

Bob Dylan: rolling thunder through New England

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TOBY MAMIS

Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Tour — the tour that decried hoopla and attracted more than its share — steamrolled through New York and sleepy New England over the past four weeks, playing small towns and tiny cities with equanimity and without an obvious pattern.

According to reports, most of the tour members traveled in a remodeled bus, cleverly and affectionately renamed Phideaux, not exactly knowing their next destination, while America's Greatest Living Songwriter and Spokesperson For His and Descendant Generations led the way in a red Cadillac convertible.

Among the stops were such metropolises as Providence, R.I.; Waterbury, Conn.; Bangor, Maine; Rochester and Niagara Falls, N.Y.; and Worcester, Waltham, Cambridge, Springfield and Boston, Mass. It was on Halloween in Plymouth, Mass. — one of the more historic townships in America's birth (could this have been bicentennially inspired?) — that the tour opened, and the show played there again the following night.

There were probably other stops we didn't hear about but, as the slogan used to go, if you didn't read about it in the N.Y. Times, maybe it didn't happen.

The New York Times was present and accounted for in Plymouth, as were many eager newshounds.



Bob Gruen

We drove up to New Haven in the pouring rain Thursday, Nov. 13 to see the second of two shows that day at the Coliseum.

The hall appeared full, but perhaps not completely sold out; Springfield and Providence reportedly didn't completely sell out, either. So much for low-key advertising. After all, ya gotta eat and pay bills whether you're Bob Dylan or the manager of a civic arena.

As exciting and enchanting as the Dylan/Band tour was for

me in 1974, the Rolling Thunder Tour in 1975 was solid, yes, long, yes, and, unfortunately, ultimately anticlimactic. It was the kind of show stodgy folkies and antirockers have been wet-dreaming about for 10 years now, ever since Forest Hills and the advent of the Byrds. With modifications for the passage of time, of course.

You couldn't tell the players without a scorecard; but there weren't any scorecards. The cast:

Bobby Neuwirth as "The Leader Of The Band." This former road manager, hanger-on, lover to the great and not-so-great, and Max's regular (in its heyday) has finally come into his own as a performer-singer, despite a pisspoor debut LP for Asylum, the label that borrowed Dylan from Columbia for a few months in 1974. And he proved it with two fine leadoff tunes, "Good Love Is Hard To Find" and "Sleezy," and with his statement to the crowd, "This is your living room!"

T-Bone Burnette, from Ft.

Worth, Tex., tried to sing a song called "Werewolf of London."

Neuwirth returned for "Don't Blame Me," featuring *Mick Ronson* doing a very fine guitar solo. This former Spider From Mars looks great and fits right in, surprisingly enough.

Rob Stoner (formerly Rob Rothstein, of Rockin' Rob & The Rebels, who changed his name for some country singles on Epic a while back), who is actually the leader of the band — leaving Neuwirth as ringleader — stepped forward, bass in hand, to perform "Catfish."

Next it was Ronson's turn — after stunning the crowd yet again with a tasteful electric solo — and he chose "Life On Mars," a song Bowie used to sing, to deliver in his Donovanish, husky, quavery voice.

Elsewhere on the crowded stage, *Luther Rix* (he's played with everybody from Buzzy Linhart to Bette Midler and back again, in NYC) and *Howie Wyeth*, a compadre of Stoner's and drummer on the recent Dylan recording sessions, shared percussive duties.

And a fine young session guitarist named *Steve Soles* stood next to 19-year-old *David Mansfield* (from Quacky Duck, the New Jersey teenaged country rock band featuring two of singer Tony Bennett's offspring), who literally stole the show with his remarkable versatility on a variety of string instruments.

Mansfield pretty much had

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MORE ROLLING THUNDER:

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the spotlight as many times as Dylan, who still hadn't managed to appear onstage by this time.

Neither had *Ronnee Blakely*, so Neuwirth promptly brought her out, and they duetted on a song about Hank Williams being dead. I'm not too familiar with Blakely's recent recorded output (although I have a nice Nashville LP on Elektra recorded pre-Nashville), but the song she sang on her own was simply awful. Luckily, she left.

And who should Neuwirth bring out next but *Joni Mitchell* (!) who appears infrequently in concert (but will do a six-week tour starting Jan. 9 to promote her new LP) and who performed three songs so new that nobody recognized them. But she scored a worshipful standing ovation.

That left Neuwirth again, so he dedicated "this next one to the person I wrote it for" — Janis Joplin — and did "Mercedes Benz." Then he did a trucking song (they all sound the same to me) and launched into Kristofferson's song about *Ramblin' Jack Elliot*, which was his cue to enter.

