

Sounds from the North Country: A London-based play uses Bob Dylan's music to tell a Depression era tale

By [Christa Lawler](#) on Sep 17, 2017



Bob Dylan's music is the soundtrack to "Girl from the North Country," currently playing at The Old Vic, a London-based theater. 2013 file/ News Tribune

A Depression Era musical-drama about some downtrodden souls living in a boarding house in Duluth might ring Steinbeck-ian. Rather, think Dylan. "Girl From the North Country" is a seemingly Bob-approved piece of theater built around the artist's music and themes and set in his birthplace — though it takes place before he was born.

And it is currently playing on a stage nowhere near you.

"Girl From the North Country," written and directed by Tony Award-winning Irish playwright Conor McPherson, is mid-run — and getting favorable reviews both here and there — at The Old Vic, a London-based theater.

McPherson was asked to write the musical by Dylan's management and label in 2013, according to a recent story in Rolling Stone magazine. Initially, he said in an Old Vic-produced video on YouTube, he wasn't sure Dylan's music would translate to musical theater.

"I thought of an idea set in the 1930s and during the Depression," he said. "I thought using Bob Dylan's songs in a show like that, set before he was born, would somehow let his songs exist in this setting."

According to the London Times, Dylan signed off on the concept and sent the playwright 40 albums "with his blessing to do with them what he wanted."

The result, according to the New York Times: "His work's melancholy and anger (and acoustic guitar-friendly melodies) fit smoothly into the abject American prairiescape of the mid-1930s ..."

The story

Though "Girl From the North Country" is set in Duluth, it doesn't touch on Dylan's childhood spent living in the upper level of a duplex in the Central Hillside, or his treks to kindergarten at Nettleton Elementary School.

It's a cast of fictional down-on-their-luck Duluthians. Nick is the deep-in-debt owner of a guest house. His wife is struggling with dementia, his daughter is pregnant, his son is drunk and the newest boarders are a Bible-selling preacher and a boxer in need of a break.

The two-hour, 30-minute production's soundtrack includes 20 Dylan songs, including "I Want You," "Forever Young," "Tight Connection to My Heart (Has Anybody Seen My Love)," "Like a Rolling Stone" and "License to Kill."

It's not quite a musical, though, according to Variety, which billed it as a "songs with a play; a fusion of drama and gig. ... (McPherson's) script doesn't crowbar in hits or bunnyhop between songs."

The show opened in early July to a five-star review from The Times of London, which called it an "instant American classic: a tale of heartbreak and hardscrabble, poetic but not without fun ..."

Back home

There are not a lot of plays set in Duluth. University of Minnesota Duluth professor Tom Isbell wrote an original play of vignettes about the St. Louis River area that played at the college last year. "One River" is based on a UMD-Perfect Duluth Day-led community journalism project that focused on the water.

But as for works by writers based outside city limits — UMD theater professor William Payne offered up two regional picks: "Ten November," by Steven Dietz, a docudrama about the Edmund Fitzgerald; and Kevin Kling's "The Ice Fishing Play," which is set on a lake in northern Minnesota.

Dylan's Hibbing classmate Susan Beasy Latto, who is also a fan of the musician, called "Girl From the North Country" "a huge deal" — though she has only followed it from afar.

It shows Dylan's universality as an artist, she said.

"I think it's really a unique perspective," Latto said. "Using his music to tell this story of the Depression. It really indicates how iconic his music has become. It's not about him and it's not about the era in which he wrote it. It applies to the human spirit and it applies to circumstances everyone goes through."

With the winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature earlier this year, Latto said that the way the world sees Dylan is changing: musician and poet.

Aaron Brown, who is tied into the Bob Dylan-Iron Range historical scene, said he had read a bit about the play, but that it isn't getting much buzz in his circles.

"We reached our apex with the Nobel Prize," he said. "The fact that he has a musical out is just Bob doing more Bob stuff."

According to Rolling Stone, Dylan approved of a two-page pitch but neither he nor his people offered much feedback beyond that. It's believed that the artist hasn't yet seen the show.

But will his U.S.-based fans get a look?

It's likely. There are plans to bring it to the United States with potentially a Broadway run.

If so, expect Latto — a theater major — to make the trip.

"I'm very interested on several levels," she said.