

BOB DYLAN'S 1965 NEWPORT PERFORMANCE: DEFYING THE SECULARNESS OF THE FOLK MUSIC REVIVAL BY GOING ELECTRIC

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Introduction

It was July 25, 1965, when Bob Dylan, a highly influential singer-songwriter, took the stage at the iconic Newport Folk Festival. In his performance of “Maggie’s Farm,” “Like a Rolling Stone,” and “It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry,” Dylan used electric instruments and performed with a rock band backing him. In my research, I show how Dylan’s act of going “electric” defied the expectations of the festival’s attendees and challenged the “religious space” of the Newport Folk Festival.



The Lense

I looked at this performance through the lens of Kathryn Lofton, arguing that Dylan’s performance acted as a secularizing event—one that moved the audience away from the nostalgic past of what folk music in the 1960s was considered to be, namely acoustic, and into a “prophetic future.” The accounts that she examines use keywords with religious language such as “Judas,” “followers,” and “resurrection.” When Dylan added electric instruments to this sacred space, he secularized it.

Audience’s Reaction

Dylan described his Newport performance in a 1965 San Francisco interview with KQED Studios. He said, “Well, I did this very crazy thing. I didn’t know what was going to happen, but they certainly booed, I’ll tell you that. You could hear it all over the place.” The audience’s negative reaction to his electric set shows that they believed bringing electric instruments into the festival was blasphemous to their “religious space.”

Newport as a Religious Spce

While what qualifies something as a religion differs, since there is no clear definition of religion due to its complex nature, there are a few characteristics that a majority of religions have. Émile Durkheim defined religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” The unified system of beliefs in which the folk revival followers believed were “authenticity,” which they defined as music coming from ordinary people who were emotionally genuine. Other values include anti-commercialism and modernization, political activism, and preservation of tradition through the use of an acoustic sound. All of these values brought this community together in Newport as people who enjoyed listening to 1960s folk music. Newport acted as a religious space because it was a gathering place for which “followers” of the folk music revival came to “worship.” This worshipping is shown through people traveling across the country to be present at this festival to listen to the music that represents the values that they believe to be sacred, especially the music being played having an acoustic sound. Durkheim says that a religious space is one that is set apart from ordinary space, reinforces community, and is associated with rituals. All of these characteristics apply to Newport; the rituals value is where the songs are being performed since the songs embody the values of the attendees. When Dylan played his electric set, he broke through the sacredness and defied their values which they hold dear, which further explains their adverse reaction to his electric set.



After The Event

After this event took place, it became an instrumental part of rock music history by what most people consider to be the catalyst for the birth of “folk rock.” In his 1965 San Francisco interview, when asked if he would continue to play folk rock music or if he would go more into writing, Dylan said, “I don’t play folk-rock... I like to think of it more in terms of vision music—it’s mathematical music.” After this performance, Dylan embraced the electric sound and released his album called Highway 61 Revisited. This event was so important to music history as it showed a shift from a traditional 1960s folk past into a more modern future.

Reflection

This concept of a fandom evangelizing music is not a foreign concept, as it is still happening in present times. For example, take the fan bases of Taylor Swift or Harry Styles. Fans idolize these artists and travel great distances to see them in concert. Could these fandoms also be considered “religious”?

Key Sources & Acknowledgements