First, Jack did "Muleskinner Blues," and then Woody's "Pretty Boy Floyd."

The band reappeared and with them came, banjo in hand, *Roger McGuinn*, as Jack rocked into a Louis Jordan tune and then also a straight country song. Suddenly, McGuinn and Elliot were gone, and Neuwirth said, "You've met a lot of friends already tonight, and now I want to bring out a special friend."

Bob Dylan, looking every bit like Alias, the character he portrayed in *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid*, swung into a duet with Neuwirth of "When I Paint My Masterpiece." Then he led the band in a syncopated rendition of "It Ain't Me Babe," featuring an exceptional Ronson guitar solo. An even more syncopated "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" followed, with actually more of a Bo Diddley chunka-chunka beat to it.

It was then that *Scarlett Rivera* made her first appearance, fiddle in hand. Rivera, formerly known as Donna Shea, was in on the recent Dylan recording sessions and TV taping and added exquisite (really) and exotic sounds to two new songs, "Durango" (dedicated to Sam Peckinpah) and "Isis." It was during the latter that Dylan, for the first time I've ever seen, sang without even so much as holding a guitar.

That ended the first half of the show — 90 minutes worth. After a half-hour's break, the lights went down, but the curtain didn't go up. At least now right away. The first verse of "Blowin' In The Wind" was fully sung by the time the curtain rose to reveal what the crowd already knew — *Joan Baez* and Dylan, just like the old days.

Just the two of them. It was, perhaps, the most exciting moment of the show. The band gradually joined them as they went through old material like Johnny Ace's "Never Let Me Go," the traditional "The Water Is Wide" and "I Shall Be Released," which was dedicated to Richard Manuel by Dylan, who said, "He wishes he

could be here tonight but he couldn't." The question on everybody's lips was, did he want to and was he turned down, i.e., what is The Band doing throughout this?

Anyway, Bob took a walk, leaving the stage to Joanie (not Joni) and the band, and it was time for her bona fide Top 40 hit single, "Diamonds & Rust," which is reportedly about one B. Dylan, noted songwriter and influential personage. Then came a thoroughly boring a capella version of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," which was followed by the haunting, beautiful and very moving "Joe Hill," dedicated to the United Farm Workers.

Joan then did a clever song, with the closing line, "Love is a pain in the ass," that she said she wrote in Germany on a tour, and then she brought out her singer/sister *Mimi Farina* for two duets, the second of which

was The Band's "Long Black Veil."

That was it for Mimi, and Joan did Dave Loggins' "Please Come To Boston," and then she brought out Roger McGuinn for his second appearance so that he could do "Chestnut Mare." That task completed, Joan launched into "The Night They Drove Ole Dixie Down," the hit she coveted from The Band, McGuinn joining her on that one.

By my watch it was exactly midnight, coincidentally, when Dylan reappeared (and the band disappeared) for two totally solo numbers: "I Don't Believe You" and "One More Cup Of Coffee."

The band returned, as did Ronnee Blakely and Scarlett Rivera, for "Hurricane," Dylan's new protest record about the frame-up of former boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter in New Jersey. With forces in motion leading towards the possible release from prison, finally, of

Carter, the timing of Dylan's recording is perfect. "Hurricane," the song, bears a lot of resemblance to "All Along The Watchtower" in its construction.

Two more new songs and then the emotional blockbuster, to his wife, "Sarah," a moving ballad of extreme intensity. It was the perfect lead-in to "Just Like A Woman," on which Blakely sang harmony. McGuinn rejoined them and traded verses with Dylan through "Knockin' On Heaven's Door."

Then everybody, I mean the whole entourage, including Joni Mitchell and *Allen Ginsberg*, joined together onstage for "This Land Is Your Land," with Ramblin' Jack leading the way 'cause he *knew* Woody and actually knew all the words.

The show ended at 12:45 a.m. after a second 90-minute set and no encore.

What's the significance of the Rolling Thunder Tour (if any)?

Well, business-wise, it proves that not matter how big you are, you can tour any goddamn way you want to. The largest halls on this tour were equivalent to the smallest halls on the Dylan/Band tour. Sound by Bill Graham's FM and lights by See Factor were professional. Security was relaxed, in keeping with the "living room" atmosphere consciously cultivated by the organizers.

Music-wise, Rolling Thunder doesn't signify a return to folkiedom, not by any means. The age of the hootnanny is long gone.

What it all boils down to, is, why shouldn't a bunch of performers who enjoy working together go out and work together? That's what performers are supposed to enjoy doing. And the Rolling Thunder Tour seemed like a lot of fun at the time. Isn't that the way it's supposed to be?

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