

For the Love of Dylan

By RUMA DASGUPTA

The American folk-rock singer's impact on urban music in eastern India.

When American songwriter and musician Bob Dylan became the first rock-and-roller to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the supreme U.S. honor for writers, little did he know that for some people in the eastern corner of India it was the proudest moment of their lives. The citation, announced in April, said that Dylan, 66, was recognized with a special Pulitzer for his "profound impact on popular music and American culture, marked by lyrical compositions of extraordinary poetic power." What the Pulitzer Committee may not have known about is the incredible way Dylan has impacted urban music in India, especially in Kolkata and Shillong and how he has left an indelible mark on the sociopolitical consciousness, as well.

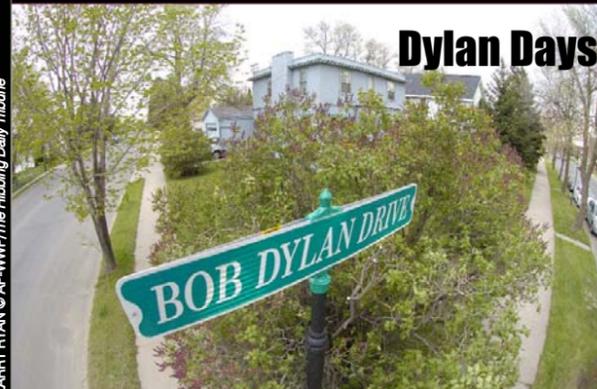
Dylan has not commented on his Pulitzer and, in fact, rarely issues public statements.

In Kolkata, West Bengal, Dylan is an adopted hero, a magnificent obsession who has inspired at least two generations of romantic nonconformists in a city that thrives on protests. He is an undeniable part of Kolkata's music scenario, although he has never heard dissenters singing his folksong *Blowin' in the*

Wind with a distinctly Bengali accent, raising their voices for social and political justice, wending their way in processions through concrete and dust. It's equally unexpected that he will see *Forever Young*, cinematographer Ranjan Palit's documentary on Lou Majaw, who has shot to fame as "Shillong's Dylan," or hear Anjan Dutt's Bengali trans-creation of his songs.

That the world's most famous anti-establishment musician has become the subject of formal studies is an oxymoron, to say the least. For the past seven years at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, three of Dylan's most representative songs have been part of the *Literature and the Other Arts* paper. Ananda Lal, a Fulbright fellow and head of the Department of English faculty, was instrumental in introducing the study of non-conventional literature and choosing *With God on Our Side*, *Mr. Tambourine Man* and *Like a Rolling Stone* to represent Dylan in the syllabi at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

"My students are already clued in and have imbibed the romantic nostalgia of the '60s and '70s from the earlier generations," says Lal, with obvious pride, "and they are sensitive to the fact that his last



Dylan Days

Every May, hundreds of Bob Dylan fans gather at his hometown, Hibbing, Minnesota, to celebrate his life and work during an event popularly known as Dylan Days. Held around his birthday on May 24, it includes singing, songwriting, poetry, short fiction, play writing and art contests. The highlight this year will be the opening of an exhibit at Ironworld museum in the nearby town of Chisholm, called "Tangled up in Ore," a retrospective of Dylan's early life in the iron mining region.

Dylan Days began informally in 1991 with impromptu musical performances at Zimmy's Bar and Restaurant, based on the singer's real surname, Zimmerman. Residents of Hibbing renamed a street to Bob Dylan Drive in May 2005.

<http://www.dylandays.com/index.htm>

Bob Dylan performs *Cry A While* at the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles, California, in 2002.

KEVORK DJANSEZIAN © AP/WIDEWORLD

MUSIC



Courtesy Ranjan Palit

Lou Majaw began Shillong's musical tradition of celebrating Bob Dylan's birthday in 1972.

three albums are classics." What is interesting is that they are at the same time outraged by Dylan allowing his music to be used in a television advertisement. The post-modernization of Dylan does not go down well!

Lal follows the literary evolution of Dylan closely and feels that today his compositions are far more Spartan as opposed to "the catalogue-like string of images that abounded in Dylan's lyrics earlier." The crafting of the words, especially the minimalism, reminds Lal of Irish-born playwright Samuel Beckett.

Others in this part of the world find a connection between Dylan and Bengali poet Jibananda Das, the antithesis of Rabindranath Tagore. "Dylan was everything the Beatles were not....He never had a mellifluous voice....," says Gaurab Pandey, a filmmaker from Kolkata now working in Mumbai. It's this absence of a pleasant and soothing tone that prompts Pandey to compare Dylan with the iconoclastic Das.

"But he let us down by switching from being a wandering minstrel to a recording artiste," laments Pandey, not responding quite the same way as Lal to Dylan's latest works. Pandey echoes the prevalent sentiments of Dylan's left-inclined intellectual Bengali fans who have felt let down by him at various turning points in his musical career.

Unlike the students who write test papers on Dylan at Jadavpur,

Dylan for the Bengali Middle Class

If Lou Majaw brought Bob Dylan to the hills of Shillong, then Anjan Dutt took him to the heart of West Bengal. Dutt reinvented Dylan's lyrics in Bengali and celebrated the anger and the angst of the rebel poet by taking it closer to the grassroots of his home state.

