In 2004, a Newsweek magazine article called Bob Dylan "the most influential cultural figure now alive," and with good reason. He has released more than forty albums in the last four decades, and created some of the most memorable anthems of the twentieth century, classics such as "The Times They Are A-Changin," "Like a Rolling Stone," and "Blowin' in the Wind."

While Dylan's place in the pantheon of American musicians is cemented, there is one question that has confounded music and literary critics for the entirety of Dylan's career: Should Bob Dylan be considered a songwriter or a poet? Dylan was asked that very question at a press conference in 1965, when he famously said, "I think of myself more as a song-and-dance man."

The debate has raged on ever since, and even intensified in 2004, when Internet rumors swirled about Dylan's nomination for a Nobel Prize in Literature, and five well-hyped books were released almost simultaneously: Dylan's Visions of Sin, by Oxford professor of poetry Christopher Ricks, who makes the case for Dylan as a poet; Lyrics: 1962-2001, a collection of Dylan's songs presented in printed form; Chronicles, the first volume of Dylan's memoir; Keys to the Rain, a 724-page Bob Dylan encyclopedia; and Studio A, an anthology about Dylan by such esteemed writers as Allen Ginsberg, Joyce Carol Oates, Rick Moody, and Barry Hannah.

Christopher Ricks, who has also penned books about T. S. Eliot and John Keats, argues that Dylan's lyrics not only qualify as poetry, but that Dylan is among the finest poets of all time, on the same level as Milton, Keats, and Tennyson. He points to Dylan's mastery of rhymes that are often startling and perfectly judged. For example, this pairing from "Idiot Wind," released in 1975:

Idiot wind, blowing like a circle around my skull,
From the Grand Coulee Dam to the Capitol

The metaphorical relation between the head and the head of state, both of them two big domes, and the "idiot wind" blowing out of Washington, D.C., from the mouths of politicians, made this particular lyric the "great disillusioned national rhyme," according to Allen Ginsberg.

"The case for denying Dylan the title of poet could not summarily, if at all, be made good by any open-minded close attention to the words and his ways with them," Ricks wrote in Dylan's Visions of Sin. "The case would need to begin with his medium."

The problem many critics have with calling song lyrics poetry is that songs are only fully realized in performance. It takes the lyrics, music, and voice working in tandem to unpack the power of a song, whereas a poem ideally stands up by itself, on the page, controlling its own timing and internal music. Dylan's lyrics, and most especially his creative rhyme-making, may only work, as critic Ian Hamilton has written, with "Bob's barbed-wire tonsils in support."
It is indisputable, though, that Dylan has been influenced a great deal by poetry. He counts Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine alongside Woody Guthrie as his most important forebears. He took his stage name, Bob Dylan, from Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (his real name is Robert Allen Zimmerman). He described himself once as a "sixties troubadour," and when he talks about songwriting, he can sometimes sound like a professor of literature: "I can create several orbits that travel and intersect each other and are set up in a metaphysical way."

His work has also veered purposefully into poetry. In 1966, he wrote a book of poems and prose called Tarantula. Many of the liner notes from his 1960s albums were written as epitaphs. And his songwriting is peppered with literary references. Consider, for example, these lyrics from "Desolation Row," released on 1965's Highway 61 Revisited:

Praise be to Nero's Neptune
The Titanic sails at dawn
And everybody's shouting
"Which Side Are You On?"
And Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot
Fighting in the captain's tower
While calypso singers laugh at them
And fishermen hold flowers

Professor Ricks is not the only scholar who considers Dylan a great American poet. Dylan has been nominated for a Nobel Prize in Literature every year since 1996, and the lyrics to his song "Mr. Tambourine Man" appeared in the Norton Introduction to Literature.

So do his song lyrics qualify as poetry? Even Dylan gets the two genres confused sometimes. He once called Smokey Robinson his favorite poet, then later backpedaled and said it was Rimbaud. He has alternatingly avoided this question and mocked it, as in his song "I Shall Be Free No. 10":

Yippee! I'm a poet, and I know it
Hope I don't blow it

However, the best, most straightforward answer may have appeared in the liner notes of his second album, 1963's The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan, where Dylan said, simply: "Anything I can sing, I call a song. Anything I can't sing, I call a poem."
Years before he ever published a book of poetry, Carl Sandburg was becoming well-known with a guitar. He had been working as a traveling salesman, political organizer, and poetry lecturer when, in 1910, he decided to add music to his repertoire. He bought his first guitar, and quickly discovered that the addition drew a much larger audience: the recitation of his own poetry combined with his performance of popular folk songs in his imitable baritone voice attracted eager crowds.

