

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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*Bob Dylan
with Paul Kelly*

Entertainment Centre

This time he blew in from the West. Still on the Neverending Tour, and back in Australia - three years on, and sixth time round - Bob Dylan has turned his Sisyphean treadmill into a victory lap. At least, that is the report of messengers, posting news of sightings and setlists on Bill Pagel's Boblinks website. The intelligence has been promising since his European dates last year. England had been brilliant, the Portsmouth bootlegs proof of the pudding. And the stats for February and March, as closely scrutinised as the Nikkei or Dow, indicate that he has played seventy eight songs from a trove of more than five hundred, and *Tangled Up in Blue* is holding at number nine.

This is Bob Dylan in the 21st century. The time lord continues, through incarnations and near death experiences, his travelling Tardis going ever backwards from Tom Baker to William Hartnell. We have seen many more than seven ages of Dylan - the hobo youth aping Woody Guthrie, the elfin boy with tumbleweed hair glaring from the cover of *Blonde on Blonde*, the Amish family guy of *New Morning*, the gypsy of *Desire*, and, much more recently, the eccentric ruin peering quizzically out of the aptly named *Time Out of Mind*. Now, sporting a pencil moustache and wearing a riverboat gambler's tie and hand carved boots, Bob Dylan is thin and frail. He could be an ageing Midwestern poet from the school of Robinson Jeffers, he could be Sir Ian McKellen, vamping as a whisky judge.

Whatever he mercurially is, Bob Dylan continues to fascinate. His mystique is managed as endlessly as he tours. He doesn't give interviews, his minders keep him out of the papers. He is reclusively private and yet he performs as many as two hundred concerts a year. Standing on stage, he maintains the enigma. Bob Never Speaks. Bob Only Sometimes Smiles. He is there right in front of you, but who is that masked, and unmasked, man ?

Out in Network, the virtual entrails are examined. Daily, concert stalkers drink his wine and web managers plow his earth. Hoping, somewhere along the line, they *will* know what all of this is worth. The vivisection, the

trainspotting, the flow-charts, the obsessive spirit of AJ Weberman lives on. And Bob plays along with this, and then he doesn't. True to prediction, he *does* play *Tangled Up in Blue* at number nine in the set. But at his concerts, unlike the legendary gigs by the Grateful Dead, surreptitious tapers are hauled out and told to leave. He travels continents, including our own, without uttering a word - and then speaks whole sentences on the Academy Awards, expressing Actual Gratitude and thanking every last corporate good old boy at Columbia Records.

Paul Kelly, Bruce Haymes and Vika and Linda Bull have played an elegantly-judged, thirty minute opening set which begins with *Cities of Texas* and ends, warmly, with *Wintercoat*. Now, onstage at the Entertainment Centre, will we please welcome Bob Dylan. The band is in place and the singer appears. But nobody is expecting Bob to welcome *us*, of course, or to start telling us about an afternoon visit to the koalas at Cleland. We know the drill. Bob does not Speak. Instead he is straight in to *Duncan and Brady* - I've been on the job too long. It is loose, but the sound is very promising. Larry Campbell and Charley Sexton are on acoustic guitars, Tony Garnier on upright bass and on drums David Kemper plays with careful restraint.

The Times They are A-Changin' is next and everyone is on to it. Dylan croons the lyrics like a wistful lover and the guitars sound slack-stringed and Spanish. There is an airiness in the sound and a precision. *It's Alright Ma* is also deftly done. Dylan's diction is studied but not snarly, and his tendency, as with many songs tonight, is to an almost automatic upward inflection. Switching to electrics for *If You See Her Say Hello*, *Seeing the Real You* and an exhilarating version of the Big Pink, Rick Danko classic, *This Wheel's On Fire*, the band retains the fluidity and lightness of touch of the acoustic songs. This is not rock music, heavy on the beat, leaden in its rhythms, it is vintage rock and roll - Elvis Presley, circa the 1955 Sun Sessions. And Bob, wiggling to the beat, splays out one bandy leg as if to show that, he too, has to serve somebody ...

Ring Them Bells, one of the finest tracks from *Oh Mercy* is garnished with a spray of pealing notes from Larry Campbell on lap steel guitar. It is a highpoint. *Masters of War* is lightly delivered with Campbell on mandolin but Dylan's lyric still carries its sardonic disdain. A wonderfully ,snaggletoothed *Tangled Up in Blue* comes in at nine. Then, after *Watching the River Flow*, *Drifters Escape*, set in Kafka's courthouse, is an eerie miscarriage of justice made creepier by Charlie Sexton's minimalist guitar.

The first set is topped off with that *Leopard Skin Pill Box Hat*, a barrelhouse blues which just gets better each time Dylan puts it on.

The band takes a bow - or rather a stand and stare. There is a touch of panic that Bob wants an early night. But nothing is further from the truth. The seven song encore section begins with *Highlands*, the lyrically rich final track from *Time Out of Mind*. Some fans have braved the edicts and moved to the edge of the stage and Dylan begins to serenade them with his cracked old croony voice - My heart's in the Highlands/only place left to go. Sexton and Campbell play a sweet rockabilly swing, Garnier thrums his bendy bass and David Kemper rolls the drums with a discerning minimum of thump. The album version runs nearly seventeen minutes, this one runs maybe nine or ten but it is still an extraordinary performance. This is a very fine moment - Dylan as Whitman and Hank Williams, Roy Rogers and Hammerstein.

Other standards follow, *Like a Rolling Stone*, that wacko lounge swinger *If Dogs Run Free*, a spine-tingling, post-Neil Young trip along the *Watchtower*, a stately, keening dirge of *I Shall Be Released* which reminds us that it is already a treasure of the American canon. Sexton plays a cherry red Gibson and Garnier a big blind bass. Another round of electrics are very easily done for *Highway 61 Revisited* and Dylan closes with a surprisingly emphatic *Blowin in the Wind*. The crowd wants more, even though we have already had our fill. We've seen the best concert Dylan has given here since 1986 - and he sang *Highlands*. Perth had *Visions of Johanna*, Melbourne, *Blind Willie McTell*. But Adelaide has had its heart in the Highlands, gentle and fair, honeysuckle blooming in the wildwood air...