

“The Strange Case of Dr. Dylan and Mr. Cohen”: A Study in Hyphenation

Sudev Pratim Basu

Associate Professor of English, Department of English & Other Modern European Languages, Visva-Bharati (University), Santiniketan. Email: sudevbasu@yahoo.co.in

I

Going by the pure mathematics of influence in the statistically murky and genre border-busting world of popular music in English, the British punk band The Sex Pistols is right at the top. Intensely hated and venerated in equal measures, they lasted a mere two and a half years, released just four singles and *one* measly studio album appropriately titled *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*¹ in 1977 and promptly imploded, never reuniting despite critical and commercial forces urging them to do so; and to rub salt into the wound, despite their statistically tiny musical output they have been a major source of influence to scores of musicians and musical genres ranging from punk and alternative rock to thrash metal and grindcore. On a similarly stingy scale, guitar legend Jimi Hendrix released just three studio and one live album before his untimely death in 1970²; that makes Hendrix's career span just three years. The Beatles' studio album career spans only nine years from 1962's *Please Please Me* to 1970's *Let It Be*. But there are some popular music dinosaurs that still record and release commercially and critically successful albums in their sixth decade of performance continuity. Some of the best examples are of course The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Deep Purple and The Golden Earring among a select few. While the Stones' eponymous debut album was released in 1964 and their latest was 2016's *Blue and Lonesome*, Dylan's eponymous debut album predated the Stones by two years in 1962 and his latest is this year's *Triplicate*; and there are no signs of these two artists calling it quits in the near future. The Dutch rock band The Golden Earring released their first album in 1965 called *Just Earrings* and their latest is the rather naughtily named *Tits & Ass* released in 2012; the British hard rock/blues band Deep Purple released their debut album in 1968 and their twentieth album in 2017, appropriately called *Infinite*. On the other hand, Cohen began his studio album career comparatively late – compared to Dylan – in 1967 with his debut album titled simply *Songs of Leonard Cohen* (the similarity in the names of their debut albums is uncanny) and his final studio album was last year's *You Want It Darker* released just sixteen days before his death. The longevity of these two artists is phenomenal, primarily so as musical tastes and business has evolved over the years between the 1960s and 2016-17 when they released their last (and for Cohen the final) album.

This is *not* about longevity of bands and artists, or their ability to hold fast to their musical signatures over the years of evolving boundaries in music. This is about the influence these two singer-songwriters wielded over the years, and still do, worldwide. Back in 1966 Cohen – the elder contemporary – introduced Dylan's music to Canadian poets at a poetry party in Montreal which included big names like F. R. Scott and A. J. M. Smith of the 'Montreal Group'³. Then, it was

Cohen who was already a published poet while Dylan was just another – albeit a rising – name in the crowded list of folk-artist-turned-pop-star. By 1965 Dylan had already ‘abandoned’ his purist roots and was forging a heavily improvised career with electric instruments as can be seen in his fifth album *Bringing It All Back Home*⁴ which opened with the classic Dylan song ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ which has Chuck Berry rock influences at one end of the spectrum and precursor to rap music on the other. In contrast, Cohen had started to live a reclusive life on the Greek island of Hydra in the early 1960s, and it was from there that he published his most well-known, and controversial, book of poems *Flowers for Hitler*⁵. It was only when Cohen went looking for fresher pastures as folk singer-songwriter in the United States in 1967 – disappointed with his writing career in Canada – that the two were on a collision course on the parallel tracks to singer-songwriter fame. But it was only in the 1980s that the musical world started clubbing the two together; but their different approaches to music was brought to light – again – in the recent article by David Remnick in *The New Yorker*⁶ published mere days before Cohen’s death in 2016. In it Remnick repeats the well worn anecdote from the early 1980s where Dylan asked Cohen how long it took the latter to write – after ‘Suzanne’ – arguably his second best-known song, ‘Hallelujah’; Cohen had seriously replied that it had taken him two years though it had actually taken him close to five years to write this song. Cohen did not want Dylan to realise that he laboured so long and hard over his songs because he had guessed that Dylan was a fast lyrics-writer and a quick composer. He then asked Dylan how long did he take to write the song ‘I And I’ which was greatly admired by Cohen from Dylan’s 1983 album *Infidels*: “fifteen minutes” replied an evidently embarrassed Dylan.

