlines about James Meredith and the forced integration of the University of
Mississippi. Timely rather than timeless, it is less well known than “Only a Pawn in Their
Game” and “The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,” both of which would appear on Dylan’s
1964 album “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” yet it is part of the great chronicle of America’s
civil rights struggle.

In and of itself, “Freewheelin’” is a remarkable album by any measure. But it also marks the
beginning of a remarkable three-year period during which time Dylan released a series of albums
that each broke new ground: “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” “Another Side of Bob Dylan,”
“Bringing It All Back Home,” “Highway 61 Revisited” and “Blonde on Blonde.” Kenneth
Rexroth, “Father of the Beats,” wrote in 1966 that Dylan was “probably the most important event
in recent poetry” marking “the American beginning of a tradition as old as civilization in France.”

Anyone skeptical of the decision of the 2016 Nobel Prize Committee should listen to those six albums. Never were our grievances and our grieving so eloquently articulated.

Elizabeth (Liz) Thomson is a London-based author and journalist. She is the revising editor of the late “New York Times” critic Robert Shelton’s biography “No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan.” Her biography “Joan Baez: The Last Leaf” was praised as “definitive” (Mojo) and was awarded a Certificate of Merit by the Association for Recorded Sound Collections Awards for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research.

*The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*