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Introduction

BOB DYLAN,
A SELF-HELP
GURU?

Y ou bet.

Since Dylan burst onto the music scene in 1961, critics, pundits, and fans alike have celebrated his remarkable skills as a songwriter, poet, vocalist, and performer of folk and rock 'n' roll music. Although I agree with this assessment, I also believe that it doesn't quite do the man justice. He represents so much more to me than an entertainer.

That's why I wanted to write this book. I think Dylan can teach people life lessons based on his mysterious genius. He stands for longevity, the quality that we all hope to achieve in our careers. Can you think of anybody

in your field who has thrived for fifty-plus years and still appears to be going strong? Consider that Dylan completed work in March 2012 on his thirty-fifth studio album.

What's most impressive about Dylan's legacy is that he has accomplished everything on his own terms. If anything, Dylan's closely held principles probably held him back at various times, such as when this twenty-one-year-old walked off *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the most popular television program of the day, because the producers wouldn't let him sing the song he had chosen for his big night. Dylan could have benefited enormously from the supersonic push from an appearance on *Ed Sullivan*. But he refused to betray his ideals.

Throughout his five-decade career, he has demonstrated time and again that he will do what he wants, and commercial incentives won't sway him off course. It's not always easy to stick to your beliefs when the promise of something great exists. I don't know how many of us would refuse to make compromises the way Dylan did.

No, we can't learn from Dylan how to write an

anthem like “Blowin’ in the Wind” or sing a classic such as “Like a Rolling Stone.” My purpose is to go beyond the songs and try to understand how Dylan has been able to remain in our collective consciousness for all of these years.

How long has Dylan been in our lives? Remember, he arrived in Greenwich Village from his native Midwest the same week that John F. Kennedy was sworn in as the nation’s thirty-fifth president.

I view Dylan through a prism other than music. I consider his lifetime of success and hold him up as a role model. Indeed, Dylan inspires people. We have seen presidents, corporate titans, movie stars, athletes, and philanthropists embraced as self-help icons because they supply wisdom and give hope to their supporters. They have a great deal to offer. I put Dylan in the company of these other high achievers because we can all learn so much from studying his example of success.

Think about it. Not many people in any field can match his staying power. His ability to endure in the entertainment industry, in particular, for five decades astounds me. Dylan has thrived in the most public of

professions. He has not been perfect, God knows. He has made some foolish moves, and sometimes he didn't respond automatically to the changes swirling around him. And by insisting on doing things his way all the time, he has appeared to the public to be stubborn and aloof. But after every disappointment and apparent defeat, Dylan has managed to pull himself up off the canvas.

I can respect his grit and tenacity as much as his proclivity for writing and singing "Blowin' in the Wind," "The Times They Are a-Changin'," "Mr. Tambourine Man," "Like a Rolling Stone," "The Man in Me," "Tangled Up in Blue," "Every Grain of Sand," "Jokerman," "Not Dark Yet," "Things Have Changed," "Mississippi," "Working Man's Blues #2," and so many other gems from his back pages.

I don't intend to write strictly about Dylan's musical triumphs. Studying his life, I see him in a bigger picture. Yes, Dylan possesses special talents. But his natural ability alone is not what has enabled him to remain so relevant and vital for such a long period of time.

What has kept him in the game is his perseverance, his work ethic, his passion for doing the work, his com-

petitiveness, and his ability to convert defeats into victories. These are also the hallmarks of any successful individual in sports or business or politics or the arts. In other words, Dylan can serve somebody as a role model in any walk of life. You don't have to be a musical peer of his—though he has influenced scores of songwriters and singers—to see his value and learn from his example.

I'm not a musician, and Bob Dylan has meant a lot to me over the years. I appreciate his versatility and marvel at his endurance and his sense of vision as a folkie, a pop star, a country crooner, a gospel singer, and a bluesman.

As a journalist who tries to make sense out of the world, I can also recognize a person who has an extraordinary commitment to what he is doing. Dylan is a millionaire many times over, but he isn't all about making money. He is that rarity who lives his life on his own terms, not those of his employers. That kind of success alone is as admirable as any of his musical accomplishments.

Dylan has long demonstrated resilience. He has found the strength of purpose to mount comebacks and prove to skeptics that he can bend with the changing times. He proved his mettle after falling into a steep decline

throughout the 1980s. By his own admission in *Chronicles: Volume One*, his engrossing 2004 memoir, Dylan had lost his muse. Further, he seemed to be out of step with the video-crazed music industry and the “Morning in America”-oriented United States.