Apocryphal this anecdote might be when recollected in 2016; but long before Dylan had Nobel laureateship thrust upon him and Cohen had become the gravelly voiced bard of Capitalist ennui and angst, the two had tried to connect musically and lyrically. Cohen’s *Various Positions* from where ‘Hallelujah’ is taken was released in 1984, and, long before the song became a crowd favourite and was covered by A-list artistes from Jeff Buckley⁷ to Justin Timberlake⁸, Dylan had covered ‘Hallelujah’ live while touring Canada during the ‘Never Ending Tour’ in 1988.⁹ The Dylan-Cohen hyphenation goes deeper than mere music: both are Jewish with a penchant for Biblical imagery and recurrent themes of existential self-flagellation; but before all that they were both ‘discovered’ by the same man – record producer and probably the greatest talent scout/spotter in American music, John Henry Hammond.¹⁰ Hammond was among the first to hear Dylan’s songs way back in 1961 and actually produced his debut album in 1962. In his first memoir *Chronicles: Volume One* Dylan pays homage to Hammond in the very first chapter:

John was John Hammond, the great talent scout and discovered of monumental artists, imposing figures in the history of recorded music – Billie Holiday, Teddy Wilson...He was legendary, pure American aristocracy...I could hardly believe myself awake when sitting in his office, him signing me to Columbia Records was so unbelievable. It would have sounded like a made-up thing. (*Chronicles* 4 – 5)

Cohen’s life in Montreal in the 1950s was far removed from the urban jungle that nurtured Dylan in New York city since 1961 when Dylan made the move from rural Minnesota. Cohen first learnt the guitar under the tutelage of a itinerant Spanish flamenco guitarist who had impressed the young man at a tennis court; the guitarist didn’t know English and young Cohen was very weak in French, the Spaniard’s second language. Through gestures and broken French the two young men connected and the lessons began. But then tragedy struck.

His young teacher failed to arrive for their fourth lesson. When Leonard called the number of his boarding house, the landlady answered the phone. The guitar player was dead, she told him. He had committed suicide.

‘I knew nothing about the man, why he came to Montreal, why he appeared in that tennis court, why he took his life,’ Leonard would say to an audience of dignitaries in Spain¹¹ some sixty years later, ‘but it was those six chords, it was that guitar pattern, that has been the basis of all my songs, and of all my music.’ (Simmons 32)

The introvert meets the social critic. The careers of these two singer-songwriters would be full of ups and downs. Dylan’s beginnings were poised on the edge of the folk-protest movement and he took to writing outside of his songs much later in the early seventies. While Dylan’s entry into the world of poems and words was through his songs, Cohen shifted from writing to singing as part of a change of space and profession. Dylan’s rural background and his shift from the country to the city is a major motif in his songs and poems. On the other hand Cohen’s transnational identity lets him approach the song and the poem from a rather urban and international perspective. Moreover, Dylan has always been a victim of fan appropriation, the greatest example of which was at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival when Dylan performed an electric set accompanied by Mike Bloomfield on guitar and Al Kooper on organs. The reaction was extraordinary: the folk purists were shocked and booed Dylan off the stage after just three songs. But Dylan went on using the electric guitar and rewrote the rules of folk and protest music.