In 1921, he wrote to a friend, "I am reading poems and singing Casey Jones, Steamboat Bill, and medleys. This whole thing is only in its beginnings, America knowing its songs....It's been amazing to me to see how audiences rise to 'em." Sandburg developed a fairly specific methodology to these readings and performances. He believed that a singer had to live with a song and ingrain it into his or her being; in performance, his work was to act out a dramatic part as a "story-teller of a piece of action." When giving performances, he first talked about poetry and art, then read some original verses, and concluded with fifteen to thirty minutes of songs and commentary.

The vocation of performing poetry and folksongs was perfect for Sandburg, who once wrote: "I am a loafer and a writer and would much rather loaf and write, and pick a guitar with the proper vags, than to deliver spoken exhortations before any honorable bodies wheresoever."

Throughout the early 1920s, Sandburg collected and notated the folksongs he heard on his travels, eventually amassing a repertoire of over three hundred songs. This project would ultimately become the classic volume American Songbag, published in 1927. He narrowed down the selection to 255 tunes, and altered some (for the sake of the "mood"), but otherwise he printed them as he heard them. In the introduction, he calls the book "an All-American affair, marshaling the genius of thousands of original singing Americans." The collection quickly became a standard in households across America.

In his famous poem "Chicago," Sandburg proclaims, "Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be / alive and coarse and strong and cunning." To this remarkably versatile poet, the statement is a literal one--poetry and song intertwine, and in the overlap between the two, one can most clearly hear the voice of the American people.

In 1999, more than thirty years after Sandburg's death, Lyrichord Disks released The Great Carl Sandburg: Songs of America, an album containing seventeen selections from American Songbag. Recorded in the 1950s, and remastered for release, it is one of the few recordings available of Sandburg singing.
"I ain't a writer," Woody Guthrie once wrote, "I want that understood. I'm just a little one-cylinder guitar picker." Of course, that humble sentiment was part of his public persona—the howdy-doo Woody Guthrie, the ramblin’ everyman, the down-home folk singer, poet of the people. The truth, however, is that Guthrie wrote an incredible amount of material: songs, essays, poems, stories, diaries, and letters. In total, an estimated 750,000 words were left unpublished when Guthrie died in 1967.

Guthrie’s voice endures for a perhaps particularly American reason: he celebrates the little guy, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised. Guthrie spoke out against fascism, sung out to sufferers of the Depression, the Dust Bowl era, and the second World War. He advocated the unions and scorned the corporations. But the formulas for writing the "people’s songs" didn’t rest in social justice alone; Guthrie’s wit, humor and home-spun vernacular attracted the American audience and avoided pretension.

Guthrie was born in 1912, in Okemah, Oklahoma, which he would later describe as the "singiest, square dancingest, drinkingest, yellingiest, preachingest, walkingest, talkingest, laughin’est, cryingest, shootingest, fist fightingest" town in Oklahoma. His family experienced both the benefits of the booming oil industry, and the devastating effects of the Great Dust Storm in 1935. After the death of his sister Clara and the institutionalization of his ailing mother, Guthrie moved with his first wife, Mary Jennings, to Texas, where he took his first shot at a music career, forming The Corn Cob Trio with Matt Jennings and Cluster Baker. That road proved extremely difficult during the Dust Bowl years, so following the westward trend, Guthrie decided to hitchhike to California in search of opportunities.

It was in California that Guthrie, fueled by the disdain of Californians to the influx of "Okie" outsiders, wrote and recorded the first of his songs to bring him and his singing partner, Lefty Lou (Maxine Crissman) wide public attention. His Dust Bowl Ballads, such as "I Ain’t Got No Home," "Goin’ Down the Road Feelin’ Bad," "Tom Joad," and "Hard Travelin’," were broadcast over a radio station in Los Angeles, as well as one just across the border in Mexico, providing Guthrie with a forum to criticize corrupt California politicians and businessmen.

His success led him next to New York City, where he enjoyed the respect of like-minded musicians, artists and leftist intellectuals. While Guthrie continued writing and performing prolifically, these people became his friends and collaborators in protest. In 1940, Guthrie lent his voice in song and in conversation with Alan Lomax to a special recording for the Library of Congress.

Ever restless, Guthrie didn’t stay in New York. Prepared to return to his origins in the South, he instead received an invitation from the producers of a documentary film project to write songs for the film. In protest of the Grand Coulee Dam in Oregon, he offered a collection of songs called the Columbia River Songs, which were highly praised. From there he went on to write other classics, like "Pretty Boy Floyd," and the singular song considered to be his masterpiece, "This Land is Your Land."
By the 1950s, when Guthrie began to suffer from Huntington’s chorea, a disease that would claim his life in 1967, his music was already influencing the next generation of American folk songwriters, most especially Bob Dylan, who made a pilgrimage to New York to meet Guthrie. One of the two original songs included on Dylan’s first album was a tribute to Guthrie, called "Song for Woody," which borrowed Guthrie’s chord progression from "1913 Massacre."

