

Challenging Ideas and Scientific Curiosity *Tangled Up in Bob Dylan*

Papers of panel at the Dylan 80 Virtual Conference, The Bob Dylan Institute, Tulsa University

Klaus Petersen

Professor of History and Welfare Studies, Chair of Danish Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS), University of Southern Denmark, klaus.petersen@sdu.dk

✉

Anne-Marie Mai

Professor of Nordic Literature, Chair of DIAS, University of Southern Denmark, ammai@sdu.dk

Introduction

Bob Dylan has turned 80, still active and still the subject of controversy. People love both to hate and to love the old songwriter, musician, and Nobel Prize winner. He is one of the world's biggest celebrities, a riddle who prefers to surprise rather than to live up to the expectations of the audience or the media.

Research in Bob Dylan's oeuvre is a rapidly growing field, where you easily become a nerd, studying amazing Dylan-details from the time when great-grandmother was young. His songs have long since become classics in the songbooks of the world, but have we grasped the challenges he has presented not only to the audience but also to society and to research?

Musicology, literary studies, art history and cultural studies have contributed to an academic understanding of Bob Dylan's songs and artwork with complex analysis and learned discussions. But beyond this, scholars from different fields also discuss how Bob Dylan's songs and artwork have been an inspiration to their work in other fields than the Bob Dylan-studies. They often use Bob Dylan's songs and artwork to relax, get inspiration, but also to explore existential dimensions of their work and thinking. A 2015-study found that Bob Dylan was quoted or paraphrased in 213 articles in biomedical journals. One example being a review article entitled "Like a rolling histone: Epigenetic regulation of neural stem cells and brain development by factors controlling histone acetylation and methylation". The idea of this collection of essays is to show the inspiration that scholars from different fields have found in Bob Dylan's art. The following essays are written for the Dylan@80 Conference, organized by Bob Dylan Institute, Tulsa University, May 21.-24. 2021. Anne-Marie Mai organized the panel, Tangled Up in Bob Dylan. It was very interesting to learn that other researchers were interested in the discussions of the panel and that other papers corresponded with our ideas. For instance, the American historian, professor, Sean Wilentz, Princeton University, was one of the keynote speakers of the conference with the paper, "Bob Dylan, Historian", where he discussed how Dylan has influence his understanding of American history. Professor Wilentz would have appreciated publishing his paper in our collection, but it has already been published by The New York Review (June 19, 2021).

The essays and the panel are also the first step of a project at Danish Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Southern Denmark (DIAS), developing new interdisciplinary approaches. The

scholars of DIAS come from all faculties and want to stimulate scientific curiosity and cooperation. DIAS wants to initiate an ongoing discussion on interdisciplinarity through workshops on ‘out-of-the-box-thinking’ including the important links between arts, humanities, social and natural science.

The *Tangled Up in Bob Dylan* Panel (and essays) is an initiative to create a new dialogue and promote interdisciplinary discussions. Since antiquity art and science have been closely intertwined. In ancient Greece one and the same word was used for art and technical sciences (techne) and music was conceived of essentially in terms of mathematical relationships. Modernity is no exception. Suffice it to think of the friendship between H.C. Ørsted and H.C. Andersen shortly before the ‘modern breakthrough’ in Denmark, or of the work done by physicist Lene Hau and Olafur Eliasson with light, or else of the cooperation between author and visual artist Amalie Smith and the British 19th Century mathematician Ada Lovelace. It is no coincidence that historians have not rarely turned into novelists, or, conversely, that podcasters and docu- and drama filmmakers often rely on heavy historical research. On the other hands, great economists, such as Thomas Piketty, do not refrain from using fictional novelistic material as reference in their work. Bob Dylan himself has emphasized that his songs are mathematical.

Over the last decades, cross-disciplinarity has become a key concept at universities and research funding agencies. Cross-disciplinarity can take many different forms: dialogue and discussions across established disciplines, borrowing theories and methods from one discipline into another, or cross-disciplinary team’s cooperation on solving specific academic puzzles. All of these are important, however as many scholars have experienced ‘real’ interdisciplinary cooperation is often hard to archive. There are several reasons for this. One of them is that disciplines are built on different identities and visions on science. This was laid out in C.P. Snow’s famous essay (1959) on the “two cultures” in academia as well as in biologist Stephen Jay Gould’s posthumous essay “The Hedgehog, the Fox and the Magister’s Pox: Mending the Gap Between Science and the Humanities” (2003). There are significant translation costs as different disciplines are dependent on different concepts and speak different languages. The classical divide between quantitative research (the language of mathematics) and qualitative research (the language of letters) are one prominent example. As society’s’ call for interdisciplinarity have increased, the interest in understanding the practical challenges of interdisciplinary cooperation have developed including very interesting work such as the anthology, *Evaluating Interdisciplinary Research: a practical guide* (2015), edited by physicist Tom Mcleish and the anthropologist Veronica Strang.