Dylan at Newport is remembered as a pioneering artist defying the rules and damn the consequences. Supporters of new musical trends ever since – punk, rap hip-hop, electronica – have compared their critics to the dull folkies who didn’t understand the times were-a-changing... He challenged the establishment... He defined his own transformation: “I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” He drew a line between himself and those who tried to claim him. (Wald 2 – 3)

Cohen did not have such problems of musical identity and genre affiliation; maybe because he had come across the northern borders and had arrived fully formed. Dylan’s early avatar was a stick-thin pale sensitive young man with a guitar, harmonica and a voice. His transformation from the rooted folkie-insider to arena-rocking superstar is easily plotted against the steady graph of Cohen’s stability, continuity and musical conformity. Ironically – and this is where things get really Freudian – it was at this same Newport Folk Festival, albeit two years later in 1967 that Cohen got noticed by John Hammond, partly because of his finger-picking guitar playing style that he had ‘learnt’ from his Spanish teacher in three lessons in Montreal. The guitar – acoustic at first and then the electric guitar – was what also connected these two performers. Dylan’s guitar playing style is already well established and proven; not so with Cohen. Yet, in the December 2016 issue of the heavily rotated and street-and-critic savvy guitar magazine *Guitar World*, tribute was paid to Cohen’s guitar style under the heading “Unsung Guitar Heroes: Tribute to Leonard Cohen”:

When you hear the name Leonard Cohen, six-string mastery isn’t the first thing that comes to mind.

But, in addition to his craftsmanship as a poet and songwriter, Cohen had a unique guitar style and musical approach that are worthy of praise – certainly no less so than other influential guitarist-singer-songwriters like Neil Young. Sylvie Simmons. Who wrote biographies of Cohen and Young, once said they both created a “one man genre.” (*Guitar World*)

Both Cohen and Dylan are equidistant from mainstream America. Dylan's marginal and peripheral mode of functioning can be traced to his protest roots as well as his ability to morph with time and musical shifts in the first world; the more the centre shifts and incorporates the periphery, the more Dylan starts to slide towards the new margins. This almost cat-and-mouse game with the establishment could also be seen when he was awarded the Nobel Prize *and* his nonchalance at such recognition baffled the committee(s) that chose him and the world at large.

Mr. Dylan's ambivalence to one of the world's most prestigious honors, and the uncertainty about whether he will accept it, appears to have begun to wear on the Swedish Academy, which awards the prize. On Saturday, an academy member called Mr. Dylan "impolite and arrogant."

"One can say that it is impolite and arrogant," the member, Per Wastberg, a writer, told the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, according to a translation by The Associated Press. "He is who he is." (*The New York Times* 22.10.2016)

Dylan's reaction to the prize can be read as his dilemma in being perceived as having been appropriated by the mainstream capitalist culture where prizes and acceptance by the multitude – the popular music industry's equivalence of the Nobel: the Grammys – would be a betrayal of the roots of his singing-songwriting genesis. Talking about popular cultural and artistic prizes worldwide Dylan is the *only* artist to have won the Oscar, the Grammys and the Nobel¹²; and we seriously doubt if such a feat can be accomplished in our lifetime. Dylan has been nominated a whopping forty-three times for the Grammys and has won on twelve separate occasions – a paltry sum when compared to classical conductor Georg Solti's thirty one wins – and his lone Oscar came from 2001's 'Things Have Changed' from the movie *Wonder Boys*. Quite contrary to popular perception – and despite Dylan's famous posturing eschewing the commercial and the popular – Dylan has been nominated for the Grammys since his debut album *Bob Dylan* was nominated for 'Best Folk Recording' at the 1963 Grammys. He won the first Grammy for George Harrison's *Concert For Bangladesh*¹³ in 1973; but it was a shared prize. Dylan had to wait till 1980 to win a Grammy for his solo effort – 'Gotta Serve Somebody' from *Slow Train Coming*; he last won a Grammy in 2007 for 'Someday Baby' from the 2006 album *Modern Times*, and he was nominated at the Grammys this year for his 2016 album *Fallen Angels*. On the other hand Cohen has just two Grammy awards: the 2008 'Album of the Year Award' for Herbie Hancock's tribute to Joni Mitchell called *River: The Joni Letters*¹⁴ on which he was a guest vocalist and the 'Lifetime Achievement Award' at the 2010 awards.

