

Bob Dylan and Spain's Prince of Asturias Prize for the Arts

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On 13 June 2007 Bob Dylan was awarded the Prince of Asturias Prize for the Arts (Premio Príncipe de Asturias de las Artes), an important Spanish decoration. But, many Dylan fans, or those merely curious, may ask, what exactly is this prize? For the benefit of those outside Spain who may not be aware of its exact significance, the present article offers some background information and a brief discussion of the response to the award, in the context of Dylan's (considerable) reputation in Spain. The sources drawn on are the official prize site (www.fundacionprincipedeasturias.org/esp/index.html) plus three comprehensive newspaper reports, all dated 14 June 2007 - *El País* (pp. 48-49); *El Correo de Andalucía* (pp. 38-39); and the *Diario de Sevilla* (p. 51) (my thanks to José Manuel Ruiz Rivero for kindly supplying the latter two). All translations from Spanish are my own.

Asturias is a region lying on the northern coast of Spain, with its capital at Oviedo. It is noted for steelworks, for cider, for a variant of Celtic music, and for being a focus of Christian resistance, from as early as the eighth century, to the Moorish domination of the peninsula. The Prince of Asturias is the title given to the heir apparent to the Spanish throne (currently Don Felipe de Borbón). The Fundación Príncipe de Asturias is a public foundation, set up in 1981 (thus, a manifestation of Spain's modern, post-Francoist monarchy), which awards prizes every year in each of eight fields of achievement. The prizes are officially handed to the recipients by the Prince of Asturias himself at a ceremony in the Teatro Campoamor in Oviedo. All the prizes are identical and consist of 50 000 euros plus a reproduction statuette by the late Joan Miró. The purpose of the awards is to recognise outstanding work, by individuals, working groups or institutions, Spanish or non-Spanish, in each of eight fields: Communication and Humanities, Social Sciences, Arts, Letters, Scientific and Technical Research, International Cooperation, Concord and Sport. In the earlier years the awards went only to recipients from the Spanish-speaking world, but since the mid-90s the net has been cast wider and the prizes have become fully international. Each prize is awarded by a specially designated jury, and prizes may be shared. The complete list of awardees may be inspected on the Foundation's site.

The official ceremony for the award of the eight prizes took place on 26 October 2007. Bob Dylan did not attend in person: his message, reproduced in English and in Spanish translation on the Foundation's website, read: 'Please allow me to thank the King, Prince Felipe and the people of Spain for giving me the Prince of Asturias Award. I am aware of the enormous prestige that this prize affords as well as the long list of distinguished recipients. It is truly a great honour. Unfortunately I cannot be there to receive this prize in person but I hope to return to Spain soon to show my gratitude for this award.' Among the other 2007 recipients were: former US Vice-President Al Gore (also the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize laureate; for International Cooperation), the Israeli novelist Amos Oz (Letters), Ralph Dahrendorf, former director of the London School of Economics (Social Sciences), and Avner Shalev, director of the Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem (Concord). Dylan's predecessors as awardees of the Prize for the Arts include film directors Woody Allen and Pedro Almodóvar, painter Antonio Tapiès, and, in the world of music, the flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucía, the avant-garde classical composer Krzysztof Penderecki, his more accessible colleague Joaquín Rodrigo (famous for the *Concierto de Aranjuez*), the soprano Barbara Hendricks, the concert pianist Alicia de Larrocha, and a clutch of seven opera singers including Plácido Domingo who were joint recipients in 1991. Another classical music figure, the Argentine-born pianist and conductor of Jewish origin Daniel Barenboim, received the Prize for Concord in 2002 in a joint award shared with the Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said. In the related field of the Prize for Letters, i.e. the literary prize, previous laureates include Camilo José Cela,

Gonzalo Torrente Ballester, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Paul Auster, Susan Sontag, Arthur Miller, Doris Lessing and Günter Grass.

Dylan is not the first non-classical musician to receive the Prize for the Arts (that distinction went to de Lucía in 2004), but he is, certainly, the first figure from the world of Anglo-American popular music to obtain this major Spanish honour. He was proposed by the literary critic Andrés Amorós; his candidature was appraised along with the rest by a 21-strong jury, chaired by José Lladó Fernández-Urrutia, a former minister and ambassador. Dylan won out in the face of a highly competitive list of 58 candidates including such front-runners as the Catalan culinary wizard Ferrán Adriá, the Portuguese classical pianist Maria João Pires, the American architect Frank Gehry and, for Britain and musical comedy, Andrew Lloyd-Webber. It may be noted that, despite the literary antecedents of his sponsor, Dylan was honoured as a musician, in the Arts section, not as a writer or poet (thus not in the Letters section). The prize is hence an honour awarded by Spain not only to Dylan but to the US popular music tradition as a whole: no jazz, blues or country musician had ever been distinguished in the land of flamenco as Dylan now has.

