

Happy 50th birthday, *Bob Dylan*

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

March 21, 2012

Bob Dylan released his first album 50 years ago this week. That self-titled debut is not the Dylan record anyone listens to most--it includes only two original tunes--and as Andy Greene details, it was [not a smashing success](#). But it opened the door for Dylan to come back just months later and record *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which propelled Dylan's staggering career.

Fifty years is a long long time, especially given that Dylan put out an excellent new studio record as recently as 2009. My favorite Dylan material is pretty early--it's from the transitional moment when his acoustic-folk approach (at its most compositionally ambitious) was giving way to his rock-band sound (at its most aggressive, though still based in folk forms). I'm not sure what my favorite Dylan song is, but I am sure it's on *Bringing It All Back Home*. But while of course some of his records have been better than others, his staying power as a fresh-sounding songwriter and recording artist is astonishing.

As a performer, however, his powers are somewhat diminished. I've seen Dylan live just once, several years ago when he came through Chicago and played four nights at progressively smaller venues. I felt lucky to be at [the last and smallest of these](#), but the show was disappointing: Dylan can't sing like he used to, and while he was never much of a piano player, this was one of those shows where he insisted on playing piano exclusively, and loudly.

Still, I can't imagine telling my kids someday that I passed up a chance to see Dylan play, so I'm glad I forked over the cash and went. Here's hoping he's got a few more albums in him.

One of the two original songs on Dylan's 50-year-old debut is "Song to Woody." Guthrie turned 50 that year--which means he'd turn 100 this one. Sounds like a [great tribute](#) took place down at South by Southwest last week.