Thus, both Dylan and Cohen – especially Dylan – have street credibility and ability to shift CD-units off shelves at the local gas station and other low-end points-of-sale all over the world. One of the myths that need to be exploded is that these singers are not very accessible or come loaded with erudition and baggage of history: they are both immensely popular in the sense of Billboard charting and moreover, they have been doing this for the last six decades. Simply put, unlike the usual winners of the Literature Nobel who don't have any recall at the street level – how many of us have read *any* works of Svetlana Alexievich, Mo Yan, Tomas Tranströmer or J.M.G. Le Clézio¹⁵ – Dylan's music and hence his poems cut across borders of nations, race and languages, as well as class and cultural stratifications. To be frank, music can more easily transcend boundaries than the written word simply because the word by existing on paper demands translation. Music, it seems, can slip through the urge of comprehension that the word entails. Thus, as artists, Dylan and Cohen can easily slip through gaps in culture that would not have happened if they had *written* rather than *sung* their poems.

Long before the Nobel Prize, the music fraternity celebrated Dylan’s thirty years in the music industry by having ‘The 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration’⁶ at New York City’s Madison Square Garden on October 16 1992, dubbed fondly ‘Bobfest’ by Neil Young. The list of performers who trotted out to pay their tribute to Dylan reads like a veritable who’s-who of contemporary popular music’s most hallowed names: from Stevie Wonder and Eric Clapton to Lou Reed and George Harrison. Ironically, this major mega-event and the accompanying record was one year *after* a similar tribute to Cohen was produced by the French music magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* and released by major USA record label Atlantic as *I’m Your Fan*¹⁷ – a play on the Cohen song ‘I’m Your Man’; the 1991 record cannot compare to the star quality in the Dylan tribute a year later, but it did have A-listers like R.E.M. and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds.

The Dylan-Cohen or Cohen-Dylan hyphenation has a long history; like conjoined-twins, these two entities continue to enthrall *and* confound us. There are a lot of similarities, as well as dissimilarities, between these two performers – from overarching musical direction, lyrics, themes, composition and arrangements to general socio-cultural and national spaces. Yet, somewhere, beyond all the hype and the hoopla, all the accolades and the awards, all the early failures and later superstardom, they connect with us at a very personal level. And this is exactly what we are looking at through these essays.

II

The essays in this volume cover a myriad range of positions and approaches; the vast width and scope of these deviations attest to the centrality of these two singer-songwriters in the verbal and musical continuity of our times in – if I may be allowed to improvise – ‘Bharat, Bengal and Beyond’. As it is well near impossible to encapsulate the life, times and music of Dylan and/or Cohen in one essay, at first reading many of these essays will appear to be fleeting and unconnected; but as one of the reasons for the critical and commercial durability of these two gentlemen is the desire and willingness to adapt and adopt, the very divisiveness and discursive nature of these essays actually attest to their relevance as musical and human documents of experience and existence. Thomas J. Haslam uses text data mining to analyse the changing shifts and patterns in Cohen’s songwriting style and musicianship while Ujjwal Kr. Panda uses postmodern humanistic geography to map *and* un-map the places and spaces in the songs of Dylan. Shobana Matthews posits Dylan as a poet of dissent and resistance. Goutam Karmakar does a commendable job untangling the complex web of psycho-social layering in the absurd positions in Cohen with reference primarily to his poems. Amlan Baisya and Dibyakusum Ray’s essay deals with the impression and influence Dylan had on Kabir Suman, the so-called Dylan of Bengal. . Shrabani Basu looks at the pre-1965 Newport Folk Festival Dylan and traces the evolution of his songs and poems. Debanjali Roy and Tanmoy Putatunda paint a chameleon-*esque* Dylan who continually redefines his positions. All said and done, this clutch of essays touch just the tip of the iceberg in the Cohen and/or Dylan critical cargo; and I have a distinct feeling that more will be written on them as we grapple with the idea of the ‘poem-song hyphenation’, something that had already been thrust upon the world over a century back by the gentleman in whose educational institution I teach: Rabindranath Tagore.