The Final Act of the jury and the official citation may be found on the Foundation's site. The Final Act declares that the Prize for the Arts is awarded to 'Robert Allen Zimmerman, Bob Dylan, mito viviente en la historia de la música popular y faro de una generación que tuvo el sueño de cambiar el mundo. Austero en las formas y profundo en los mensajes, Dylan conjuga la canción y la poesía en una obra que crea escuela y determina la educación sentimental de muchos millones de personas' ('Robert Allen Zimmerman, Bob Dylan, a living myth in the history of popular music and the beacon of a generation that had a dream to change the world. Austere in his forms and profound in his messages, Dylan combines song and poetry in a life's work that has created a school and has marked the sentimental education of millions'), concluding that his work 'es fiel reflejo del espíritu de una época que busca respuestas en el viento para los deseos que habitan en el corazón de los seres humanos' ('is a faithful reflection of the spirit of an epoch seeking answers in the wind for the yearnings that inhabit the human heart'). These words imply, beyond any doubt, recognition of Dylan not just as a figure of major importance for cultural studies, but also as a vital substantive artist in his own right. The citation offers an outline of Dylan's career, affirming: 'Pionero en la introducción de la literatura en la música popular, fusionó por vez primera los ritmos de origen europeo y afroamericanos, lo que supuso una revolución de influencia decisiva para las generaciones de músicos posteriores' ('Pioneering the introduction of literature into popular music, he fused, for the first time, European and Afro-American rhythms, bringing about a revolution that had a decisive impact on generations of subsequent musicians'). It is generally a valid tribute (although surely Elvis fused black and white music before Dylan did?), but it contains a bizarre error in the statement that 'en 1961 [sic] lanzó su primer disco, *Bob Dylan*, del que vendió dos millones de copias' ('in 1961 he released his first record, *Bob Dylan*, of which he sold two million copies' - a claim that might just be true today, almost half a century on, but the figure at the time was more like 5000; and the year of release was 1962, not 1961). The citation makes it clear that Dylan was no longer a protest singer after 1964, and does not suppress mention of the oft-maligned religious albums. Of Dylan's literary works, *Chronicles Volume I* is evoked, but not *Tarantula*, and his contributions to the cinema are not forgotten. There is, inevitably, an accolade for the most recent Dylan album, *Modern Times*. The text also lists some of the other distinctions Dylan has received, including the Polar Music Prize in Sweden, the Kennedy Center award and the honorary degree from Princeton, quotes *Time* as naming him one of the hundred most influential persons of the twentieth century, and winds up with a reference to Bob Dylan's tally to date of 90 million album sales worldwide.

Dylan's award was widely reported in the Spanish press, and it is hoped that the three sample reports to be discussed here are representative. On occasions like this, even the best-intentioned

journalists are, alas, liable to lapse into cliché and oversimplification, and the informed Dylan follower will inevitably approach the reports with this caveat in mind. *El País* devoted a page to the story with four linked pieces, the most substantial, signed by the Argentinian-born writer and journalist Rodrigo Fresán, being 'El señor de las canciones' ('Lord of the songs' - an obvious allusion to Tolkien). Fresán, who has written on Dylan in that newspaper before, and here demonstrates his expertise by alluding to non-'famous' songs like 'Not Dark Yet' and (in the quotation below) 'Political World', linked up the Asturias award with Dylan's by now perennial nomination for the Nobel Prize for Literature, declaring: 'Si hay justicia en este mundo injusto, en este *political world*, este galardón - como ocurriera con Günter Grass - debería funcionar como la llave que abre la cerradura del Nobel' ('If there is any justice in this unjust world, in this *political world*, this award - as happened with Günter Grass - should act as the key that unlocks the Nobel'). He has no doubts about Dylan's literary claims, seeing his *oeuvre* as 'miles de versos donde se esfuman las fronteras entre el folk, el country, el rock y la más excelsa poesía' ('thousands of verses that blur the frontiers between folk, country, rock and the highest poetry'). A brief piece, 'Como un torrente' ('Like a torrent'), signed 'D.A.M' - i.e. the rock journalist Diego A. Manrique - listed ten essential Dylan albums, culminating, no doubt obligatorily, in *Modern Times*, and recycling a gross error in the form of the hoary (and chronology-defying) old chestnut of *Blood on the Tracks* being Bob Dylan's 'divorce album' (!). Santiago Segurola ('El gigante universal' - 'The universal giant') saw Dylan as a giant of popular music whose influence is matched only by that of the Beatles, and traced out his impact on a whole series of Anglo-American-Canadian acts of the 60s and 70s, from Manfred Mann through Laura Nyro and Joni Mitchell to Bruce Springsteen. Finally, and bringing it all back home, R. Torres and B. Portinari, in 'Nos puso las pilas a todos' ('He charged everyone's batteries'), asked seven figures from the Spanish arts and entertainment world how they would define Dylan's influence on music and literature in Spain. Joaquín Sabina, a Spanish singer-songwriter, offered the most fulsome praise: 'Es el máximo representante de la música en inglés de la segunda mitad del siglo XX, que nos puso las pilas a todos. Ha demostrado que la canción no es un género menor' ('He is music's greatest exponent in the second half of the 20th century, who charged everyone's batteries. He has proved that song is not a minor genre'). Benjamín Prado, poet, novelist and renowned Spanish Dylan fan, declared in similar vein: 'Le deberían dar el Nobel de Literatura, porque se reconocería la dignidad literaria de alguien que escribe canciones como poemas' ('They should give him the Nobel Prize for Literature, because it would mean recognition of the literary dignity of someone who writes songs as poems'). The veteran singer-songwriter (in Catalan and Spanish) Joan Manuel Serrat - himself a candidate for this year's prize - who is from Dylan's generation, added his voice to the consensus, praising Dylan as one who 'aglutina todo un pensamiento de progreso, sin el cual ni se entiende la música, ni los últimos 50 años' ('brings together a whole current of progressive thought, without which one cannot understand either music or the last 50 years'). Quite as glowingly, his compeer Andrés Calamaro, an Argentinian rock musician based in Spain, affirmed: 'Dylan nos conmueve con su ejemplo, su elegancia y su grandeza musical desde hace 45 años largos' ('Dylan has been moving us with his example, his elegance, and his musical grandeur over 45 long years'). All in all, then, for Spain's leading newspaper Bob Dylan is a universal artist whose work transcends the barriers of genre and who more than eminently deserved the honour.