Guthrie kept writing long after he became too ill to sing. Recently, scholars and musicians have been pouring over the wealth of unpublished poems, stories, and songs that Guthrie left behind. In 1990, Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal collected many of these documents in Pastures of Plenty: A Self-Portrait. Then in 1998, having been given access to Guthrie’s unpublished lyrics, British musician Billy Bragg, along with the alt-country band Wilco, set many of them to music. The collaboration resulted in the two-volume album Mermaid Avenue, one of the best-reviewed records of 1998. The album opens with "Walt Whitman’s Niece":

A girl took down a book of poems,
not to say which book of poems,
And as she read, I laid my head,
and I can’t tell which head
Down in her lap, and I can mention which lap

Bragg says that what we know of Guthrie’s songs reflects only a fraction of what the singer actually wrote, and to think of him as a hobo guitar-picker sells him short. In Guthrie’s unpublished notes, the singer wrote visions of his Oklahoma childhood, tales of sea voyages, and fantasies of making love to Ingrid Bergman on the slopes of an Italian volcano.

"Woody Guthrie was the first alternative musician," Bragg wrote in the liner notes to Mermaid Avenue. "While Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley were busy peddling escapism for the masses, Woody was out there writing songs from a different point of view with a lyrical poetry that captured the awesome majesty of America’s scenery and the dry as dust humor of its working folks."
"The power of music that poetry lacks is the ability to persuade without argument." — William Matthews

A then, is for "Are," as in, Are you sure that's rock? In this essay you'll find references to Jazz: there's Pop on the way, too, and some folks you might call Folk. There's going to be some Hip-Hop as well. This blurring of boundaries, I think, is essential. Pound's trinity of pattern-expectation-surprise fits many a form, and rock, in terms of expression and influence, is no exception. Think of it as a genre of confluence, one big kick-ass prose-poem. Country, R&B, and Soul are all part of the pantheon, either through influence or inclusion or bald theft. I think of The Bad Plus, my new favorite Jazz trio, deft musicians all, original composers and pure fans of music, evident in works that pay homage to both jazz and rock greats. Listen to their versions of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man," Blondie's "Heart of Glass," or the Pixies' "Velouria," and enjoy the art of genre blur.

I suppose it's time to confess that I grew up listening to Fusion, that odd and much maligned amalgam of jazz and rock: think Miles Davis, Jeff Beck, Weather Report, Bill Bruford, Stanley Clarke, and even some of the pre-Grammy Carlos Santana. Purists might label Fusion as reverie with a pulse, but I liked its middle ground, its associative, lyric-less space ripe with a rock-bite and the modal improvisations of jazz. I appreciated the lack of language; even at 13 I knew that white space speaks louder than forced text. And I could even begin to put language in those spaces. Even today, when it comes to playing music as I write, I find that more ambient fusions of hip-hop, jazz, rock, pop, and r&b can allow me to enter a zone where music generates mood that influences language. Galaxie 500. Kruder and Dorfmeister. Morecheeba. Sterolab. Yo La Tengo. These bands are clearly very distant cousins of Led Zeppelin or Deep Purple. But even the classic rock pantheon has its influences. Zep's "Over the Hills and Far Away" and "Going to California"; U2's "Bad" and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For"; and the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy For the Devil" and "No Expectations" haven't directly led to poems, but they generate an ambiance that parallels the gut-check immersions of composition, of moods ripe for language.

A is also for AC/DC: Specifically, their LP Back in Black. Some call the music derivative and the lyrics juvenile—"So don't worry about tomorrow / Take it today / Forget about the cheque / We'll get Hell to pay" —but I love it; At 13, Angus Young and Clearasil were my best friends. Who can forget "You Shook Me All Night Long"? Is it way out of line to talk about the alternating power cord opening of 7 licks, 6 licks, 7 licks as somewhat reminiscent of Emily Dickinson and hymn meter? I like to imagine that somewhere in Amherst there's a teen listening to her iPod and finding something heavenly in "Hell's Bells."
B is for Blues. Blues—tonic in line 1, subdominant and tonic in line 2, dominant and tonic in line 3. Precursor. Papa Legba on the crossroads of Highways 8 and 61 in Mississippi. Let the man tune your guitar; he'll give it back and ask you to play. You might lose your soul but you'll have game. Donald Hall's comment—that poetry's main task might be the embodiment of disparate feeling—suggests the Blues: lyrics of lament can in their shells have a heart that beats simultaneously angry and proud, crushed yet hopeful. Skip James. Willie Dixon. J. B. Lenoir.

