



Uncovering the genius and artistry of Bob Dylan’s lyrics

KEVIN BARENTS CLEARS his throat and reads from the ninth stanza of Bob Dylan’s “Idiot Wind,” off the 1975 album *Blood on the Tracks*. “Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull.” Barents pauses and leans back in his chair.

“‘Idiot wind,’ I claim, is a separate line, so if you look at it this way, this is perfect iambic pentameter, and it’s got trochaic substitutions in the first three feet, which means instead of unstressed stressed, it’s stressed unstressed,” the College of Arts & Sciences lecturer says. “Having those trochees in the beginning creates a more forceful approach to the line, almost like the gale it’s describing.”

It’s this sort of treatment of Dylan’s catalog that Bar-

ents encourages in his freshman writing seminar Bob Dylan’s *Lyrics*. Barents’s idea is to teach undergrads the mechanics and artistry of good poetry and writing (not to mention rock criticism) by marrying the curriculum to one of songwriting’s most engaging and prolific practitioners. His students start the semester discussing the definitions of poetry and song and debating whether Dylan’s words, isolated from the music, are worthy of comparison to some of the best poetry in the English language.

“As usual, Dylan himself is of no help in answering this,” Barents says. “At one moment, he says it’s all about the words: ‘I’m a poet.

I live like a poet, I’ll die like a poet.’ Then later he’ll say, ‘I’m a song-and-dance man. It’s about the music, not the words.’”

Lee Feiner (COM’12) flips open the course’s main textbook, *Bob Dylan Lyrics, 1962–2001*, stops on the 1962 song “Rambling, Gambling Willie,” and recites a few lines. “It’s so well thought out,” he says. “He shows poetic instinct that you’re not going to find in a lot of poetry, that you just can’t teach. To deny him the title of poet is just not fair.”

Feiner says that when he saw in the course description that they would dissect Dylan’s lyrics through the seminal *Blood on the Tracks*, he jumped at the chance. “Because of the way poetry was presented to me in high school, I have never been in love with it,” he says. “I figured there is no better way to enjoy poetry and writing than through an artist I’ve grown up listening to.”

The course also uses *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*, by

that Dylan — who recently released his fourteenth compilation album, *Tell Tale Signs: Bootleg Series Vol. 8*, adding to thirty-two studio albums and thirteen live releases — has plenty to teach aspiring writers and critics. “The words of the lyrics are very, very good,” he says, “and it would be good for students to think about the ways in which an artist comes up with words that are at once surprising and just.”

In the same stanza of “Idiot Wind,” Barents notes, the late poet Allen Ginsberg once singled out Dylan’s rhyming of “skull” and “capitol” for special praise. “Not only does it sound good, but there’s a correlation between those two things,” Barents says. “It’s suggestive in terms of government and brains, the shapes of the building and the skull, the whiteness. Good rhymes force us to pay attention to the connection between words.”

In the end, Barents wants to hear his literary charges discuss not only imagery and metaphor in Dylan songs, but poetic elements such

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literary critic Christopher Ricks, BU’s William M. and Sara B. Warren Professor of the Humanities. Barents describes the book as “a 500-page explication of Dylan’s songs that treats them every bit as seriously as an explication of Milton or Blake.” In fact, it was the elevation of Dylan’s academic credibility by Ricks that prompted Barents to propose the course in the first place. Ricks agrees

as synecdoche, synesthesia, and metonymy, and how each contributes to the whole. “I’m not sure how many of my students will be pursuing poetry in the future,” Barents says. “But a lot of them will be taking literature courses here at BU, and I hope this will make them more prepared and more articulate when they get to Tennyson or Byron and people like that.”

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