A further cornucopia of accolades emerged in the report of *El Correo de Andalucía*, headlined 'Bob Dylan introduce el rock en los Príncipe de Asturias de las Artes' ('Bob Dylan brings rock to the Prince of Asturias Arts Prizes'). Again, a galaxy of personalities were quoted in support of the prize. Benjamín Prado appeared here too, this time baptising Dylan 'el Picasso del premio' ('the Picasso of the prize'). The late Rodrigo Uría, then chair of the board of trustees of Madrid's world-famous Prado museum, praised Dylan as a 'símbolo de la lucha por la libertad y los derechos' ('a symbol of the fight for freedom and rights'); and, not to be outdone, Carmen Calvo, then Minister of Culture in the socialist government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, lauded the singer as 'un verdadero gurú

del compromiso y de la estética musical' ('a true guru of commitment and the art of music'). The lead piece, while relying heavily on the jury's citation (and incidentally repeating the error of the alleged two million sales of Dylan's first album), remarked on how this award marks the entry of rock'n'roll into the precincts of the Prince of Asturias Prizes. Similar in general was the response of the *Diario de Sevilla*, whose headline (paraphrasing the citation) ran: 'Dylan, premio a un "faro generacional"' ('Dylan, a prize for the "beacon of a generation"'): this text too was based on the citation, not without an error of its own ('Dylan, cuyo verdadero [*sic*] nombre es Robert Allen Zimmerman' - 'Dylan, whose real [*sic*] name is Robert Allen Zimmerman') as if a name changed by deed poll was not legal and therefore real). The newspaper also offered an opinion piece entitled 'Normalización pop' ('Normalizing pop'), signed by Blás Fernández, which evoked Dylan's Nobel nomination, seeing the Spanish award as some kind of consolation prize, and welcomed it as evidence of the breakdown of the supposedly unbreachable antithesis between 'la música culta' (classical or erudite music conceived as the intellectuals' music) from 'la música popular' - an indubitably valid point, whether or not it is correct to link Dylan with *pop* music (a recent invention) when much of his work draws so deeply on far older genres of *popular* music.

On that final point, it may reasonably be claimed that Dylan's Spanish award is not entirely surprising, since that very antithesis, between the erudite and the popular, tends, in Spain and in Spanish-speaking countries in general, to be less rigid and absolute than in the Anglophone world. Federico García Lorca's poems are regularly set to flamenco rhythms; the Chilean protest singer Víctor Jara was a university lecturer. Bob Dylan's work has for several decades been widely consumed in Spain and has been a major influence on that country's cultural landscape: indeed, I have myself charted the story of his reception in the Hispanophone world, in an article entitled 'Guitars and Tarantulas', available on-line at: www.geocities.com/christopherrollason/CaenlongversionJun07.pdf. The Prince of Asturias Prize for the Arts comes, in the end, as a due and legitimate accolade to Bob Dylan from Spain, 43 years after he first sang of those famous 'boots of Spanish leather'.