Famous Bees—a nod to James Brown, professor of the primal, head-facilitator of funk. A nod to David Bowie as well. Many a suburban child went from Sesame Street to Tolkien to Star Wars to find alternative universes, but here was a living and breathing paragon of teenage alterity. We made room for a Martian singing about Ziggy, and we were better for it.

C is for cadence—Phrase endings in music replicate clauses or phrases in language...a phrase ending is called a "cadence" (Italian for drop or fall) and I'm curious about how that translates to poetry, where the line—end-stopped or enjambed—doesn't necessarily match the syntax of the sentence. I wonder if one of the reasons why song lyrics don't often seem to "match up" to good poems is this very sense of the line and the sentence...does the music inevitably enjambs more seamlessly than the line? The line resembles the bar in music; William Matthews reminds us that the bar is a useful tool for musical notation and analysis, but, like the foot in prosody, it doesn't occur in nature. We compose by phrase in both realms, and yet in song the music tends to bleed beyond the language: notes and phrases can enjamb even if the lyrical line is end-stopped, which might explain why some lyrics, when stripped of their excellent musical clothes, reveal nothing but heavy-handed end-rhyme. (Think Cat-in-the-Hat, or, for Adam Sandler fans, of what I call the "Happy Gilmore Syndrome"—per the angry, sing-song exchange of rhyming imperatives in a golf clubhouse.) It's the rhythm and not the words that usually drives communication.

Think of the frenetic vivace instrumental burst in Led Zeppelin's "The Song Remains the Same," followed by the adagio lyrics, arriving at:

California sunlight, sweet Calcutta rain,  
Honolulu starlight—the song remains the same.

Monster rhyme? Not quite. Of interest: the musical bar hasn't yet ended when we get to rain, and again for same. That tension between bar and line—which is aural and not discernible on the page alone—is perhaps the musical equivalency of the tension poetry generates between line and the syntactical laws of grammar, the sentence-sense of a poem.

C is also for the conditional—or perhaps I should stress a kind of conditional: The Subjunctive Mood, which can communicate contingent or hypothetical action (as well as present grammatically subordinate statements). Rock and pop, with their major and minor atmospheres, often speak about potentials, about what-ifs. Listen again to Bad Company's "Feel Like Making Love" and note its roster of hypotheticals—Ifs, What-I-would-Dos, If-I-coulds, etc. Such conditionals strike me as a common denominator of rock and pop and poetry. The subjunctive accommodates possibility, the hypothetical, the imagined. Conditionals led me to fall in love with pop music first and Wallace Stevens soon afterwards.
D is for Nick Drake, whose guitar work was brilliantly confident even while his lyrics, as James Owens writes in The Rough Guide to Rock, suggest that you’re "watching someone shape up for a dive into an empty pool." Listen to the first 10 seconds of "Cello Song" or "Hazey Jane" and fall in love with Drake's nimble picking. Beautiful voice, too: soft, wise, understated. A voice I'd like to have in my work. The more obvious and overstated D would be Dylan. Hasn't enough been said? The plethora of sincere if sometimes-mawkish proclamations about his lyrics-as-poetry might rival the page count of the Upanishads.

E is for "ending." I'm always a sucker for the long, extended, reflective, meditative jam at the end of a song that swells towards a conclusion, simultaneously meditative and edgy. I think of Frank Zappa's meditative solos in "Watermelon in Easter Hay" from his crazily operatic Joe's Garage, or Talk Talk on their album Laughing Stock, or any number of narratives ("Telegraph Road" comes to mind) by Dire Straits. Perhaps my personal favorite: the Pixies' "No. 13 baby" on their Doolittle release. It fronts the edgy lyricism of petulantly savvy Black Francis and ends in a satisfying feast of surf guitar rhythms, Kim Deal's pulsing bass, and a sharp Joey Santiago solo that fades off into the songset—put on the 11th cut and take note when the song hits the two-minute mark—the next minute and 50 seconds are exponential bliss. Download Tom Petty's song "It's Good to be King" and wait out its simple lyrics until the melancholy pop slides into something ethereal. The tension between beauty and power and the more tentative or reflective creeping out into new territory inspire a kind of reverie, a poetic dreaming.

F is for fragment, our cultural bellwether. Find it in the sound bite, the jump cut, the sample, the appropriated image or text: "A glimpse suffices to trigger an entirety," says Cole Swenson.