The following essays contribute to our discussion on inspirations between research, art and inspiration between artists and will be followed by more workshops on challenging ideas and scientific curiosity at DIAS.

Presentation of the Panelists:



Professor Christian Graugaard, Department of Clinical Medicine, Aalborg University.

Christian Graugaard is a medical doctor and has specialized in sexology and sexual health. He has (co-)authored numerous articles, book chapters and monographs, i.e. the first comprehensive textbook of sexology in Danish. In 2017, he co-initiated the world's largest cohort study on sexual health among 15-89-year-old Danes (www.projektsexus.dk). He is editor-in-chief of the oldest, still-existing medical journal, *Bibliotek for Læger* (*Library for Physicians*), which currently deals with the humanistic aspects of medicine and health. He has also published collections of his own poems.



Professor Pieter Vanhuyse a professor of Welfare Studies and Public Policy, University of Southern Denmark, specializing in population dynamics.

Pieter Vanhuyse is a chair of Danish Institute for Advanced Studies. He has (co-)authored over 40 publications and over 50 chapters, policy briefs and research reports on political sociology and public policy. He has co-edited *Global Political Demography* (2021). He has taught Master program courses on topics as Aging, Generations and Social Policy And Economic Principles and Politics. Pieter Vanhuyse has an impressive knowledge on Dylan's songs and has followed Dylan's work for many years.

Professor Richard F. Thomas is George Martin Lane Professor of the Classics, Harvard University, and a world expert on classical poetry.

Richard F. Thomas has published articles and reviews on Hellenistic Greek poetry, on Roman poetry, particularly of the Republican and Augustan periods, on Tacitus, on the reception of Classical literature, and on the lyrics of Bob Dylan. His great monograph, *Why Bob Dylan Matters* (2017) shows how deeply Dylan is inspired by the poetry of the classics and why he can be compared to the classical poets.

Professor Thomas' paper was based on the essay "And I crossed the Rubicon." The paper has already been published: <https://thedylanreview.org/2020/06/12/and-i-crossed-the-rubicon-another-classical-dylan/> *The Dylan Review*, vol. 2.1, Summer 2020.



Professor Anne-Marie Mai is a professor of literature, University of Southern Denmark, and a chair of DIAS.

Anne-Marie Mai has published the monograph, *Bob Dylan. The Poet* (2018). She has specialized in literary historiography and contemporary literature. She has published more than 150 articles, book chapters and monographs. She nominated Bob Dylan for the Nobel

Prize that he won 2016, and has published books and anthologies on Dylan. She has edited the anthology *New Approaches to Bob Dylan* (University Press of Southern Denmark, 2019).



The artist **Michael Falch**. Michael Falch is a famous Danish musician, songwriter, author, and actor. He released his first album 1980 with his band, Malurt (“Wormwood”). He has recorded more than 30 albums, published essays and memoirs, and he has received several awards as a musician and an actor. His latest album is *Forår i brystet* (*Spring in the lungs*) from 2020.

References

Bibliotek for læger, <https://ugeskriftet.dk/bf>

Goerres, A. & P. Vanhuysse (eds.) 2021. *Global Political Demography. The Politics of Population Change*. UK:Palgrave Macmillan.

Gornitzki, C., A. Larsson & B. Fadeel. 2015. Freewheelin’ scientists: citing Bob Dylan in the biomedical literature. *BMJ* 351:h6505. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h6505>

Gould, S.J. 2003. *The Hedgehog, the Fox, and the Magister's Pox*. US:Harmony Books.

Graugaard, C. et al.(eds.) 2019. *Sexologi: Faglige perspektiver på seksualitet*. Copenhagen: Munksgaard.

Lamont, M. 2009. *How Professors Think. Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgement*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

Lija, T., N. Heldring & O. Hermanson. 2013. Like a rolling histone: Epigenetic regulation of neural stem cells and brain development by factors controlling histone acetylation and methylation. *Biochimica et Biophysica Acta (BBA) - General Subjects* 1830(2), 2354-2360.

Mai, A-M. 2018. *Bob Dylan. The Poet*. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark.

Mai, A-M. (ed.) 2019. *New Approaches to Bob Dylan*. Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark.

Mcleish, T. & V. Strange. 2015. *Evaluating Interdisciplinary Research: a Practical Guide*. UK: Durham University Press.

- Michaels, S. 2014. Scientists sneak Bob Dylan lyrics into articles as part of long-running bet. *The Guardian*, 29 September. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/sep/29/swedish-scientists-bet-bob-dylan-lyrics-research-papers>
- Thomas, R.F. 2017. *Why Bob Dylan Matters*. US: Harper & Collins.
- Thomas, R.F. 2020. "And I crossed the Rubicon". *The Dylan Review* 2:1, Summer 2020.
<https://thedylanreview.org/2020/06/12/and-i-crossed-the-rubicon-another-classical-dylan/>
- Wilentz, S. 2021. Bob Dylan, Historian. *The New York Review*, June 19.