Notes

¹ Released by Virgin after being fired from two record labels and banned from performing live in most parts of the UK, the album content – especially the word ‘bollocks’ gave rise to a massive controversy unparalleled in British music industry. Iconic music magazine *Rolling Stone* had this to say about the album

in 1978 through the words of music industry A&R (artist and repertoire) executive and music reviewer Paul Nelson: “Musically, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here’s the Sex Pistols* is just about the most exciting rock & roll record of the Seventies. It’s all speed, not nuance – drums like the Mai Lai massacre, bass throbbing like a diseased heart fifty beats past breaking point, guitars wielded by Jack the Ripper – and the songs all hit like amphetamines or the plague, depending on your point of view.”

<http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/never-mind-the-bollocks-heres-the-sex-pistols-19780223>

² *Are You Experienced* and *Axis: Bold As Love* (both in 1967) and *Electric Ladyland* (1968) were studio albums on the Reprise label. His live album *Band of Gypsies* (1970) was released by Capitol and he also featured in the *Woodstock: Music from the Original Soundtrack and More* (Cotillon, 1970) album but was among seventeen artists on the album; his *Smash Hits* (Reprise, 1968) was a compilation album.

³ See Ira B. Nadel, *Various Positions: A life Of Leonard Cohen*, (New York: Random House, 1996), reprint 2010.

⁴ Released in 1965 by Columbia.

⁵ Published by McClelland & Stewart from Random House in Toronto in 1964.

⁶ See *The New Yorker*, October 17, 2016; <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/leonard-cohen-makes-it-darker>

⁷ From the album *Grace*, released by Columbia in 1994; this was Buckley’s only album before he died tragically drowned while swimming fully clothed in the Mississippi river in May 1997.

⁸ From the live album *Hope For Haiti* released by MTV in 2010 as a response to the earthquake in Haiti. Timberlake was accompanied by Matt Morris and the guitarist-singer Charlie Sexton.

⁹ At the Forum de Montréal on July 8 1988.

¹⁰ Not to be confused with his son John P. Hammond the blues singer-guitarist; in order to distinguish him from his father he is often referred to as John Hammond Jr. John Hammond (senior) is credited with having discovered names like Bruce Springsteen, Billy Holiday, Count Basie, Pete Seeger, George Benson, Stevie Ray Vaughan and for single-handedly reviving the music of the now-legendary delta-blues singer Robert Johnson.

¹¹ The ‘audience of dignitaries in Spain’ refers to the gathering at The Prince of Asturias Award in Oviedo, Spain, on October 21, 2011; the reference is from the speech by Cohen while accepting the award. See <http://cohencentric.com/leonard-cohen-the-prince-of-asturias-awards-speech-with-annotations-commentary/>

¹² See <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/2016/10/13/bob-dylan-first-ever-to-win-grammy-an-oscar-and-the-nobel-prize-academy-award-nomination-knocking-on-heavens-door>

¹³ Artists for the album/concert include George Harrison (vocals, guitar), Ravi Shankar (sitar), Bob Dylan (vocals, guitar, harmonica), Leon Russell (vocals, piano, bass), Ringo Starr (drums, vocals), Billy Preston (hammond organ, vocals), Eric Clapton (electric guitar), Ali Akbar Khan (sarod), Alla Rakha (tabla) and Kamala Chakravarty (tanpura/tambura).

¹⁴ Guest vocalists on the album include Cohen, Tina Turner, Norah Jones, Corinne Bailey Rae, Luciana Souza and Joni Mitchell.

¹⁵ Nobel Prize laureates in Literature in 2015, 2012, 2011 and 2008; from Belarus, China, Sweden and France.

¹⁶ See *The 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration*. New York: Columbia. 1993. CD.

¹⁷ See *I’m Your Fan*. New York: Atlantic. 1991. CD

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