But tellingly, he set out to show the public that he still belonged. His strategy of nonstop touring around the world, for example, worked brilliantly. His decision to launch what the media came to call the Never Ending Tour confirmed Dylan’s innate business acumen, as he methodically tapped a new and fertile market. New fans discovered him and reveled in the same qualities that a previous generation of followers had appreciated.

The idea for this book grew out of a reliable source: Dylan himself. In *Chronicles*, Dylan wrote extensively about what critics and fans have written off as his fallow period, the 1980s. Dylan himself doesn’t shy away from the outside criticism and actually proves to be his own harshest critic in the book.

To see Dylan today, it’s hard to imagine that he went through a decade-long slump. He is riding high now. His albums sell well, and he has the clout, and the chops, to

play about one hundred shows a year around the world. He is beloved by a generation of fans that wasn't even born yet when, in the mid-1970s, he was polishing off *Blood on the Tracks*, often hailed as his best album.

Dylan explained in *Chronicles* that he set out on the Never Ending Tour on a deliberate and thoughtful course of action to regain his relevance in our lives. This idea intrigued me—that this brilliant musician had the wherewithal to craft such an ambitious and ultimately successful strategy for his comeback. It's the kind of case study you might find at a graduate school of business: "Reviving a Damaged Brand and Making It Highly Relevant Once Again."

A few words now about the title of this book: *Forget About Today* is a phrase from Dylan's gem "Mr. Tambourine Man" (which not so coincidentally is my favorite Dylan song). It represents a concept that he has lived, and it stands as the cornerstone of his longevity.

He has proven the value of forging ahead and not letting success or failure overwhelm him. You will read in the ensuing chapters how Dylan has done this.

It's my hope that you will embrace the kinds of life

lessons that Dylan has carried out for himself. It's tricky for me, writing about such a powerful presence—and one who is still intent on breaking new ground at every turn, in music, art, and prose writing.

Sure, critics are bound to carp that Dylan's voice is too raspy and rough these days. Some even suggest that maybe he should leave the road for good.

If he took the time to read such stuff, he'd probably shake his head in bemusement. Maybe he'd laugh at the irony that the naysayers are saying today what short-sighted reviewers were writing fifty years ago: Bob Dylan can't sing. They didn't get it then, and they don't get it now. Dylan lives his life as an artist, not as a crowd pleaser, and yet he is getting the last laugh on all his detractors. Dylan continues to do whatever he wants. That lesson in itself is a pretty powerful one, too.

In case you were wondering, Dylan did not talk with me for this project. When I initially requested time with him, I was asked to submit a formal interview request by email and did so. Through his highly professional and compassionate representative, Dylan politely declined the invitation to talk. I couldn't feel too badly about the

rejection. Dylan seldom grants interviews to authors and usually speaks publicly only when it serves his needs, such as upon the release of a new album. This is not exactly shocking. Most entertainment people have the same game plan because they feel they don't need the publicity. Besides, public figures protect their privacy by nature, and they're wary of the motivations of reporters.

Nor did I seek Bob Dylan's approval to write this book. The opinions expressed on these pages are all mine, though I conducted hundreds of interviews with musicians, journalists, corporate executives, and friends who have followed Dylan's utterances for most of their lives.

Primarily, I don't want to present to the world yet another Dylan biography. Likewise, my mission is not to reveal the identity of "Mr. Jones" by offering the millionth speculative theory on the subject. I prefer to keep the parlor games in the parlor.

It was my hope to write something more thoughtful and original here. Dylan has inspired me, and my guess is that he has inspired you as well.

One

KEEP ON
KEEPIN' ON

A hallmark of Bob Dylan's success can be summarized best as "keep on keepin' on." Not only is this one of Dylan's most memorable set of lyrics, from his evocative song "Tangled Up in Blue," but it also underscores a long-held philosophy of his, not to mention an essential reason for his longevity over the past half century.

Throughout his career, Dylan has made action his mantra. He challenges himself to forge ahead, no matter what. In good and bad times, he does what needs to be done. Though this may seem like an obvious point, too many of us fall into the trap of merely *wishing* for

something better without actually doing anything about it. It is far easier to talk than to act, which is why most dreams and plans fizzle before they can even begin.

This chapter focuses on an undervalued aspect of Dylan's success, one that anyone can benefit from. You don't have to be necessarily talented or gifted. No special skill is required, either. You don't even have to be 100 percent on the right track all the time. You just have to be *committed* to following through on your plans, getting things done, and moving ahead.