"The middle class Bengali is my target audience," says Dutt, 55, who has traversed from being a journalist to an advertising copywriter to a theater director to a filmmaker and actor, and he has carried his best-loved music along with him. "Every Bengali is strongly grounded in literature and alive to words," Dutt comments on the reason why his Dylan adaptations have found a niche.

Initially, it was more Dylan's raspy voice that drew Dutt, who had been bred on Elvis Presley and a bit of the Beatles in a Darjeeling school. "At 16, Dylan redefined music for me," says Dutt. "The author-singer was a new concept to those of us born into a tradition of Rabindra Sangeet and film hits of the '50s."

Apart from the sheer strength of the lyrics and the unconventional voice, Dutt was lured by the intellectual equity that Dylan had brought to rock music. In the '80s, when Dutt entertained friends and family with a rudimentary acoustic guitar and growled out *It Ain't Me, Babe* at informal parties, little did the

young man know that he was going to make it big as an "alternative" singer. He was a long way from the released recently *Ami Aar Godot*, which is his Bengali adaptation of Dylan numbers sung along with his son, Neel. In fact, Dutt's first formal concert was held in an open space that belonged to a theater group. It was a kind of test-marketing of his love for contemporary western music, which had previously found expression only in his theater projects.

Dutt, wearing dark glasses at midnight, belts out original Dylan numbers regularly in one of Kolkata's most popular pub and rock hubs, Someplace Else. Dutt has also taken his version of Dylan to Bengalis living in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, New Jersey and Boston. His trans-creation of *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* was a favorite with these audiences in the United States.

Today, what Dutt values most in Dylan is his courage to negate himself again and again, to question his beliefs and dare to reinvent himself. Dutt has a soft spot for Dylan's love songs, which "are not temporal and celebrate partings."

This year, once again, Dutt and his son will find time from their tight filmmaking schedule to celebrate Dylan's birthday. —R.D.



Anjan Dutt

Courtesy Neel Dutt

the political activists waving placards and looking for answers blowing on the Gangetic plains are mostly unaware of the other works of the poet who penned the unforgettable *Blowin' in the Wind* lyrics and became America's celebrated "rebel" singer. That perhaps is a testimony to Dylan's greatest success; a single song written and sung by him taking on a life of its own in another corner of the world, independent of the charismatic, media-created image of the star.

Dylan performs more live shows now than he did 40 years ago and fans wait in long queues for up to 12 hours to get tickets to his sell-out concerts.

Lou Majaw, India's surrogate Dylan, is rocking as well. He is the live wire who in 1972 transported Dylan to Shillong and began the Meghalaya capital's musical tradition of celebrating Dylan's birthday, May 24, in an unpretentious concert hall. Today, the musical event draws audiences from across the coun-



ANUPAM NATH © AP/WIDE

Guitarists perform Dylan's *Knockin' on Heaven's Door* in Shillong, Meghalaya, during an attempt at a Guinness World Record for the largest guitar ensemble on October 26, 2007.

try. Year after year, Majaw, along with musicians like Nandan Bagchi, Lou Hilt, Amit Dutta and Arjun Sen from Kolkata and Delhi, get together as the band Ace of Spades to put on a resounding show.

As drummer Bagchi recalls, most Dylan fans of the '70s and '80s in this part of the world could not buy Dylan's music in Kolkata, so they copied cassettes of friends visiting from abroad. At that time India and Bengal were in the throes of anti-establishment movements and Dylan struck a chord in their hearts. Today, music stores in the city sell Dylan, if not every day, definitely every other day.

"His songs lit up my life and gave it a lot of meaning," says Majaw, the grand old man with flowing white hair who calls his son "Little Dylan." Little did he know that he was start-

ing the process of deifying Dylan in Shillong when he put on stage the first Dylan birthday show to honor the musician who had influenced him profoundly.

"Majaw is a rock artiste in his own right and a fine one at that," says documentary maker Ranjan Palit. A Dylan buff himself, Palit wields an acoustic guitar with the same passion as a camera and regales his cast and crew with impromptu servings of Dylan's music at the close of a day's shoot. Although Palit's film is in the can and the yearly trips to Shillong are no longer imperative, he feels that he has to be back again this year for the Dylan concert because, "It's like a pilgrimage."

Majaw apart, Shillong pulsates with Dylan music. Out-of-towners like Anjan Dutt, a Bengali rock singer and filmmaker, and his son Neel, have sung the usual hits like *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* and *Mr. Tambourine Man*. Liz Cotton from New Delhi got the house rocking on a May 24 two years ago with *I*

Shall Be Released and *Mozambique*.

On October 26, 2007, Shillong hosted an ensemble of 1,730 guitarists, trying to break the Guinness record held by 1,721 musicians from Kansas City, Missouri, who had gathered in that Midwest American city to play Deep Purple's *Smoke on the Water* the year before. Last fall, the Indian mountain air resonated with *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*, beating to the rhythm of every Meghalayan heart that's filled with love for Dylan.

In Kolkata, this year we are waiting for the birthday celebrations to begin. It's that time of year when we get to keep guessing what's coming our way, blowing in the wind.



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For more information:

Bob Dylan

www.bobdylan.com/

Homage to Bob Dylan—Indian style

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/5016926.stm

Bob Dylan videos

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Bob+dylan