I've taught with Ann Carson's collection of Sappho's fragments (If Not, Winter), asking students to generate their own language within the bracketed spaces, indications where missing papyrus once housed language—letting them use the Sapphic fragments as springboards to work of their own. The work of discernible fragments and gaps rife with potential for play reminds me of listening to Rock as a child. In singing along or deciphering, fragments and snatches were the order of the day, with mistakes and missteps de rigueur. Echoing the compilation of misheard song lyrics, 'Scuse Me While I Kiss This Guy, I remember how a friend once thought that the refrain in the Beatles' "Paperback Writer" was "Take the back right turn." I've always loved the space to play off of a text, and Sappho's fragments remind me how Rock lyrics, in drips and drabs, clear or garbled, can also generate a play space for language. Speaking of play space and the letter F, let us praise funk—as in Parliament, as in George Clinton. Funk with bagpipes and strings? Oh, yes.

G is for Peter Gabriel and his range. The poets I've always admired have had signature sounds yet have pushed the envelope by exploring new directions and stylistic conceits. Lowell comes to mind. More recently, poets like Charles Wright and Larry Levis moved from spare lyricism to more discursive and exploratory forms as their careers progressed. Think of Jorie Graham's work with its metaphysical, epistemological, and syntactical concerns—how her restless explorations of phenomena, its requisite sensory experience, and philosophical discursiveness have formally progressed, from book to book, as she recalibrates how the lyric can capably communicate. Gabriel's journey as musician and songwriter features great songs but also a great arc. Genesis, the band he co-founded, was all about theatrics and storytelling early on. As
Gabriel moved into a solo career, the work became more introspective and confessional. World music made its mark on his work later still, with Indonesian and Senegalese influences, to name two. And along the way, he didn't forget how to pen a purely enjoyable pop song (e.g., "Sledgehammer").

**H** is for Hip-Hop, which has captivated listeners as much (if not more) as rock has in the last decade. I'm a little old-school, but A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul strike me as highly literate and highly polyphonic influences all about mixing, melding, and blending. Sometimes I teach lessons that juxtapose the aural music of the anonymous 14th century poem "Alysoun" with that of Quest lyrics, specifically "Excursions" or "Check the Rhime" from The Low-End Theory. Textual euphony as layers of sound.

**I** is for interstate, the one that travels back and forth between investigation & identification. Interstate suggests Springsteen. I love the sheer wind-in-the-hair joy that "Born to Run" or "Jungle Land" induce—but I'm more fond of Nebraska. A Moody boy, I'll take my minor-key melancholy with me for snack just about anywhere. I like his identification songs, but his laments seem more keen on investigation.

Music and poetics that invite investigation as opposed to declaring identification have always been somewhat more attractive to me, but perhaps not as a teenager. Investigation might very well lead to identification, but without the former, without the cerebral play of a Stevens or the musical play of a Zappa, I feel we're not meeting our potential as souls and spirits, as well as bodies.

If approaching the ineffable or unspeakable are our best ambitions for language, then what we are talking about is desire, hunting, and seeking. Music tends to do that hunting for us far more successfully than language. If you take away the bells and the background pulsation of "Born to Run," the lyrics aren't that moving, are they? But the primal yell in the song, now that's another story. It still gives me the chills—pent-up desire crackling over the airwaves! I'd like to yell like that in a poem or two.

**J** is for Jude, as in "Hey Jude," a seminal musical memory. I had a little red record player as a child, and I remember playing my little 45 with the half apple on its label: the single was "Hey, Jude." It was an early lesson in the metaphysics of transcendence, the building and layering of melody and pitch so that coming to terms with something large and unwieldy might be met with good feeling, a rising of sorts. Take a sad song and make it better. The song was also my first lesson in enjambment and its ability to sonorously mitigate any threat of juvenile, end-stopped rhyme (see C, above). I remember being distinctly aware of end rhymes, but the music literally didn't stop at the end of the line; here was language with rhyme that simultaneously conveyed a layered, subtle sentence-sense.

**K**—dare I follow the Beatles with a reference to Kiss? A friend gave me a copy of Double Platinum in college and it was like reuniting with a long-lost love. "God of Thunder." "Cold Gin." "Detroit, Rock City." Oh, my. And perhaps there's no more humorous a piece of cover art than Love Gun. Those boots! Those ladies!
Let L stand for Los Lobos, whom I first heard live in 1984 in a chapel at Oberlin College. Complex, as in fine wine, is there a voice more lovely or ballad-appropriate than David Hidalgo's? And after you've shed a tear or two, can any band rock out as well? Again, range is huge aesthetic plus—Pound's dictum of "make it new" as measured in all sorts of eclectic influence: traditional Mexican songs, folk, 50s rock. Just Another Band from East L.A. is seminal.