Success Is a Verb

A perfect example of Dylan's commitment was on display on the night of March 25, 2001, when he won the Academy Award for Best Original Song in recognition of his theme to *Wonder Boys*, "Things Have Changed." *Wonder Boys* was a smart film about a middle-aged man chasing the glory of his youthful triumphs. When presenter Jennifer Lopez announced Dylan's name, the hall

exploded into a round of loud and sustained applause. The folks watching on television could even hear a fan in the crowd yell out triumphantly, “Who!”

Even if Lopez hadn't referred to the winning song as “mirroring the ongoing career of Bob Dylan,” the parallels wouldn't have been lost on the Hollywood audience. The entertainment industry's stock-in-trade was just the kind of rise-fall-and-rise-again saga that marked Dylan's annals. As the film's director Curtis Hanson pointed out in one of the bonus features on the *Wonder Boys* DVD, “Who knows more about being a wonder boy and the trap it can be, about the expectations and the fear of repeating yourself?”

Who, indeed? Dylan, who earned acclaim at the precocious age of twenty-one only to fall later into near oblivion, had just proven he was back on top again. It was a wonderfully poignant moment.

As the triumphant Dylan gushed, “Oh, good God—this is amazing!” to the Academy Award show's television audience, he demonstrated the very quality that set him apart from everyone else and enabled him to persevere where others had failed. Of course, a star of his

stature could have rearranged his touring schedule to receive his award in person. He could have stayed in Los Angeles and gone to the show-biz parties, where he would have been treated like royalty. But he chose to remain on tour, in Australia, and accept his honor via satellite while standing on, appropriately enough, a concert stage. Keep on keepin' on, indeed.

More than anyone among his peers, Dylan is committed to *doing* what a working musician does. Sure, he enjoys the perks of the job, the recognition, the validation, and the admiration of the fans. But he knows those are sideshows. Accolades, by definition, point to the past. "Nostalgia is death," as Dylan once bluntly put it in an interview with journalist Robert Hilburn of the *Los Angeles Times* at around the time he turned fifty years old.

Yes, we all need a pat on the back now and then. But nobody should confuse a sense of past accomplishment with actual new accomplishment. To move forward, Dylan knew he couldn't simply coast on the static coat-tails of the past. As Dylan pointed out in his memoir, "It's nice to be known as a legend, and people will pay to

see one, but for most people, once is enough.” He knows that continued success comes from challenging yourself day in and day out, again and again.

Greatness Through Repetition

Dylan, for all of his superstardom, doesn't shy away from the nitty-gritty of what a devoted musician does—that is, composing, rehearsing, touring, and performing in concert halls around the world.

How, we ask, can the man draw a sense of satisfaction from playing a hundred shows a year around the world without feeling as though it is all an utter grind, what with the constant traveling, rehearsing, and rigors of performing every night? And how the heck can he perform “Like a Rolling Stone” or “All Along the Watchtower” at virtually every gig without feeling bored by the sheer repetition of the task?

Seeking an answer to these mysteries, I asked no less of a Bob Dylan authority than Robbie Robertson. The

leader of the Band and a brilliant songwriter in his own right, Robertson started playing lead guitar with Dylan in 1965 and continued to be his bandleader for much of the time through 1974. He had a succinct and indisputable answer.

“It’s the thrill of discovery that keeps Bob going,” Robertson said.

Rather than regarding repetition as drudgery, Dylan revels in putting himself out there and honing his craft. Sometimes he’s on fire; sometimes he seems lackadaisical. That’s not the point. Night after night, he’s proving himself all over again, rediscovering the beauty and power of his songs as well as the value of his craft. And so are his audiences. He has created a whole new art form out of performing.

Dylan’s ability to focus on the controllable aspects of the moment is a critical trait. The process of trial and error can yield unexpected breakthroughs and inspiration that comes only from persistent action.

Dylan personified this point in the early 1990s, after the release of the poorly received album *Under the Red Sky*. Weary and out of inspiration, he challenged himself

to stay productive even if it meant recording songs in the privacy of his garage, not some glamorous recording studio, complete with his dog barking in the background. (That scenario actually occurred when he recorded a demo of what would quickly be regarded as one of his most iconic songs, “Every Grain of Sand.”)