M is for Major and Minor. As Richard Hugo, for fun in The Triggering Town, once categorized American poets as belonging to the Faulknerian camp of Snopes (an outsider who desperately wants in) or the Hemingway camp of Krebs (an insider by birth who feels like an outsider), we might use two musical distinctions to talk about general modes of poetic expression:

Major mode: essential affirmative and optimistic.
Minor mode: more melancholy and pessimistic.

Wedding revelers avoid the latter and embrace the former; mourners reverse the equation. Try Chopin's funeral march in major mode or Wagner's wedding march in minor mode and you end up with comic relief that Frank Zappa would love.

M is also for metaphor and Elvis Costello's This Year's Model: "little triggers on your lips...."

Isn't metaphor a physical form of conditional grammar, a simultaneous moving away-from and toward? I borrow heavily here from a Tony Hoagland essay about Larry Levis in the winter 2001 Gettysburg Review. Metaphor is all about utility and equivalences, but it can contain rapture as well. It is a way to fly from reality, from what is right here, and it is also a way to cozy up to reality with more authority. Paradoxical, to be sure, but as Hoagland suggests, perfectly fitting for us as beings of both matter and spirit. So, too, with Rock—sometimes it's power and flight; sometimes it's cozying up.

N courtesy of Keats, is for negative capability—mysteries and doubts sans the irritable reaching after fact and reason. Sometimes it helps to listen to Rock this way. Are the lyrics inane? There's still voice conveying attitude. Are the lyrics indecipherable? There's still voice conveying presence. The gravel of Tom Waits, the banshee Janice Joplin. Then there's a band like Sigur Rós: imagine, simultaneously, a tempo that invokes molasses and voices that suggest the Northern Lights. Their songs feature lyrics in "hopelandic"—an invented language. Words? Instruments? Sound. Materiality unfolding. Process as presence. Poems?

Cole Swenson reminds us that Negative Capability is also "associated with a capacity for empathy and with a lack of self-consciousness." One certainly finds empathy in the narratives of Springsteen and Billy Bragg. As for a lack of self-consciousness, I'm not sure if The Smiths or Van Halen apply.

O is for Objective Correlative. Eliot's baby—the idea that objects/situations/chains of events can serve as formulae for particular emotions—has musical relevance, too. Music has objective correlatives all its own—major and minor keys, shifts, and individual instruments. The piccolo
and the double bass. Fender Rhodes and a Stratocaster with a whammy bar. Different languages.

We can love what is satisfyingly spare (Lorine Niedecker); we can love (Frank O'Hara) what is deliciously baroque. P is for his royal purple-ness, Prince. We might eschew the purple from our prose and our poems, but leave it on the dance floor. I have one word for you: "Housequake."

I'd be remiss if I left out The Police, too: Is there any better lament than "The Bed's Too Big Without You"? In homage to what is lovely if naive, I must admit that my high-school sweetheart and I called "Every Breath You Take" our song. We didn't really pick up on the song's creepy aspects back then, but so what. I still hear it and feel what first love felt like.

Q is for Queen, purveyors of sport-anthem standards "We Will Rock You" and "We Are The Champions." A success of synthesis: a terrific stadium band of well-documented concert flair with a sound borne of studio wizardry: vocal layering, multi-track guitars, etc. Such complexity mirrors a poetic goal—to have work that reads thoughtfully well on the page and comes across as musically adept out loud. Studio versions and live versions.

Q is also for Quo, borne out of Berryman. He is my poetic project, a lover of quotidian things who struggles with his status quo; he wants to make a manuscript of himself. He hopes that change will come through contemplation, music that can steep in the quotidian and then transcend it.

R is for reverie, that beautiful dreaming sometimes brought on by the low pressure of music, a state in which I like to compose poems. Bachelard calls poetic reverie an opening to a beautiful world and reminds us that "the word lives syllable by syllable, in danger of internal reveries". I think of Gerard Manley Hopkins and of Sylvia Plath, influential musicians whose lyricism rocks me from syllable to luscious syllable. But the reverie, too—that's key. The space to dream, the space to compose. I need something part Serge Gainsbourge, part Booker T and the MGs, to make mood and make space for language.

S is for Schopenhauer, who suggested that all other arts aspire to the condition of music. Poet Hayden Carruth suggested that Schopenhauer should have said, "ought to aspire."