Alone in his home studio, he tinkered without feeling the pressure of having to produce a blockbuster album. Dylan started recording some of the old folk songs. Once, he had played the tunes as an upstart teenager in Greenwich Village. Three decades later, the material had greater meaning for him, now that he was armed with the wisdom of a fifty-something-year-old man. The result was two modest but important albums: *Good As I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*. Though neither would prove to be big commercial hits, the two works inspired Dylan to eventually write the songs that would wind up on his next album, 1997’s Grammy-winning *Time Out of Mind*. That was a special achievement in its own right, but I would argue that it would not have been possible without his tinkering on the earlier two albums. Dylan rediscovered his muse, his voice, and his sense of

purpose. Some would insist that he had taken a step back by retreating to his garage, but the larger point is that he kept working all the time.

Anyone looking for breakthroughs, whether it's in sports, a new career, or any long-held dream, could learn from Dylan's approach. He went back to the basics and found inspiration. This approach contains a universal application, too. Salespeople, for instance, know this lesson well. At some point, it's a numbers game. You have to knock on so many doors to be successful.

Next time you feel in a rut or discouraged by lack of progress toward a goal, pay attention to the amount of effort you are putting into it. For example, say you're doing fifty sit-ups without the result you want; it may just mean you need to do seventy-five or a hundred. When you come to this realization, you can steel yourself and say, "I can do this." I submit that what we see on the outside as good fortune or extraordinary talent is, more likely than not, the result of persistent action in disguise.

Once, when a journalist asked Dylan to discuss his philosophy for his career, he responded by asking the reporter if he could tell him what a bricklayer's philosophy

was. The reporter probably went back to the newsroom and told his editor that Dylan had been putting him on, as he is puckishly wont to do with the media. But Dylan's reply makes perfect sense when you tie it into his value system. The man sees himself as a craftsman, who knows that true mastery of his craft can come only from doing something again and again.

You Don't Rob the Same Bank Twice

Don't confuse genuine productivity for mindless action. Doing the same thing and expecting a different result, as the saying goes, is the definition of insanity. This is not what Dylan advocates for himself.

Everything he does is infused with a sense of intention and innovation. In the late-1980s, for example, after countless tours of the biggest arenas, Dylan told his management he was shaking things up. Dylan said he

was going to visit places where he'd never played. He wanted to go to small halls and college campuses—and by the way, he was going to visit those same places again and again, year after year.

Naturally, his skeptical team objected. After all, the conventional wisdom of show business ordained that this was not what a big-time star was supposed to do. Elliot Roberts, who was arranging Dylan's tours at the time, told the star, "You're Jesse James. You don't rob the same bank twice."

Dylan knew instinctively that Roberts was wrong. He knew better because he was the guy who went up on stage and put himself on the line. He, not his advisors watching from the wings, could see the looks on the faces of the audience members. Dylan knew when he was moving them—and, more importantly, when he wasn't turning them on.

How long, he began to fret, could he get the same fans to pay top dollar to see him play the same hits in soulless hockey arenas? Dylan knew that by playing smaller venues in the same cities time after time, and by pricing those tickets more reasonably, the coveted

young fans would get used to returning to see him perform.

No, these would not be the kind of big-payday shows that his peers were getting rich from. Dylan sensed, though, that those kinds of audiences were already dwindling. He knew he needed to do it differently even if none of the so-called experts thought so.

Successful people believe in themselves. They trust their instincts; they know that they can do it. Half the battle is in our minds. If we are determined and believe we can succeed, we are more than halfway to achieving our goal.

The opposite of confidence is fear and self-doubt. We are afraid of failure, but fear mostly exists in our minds. Instead of becoming overwhelmed with fear, why not focus on attaining success instead?

Dylan's fans didn't always know what they wanted from him, but the man himself possessed the confidence to know what *he* wanted. He could not have known the outcome, but he had the faith to bet on himself and his instincts. He set out to build a new base by doing what he knew how to do best: perform.

In this case, he was right on the mark. Because he covers so much territory, both geographically and musically, audiences have gotten to know his songs, embracing the live performances as well as the studio recordings of his entire catalog. He has attracted legions of new fans as a result.

How do you know if you're on the right track? You don't. You can't always know. But the trick is to push yourself. You can always do more and do it better. Little by little, your confidence will build, but it can only grow through the act of doing.

A Series of Small Steps

If you are working toward a big goal or dream, the task can seem insurmountable. You may not know where to start, and in view of the mountain of tasks ahead, it's tempting to procrastinate or simply give up before you really get started.

In this respect, we are all the same. And yet, if you

wonder how people achieve big things—where they find the energy, time, and stamina for it—the answer is often simple. They just do it.

The trick is to take one step at a time. Remember, if you don't start, it will never happen at all. What is the very first baby step in the direction of your goal? Just focus on your first step, and when that one is done, focus on the next one, but only that one; don't look too far ahead and get disheartened or overwhelmed. You just need to take the plunge.

Action has always been a hallmark of Dylan's career. At the age of nineteen, he dropped out of the University of Minnesota midway through his sophomore year and moved to Greenwich Village in January 1961 in his quest to make his mark as a folksinger.

“Going to New York was like going to the moon,” Dylan told Cameron Crowe in one of his most comprehensive and revealing interviews ever, published as part of the retrospective musical collection *Biograph* in 1985. “You just didn't get on a plane and go there, you know. New York! Ed Sullivan, the New York Yankees, Broadway, Harlem . . . you might as well have been talking

about China. It was some place where not many people had ever gone, and anybody who did go never came back.”

Dylan’s decision to drop out of school took a lot of guts. As an undergraduate at the largest university in his home state, Dylan had all the security that a Minnesota teenager could have hoped for in President Dwight Eisenhower’s America. But by then Dylan had clearly developed the self-reliance required for such a life-altering gambit. He knew he had to take a bold step. He was gambling on his ability and determination—and, in the parlance of Las Vegas, he was all in.

Doing Begets Opportunity

The smallest of actions, even the ones that seem trivial and insignificant, can lead to success. Sometimes opportunity presents itself only while you are in the act of doing something else. Action begets opportunity.

An apt illustration of this point occurred in July 1975,

when Dylan was getting the itch to record an album of new songs. Time was on his side. The clock wasn't ticking. He no longer felt the burden of constantly coming up with new material to satisfy the demands of his record label. "That pressure is off," Dylan told radio interviewer Mary Travers in March 1975. His highly successful album *Blood on the Tracks* had just come out, and it had been received extremely well by critics and fans alike. The challenge, then, was more personal for Dylan. How could the man follow it up? Eager not to repeat himself, he determined that he needed to come up with a new kind of sound, something his audience would never expect.

With this goal in mind, he was driving in Manhattan one afternoon when he spotted a striking-looking woman walking on the sidewalk. She stood out for two reasons. She had very long black hair and was carrying a violin case. Voilà! He pulled over to the curb and struck up a friendly conversation with the musician, whom he had never before met.

Acting on a creative impulse, he invited this total stranger to accompany him to a nearby recording studio.

She agreed and so impressed Dylan with her creative style of playing that he promptly asked her to join his band. The musician turned out to be Scarlet Rivera, and her forceful violin sound became an important component on Dylan's next album, the highly successful *Desire*.

Let's face it. Most of us would have probably kept right on driving and, afraid of leaving our comfort zone or embarrassing ourselves, never dared to take such a chance. But Dylan, showing his innate knack for making his own breaks, took a shot by creating a whole new sound for himself, and it worked out rather well. *Desire* would prove to be the ideal follow-up to *Blood on the Tracks*, yet another triumph of innovation for the ever-restless and ambitious Bob Dylan.

When you focus too much on getting *there* instead of *here*, you lose the energy and passion that dwells in that moment. Yes, it takes discipline to embrace the present, but remember, the *journey* itself is the main event. When you start on a course of action, you put yourself on a road filled with surprises. If you forge ahead with only the end result in mind, you can miss important sig-

nals along the way. But if you are open and ready to act, who knows what can happen?

The Philosophy of Keep on Keepin' On

It's easy to dream and imagine a better life, but you also need to give form to your thoughts with decisive action. And that's where most of us get stuck. To create positive change, you need to take positive action.

Too many people stop short of action. We know this is a common pitfall of businesses in which the focus is on strategy and planning and not so much on execution. The same phenomenon happens to individuals. How many days and nights do you spend dreaming about what could be? Now think about it: What if you devoted the same amount of time to doing things to make it a reality? What would happen?

Without action, you could have the greatest idea and

the greatest plan in the world and you would still fail. On the other hand, a modest idea coupled with a still-incomplete plan can often produce success when accompanied by enough action.

The best part of this lesson is that anyone can apply it—this is not some innate gift. If you can see the goal and if you have an idea of where you're going as well as some semblance of how you're going to get there, then you are already ahead of most people.