T is for teenager and tension. William Matthews talks about what music means for a teenager: it "forms a screen between yourself and those parts of the world that you would like to keep at a distance." I'd add: or at least would like to approach on alternative terms. Tension is a matter of balancing such terms. Philip Guston knew a painting was finished when he came to that point where any further act would be experienced as a diminishment of that tension.

Musically, My Bloody Valentine comes to mind: In their 1990 release, Loveless, their songs are dominated by what sounds like distortion and feedback—loops of it. The simultaneously smoky and feminine lyrics of Kevin Shields and Belinda Butcher add something pretty to the mix and generate a palpable balance between consonance and dissonance, between the murky haze of distortion and the melodic hooks that begin to emerge out of the fog. Those simple melodic hooks work the foreground and render a terrific study in layered textures. (Listen to cuts 1, 2, and 6:
"Only Shallow," "Loomer," and "I Only Said"). I think that's something I can say I'm after in my work—I want music, I want referentiality, but I want those tensions, too—what's simultaneously present and a little bit peripheral, power chords and reverie, metaphors on the interstate between presence and absence.

In my own personal pantheon, U is for Ultra-Vivid Scene, but have you heard of them? Let's say U2, then. Rock has as its bedrock a sense of protest, a sense of coming-of-age, but until I heard War in 1983 I had made few conscious links between voices that were musical and those that were political. It didn't hurt that it was a rocking, good album, either. My political coming of age in the Reagan 80s was shaped by LPs like War and Springsteen's Born in the U.S.A. Even then I could discern the difference between Bono's pre- and post-song prattle about the band's songs vs. listening to the actual music; even then I could hear the ironies and frustration in Springsteen's album while it was used as blind party jingoism. Politics, then, in its own realm of human relations, and in both good music and good poetry, is complex, far from simplistic or black and white. What is partisan is not what is political. Find, if you can, one of my favorite political poems which was written, I believe, in the same era: Stephen Dobyns' "In a Row."

Poetically and musically, V is for Voice. In a poem, tone of voice—as influenced by diction, syntax, music, figuration, and lineation—can establish the presence of particular thought and feeling. It's not hard to distinguish the respective voices of Amiri Baraka and Mary Oliver. Voice, in Rock, also delivers attitude (from angry rant to contrite lament) and more generally serves as an identifying signature. I'm fond of Van Halen's "Running with the Devil" and the Velvet Underground's "Pale Blue Eyes," and it's not hard to differentiate the two. Think of Geddy Lee, lead singer for Rush, whose high registers polarize listeners. Try to imagine a Rush song without him and you can see why Rush numbers rarely shine on the Karaoke stage. Think, too, of the Rolling Stones and their signature flavors: Jagger's wail and Richard's rasp of "But I just can't seem to drink her off my mind" in "Honky Tonk Woman" provide notation that's just as crucial as the song's signature between-line guitar licks.

The first announcement that a lyric poem often makes is the credible presence of a speaking voice, an assurance of personhood, as Alan Grossman might say. I don't know that good music makes me feel that way—other than that I can identify the difference between Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music and Dean Warham of Luna.

The Who supposedly took their name from a conversation with a club manager. Told that the band was called The Detours, he responded, "The who?" And so came the band that brought us the bubbly sneer of protest better known as "My Generation." I loved the song, even if I never signed on to the sentiment of "hope I die before I get old." Still, I was blown over by the rock-opera Tommy, and I secretly loved the dark glee with which Pete smashed his guitars and Keith kicked over his drum sets. It wasn't like anything I'd found in my 9th grade poetry anthology, to be sure.

X is the last letter in Stax, the classic soul label in a grittier vein, the flip-side of Motown's somewhat more slick sound. If you haven't ever, listen to Otis Redding "Try a Little Tenderness." Three minutes and 51 seconds of beauty and salt.
I've been a fan of Yo La Tengo, since the mid-80s after seeing them at The Bottom Line in New York. Ira and Georgia look like people I went to college with. My best friend's first dance at his wedding was the tender "Our Way to Fall" from the disc And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside Out. There's something comfortable and familiar about them on stage and in the mood of their music. Poetic parallels? Lowell once talked about the "raw" and the "cooked" in the poetry, and the adjectives are frequently evoked to draw a black-and-white binary categorizing poetry that is either formal or unrestrained in its music and structure. That said, I think of Yo La as a band that likes to break down the distinction as it applies to rock—the hard rocking of reverb guitar vs. the soft, subtle ballad. Their balance of raw and cooked is so great because even when they're cooked, they're a little raw. Let's say rare as opposed to well done. Isn't that what we love in our art?

Finally, Z is for Led Zeppelin. What can I say? One of the most formative imaginative periods of my life was listening to Physical Graffiti and reading T. H. White's "The Once and Future King"—It was like taking mushrooms as an 11-year-old. Hearing the lyrics of "Kashmir" (e.g. "I am a traveler of both time and space") while simultaneously reading about Merlin taking the young Arthur for a world-wide spin—as owls, if I remember correctly—was as close to a harmonic convergence as I've ever experienced. I still, to this day, play the 2:06 guitar solo that is "Bron-Y-Aur" at least three or four times before I move on to the next track. This Rock was all about shape shifting and metamorphosis. In The Poetics of Reverie, Bachelard says that reverie helps us descend so deeply within ourselves that we're liberated from our names, rid of our history. A stage is cleared for the conditional, and the combination of erasure and potential strikes me as distinctly teenager-ish.

Houses of the Holy remains my favorite Zeppelin album. The new-age prescient "Rain Song," the folksy strains of "Over the Hills and Far Away," with its break-out into heavy bass-and-chord rock. The funk of the "The Crunge," which ends with the question, "Where's that confounded Bridge?" That bridge is what makes this album seminal for me. We know the influences on rock—Country-Western, Blues, R&B—and I love how this album bounces around from influence to influence, from ballad, to blast, to blues. Does it rock more than the two albums that sandwich it, the best-sellers Led Zeppelin IV and Physical Graffiti? No. But it's still my favorite. The "radical innocence" that Yeats talks about in poetry—I find it every time I listen to "Dancing Days."

I should have seen the convergence of poetry and rock and roll coming. I grew up in a town that has one of the loveliest local libraries I've ever seen. One Friday evening when I was fifteen, I decided to take in my first screening at the library's film series. Had I suddenly entered into a more cultured state of development? Hardly. I went to see Led Zeppelin's movie, "The Song Remains The Same." Our library was named after William Cullen Bryant, a poet and journalist who laid the foundation for the reading room and lecture hall in 1874. Bryant was famous for his 19th century poem "Thanatopsis," which translates as a "meditation on death." Thanatopsis is what the library's board members must have performed as they considered the fate of the librarian who had put the film on the schedule. It was bedlam. The library's sound system was more suited to Bergman than to drummer John Bonham, and the richly paneled interiors were not meant to house a mob of unruly teens. The librarians didn't know what hit them. As for me, I
had arrived. Here was concert footage of country and blues with an exponential pulse, all in the house of a poet.


Benjamin Britten, one of the best-known British composers of the twentieth century, began his prolific career in the 1930s by composing scores for documentaries produced by the General Post Office Film Unit. The job, which was sponsored by the British government, allowed him to showcase his creativity—in one film, for example, Britten recreated the sound of a train going through a tunnel by recording a cymbal, then reversing it. It was during this time that he crossed paths with W. H. Auden, an encounter that resulted in several collaborations between the composer and the poet.

Among these joint projects was Our Hunting Fathers in 1936, an orchestral song cycle that lamented the hunting of animals and the destruction of nature. Paul Bunyan followed in 1941, an opera based on the legendary American giant lumberjack, and Hymn to Saint Cecilia was written in 1942, a choral work based on three poems by Auden, each followed by an invocation to Cecilia, the patron saint of music. Incidentally, Britten was born on St. Cecilia’s day, on November 22, 1913.

But Britten’s most celebrated melding of poetry and music was the large-scale composition of six movements, War Requiem, performed in 1962 for the opening of the new cathedral in Coventry, built to replace a cathedral destroyed by bombs during World War II. Britten wrote the piece for three soloists, a chamber orchestra, a full choir and main orchestra, and a boys’ choir and organ. He used the Latin text of the Requiem Mass, or Mass for the Dead, along with nine poems of Wilfred Owen, the World War I poet who died just days before the signing of the 1918 Armistice. The somber and powerful work, which expressed the composer’s anti-war sentiments, was well received by critics and audiences alike.

In 1989 director Derek Jarman produced the film War Requiem, transposing images of war and horror against the backdrop of Britten’s music. Sir Lawrence Olivier made a cameo appearance—his last role on film before his death—as an old soldier recalling memories of war. "Jarman has added visuals so intense," wrote Joseph McLellan of the Washington Post, "that this is likely to be the ultimate embodiment of the idea [of war] until someone develops a technique for recording and playing back physical sensations other than sight and sound: the impact of a shell exploding a few yards away; the feel of mud everywhere; the taste of blood coughed up from a blood wound."

Britten’s other important works include numerous vocal, orchestral, and chamber pieces such as Songs and Proverbs of William Blake and Cello Symphony, as well as the operas Peter Grimes, Albert Herring, Billy Budd, The Turn of the Screw, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Death in Venice.