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Live Review

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:: Bob Dylan ::

26 April 2009 / The Roundhouse / London

By Liz Tray

In his later years Dylan has painted himself as the traveling troubadour. At the centre of the circus that has swirled around him for over 45 years he, somehow, keeps a single mind. In concert you're lucky to get as much as a nasal hello - band intros aside - but, offstage, there has been a marked shift in his projected persona. Before 2005's *No Direction Home* he had done one TV interview in 19 years. Then came the first volume of his autobiography, *Chronicles*, and the revelatory *Theme Time Radio Hour*. In the latter, his remarkable mind takes the listener on a journey through the American musical heartland; his hypnotic voice relating tall tales, jokes and even the odd recipe. He must have uttered more publicly spoken words in the last 3 years than he has in the previous 40.

Having been on the road consistently now for over 20 years he's always coming to a town near you. Rather than handfuls of arena shows in major cities alone, he'll play a baseball diamond in Kansas, a club in Helsinki and, now, a needless Roundhouse gig. Needless in the sense that he had played the O2 the night before and I don't doubt that the 20,000 souls exited having failed to recognise half of what they'd heard. He'll come to you but when you meet him half way that's your gift. He'll do songs you know, but they will bear little resemblance to the recording. He has written these songs once and now he has written them again.

You hear endless treatises on *The Voice*. I've never understood why it repels people. Maybe you must get past it to arrive at the prize - the songs, their words. Or maybe it's something to revel in, as I do. There's almost a perverse desire to see the voice turn people away, so the jewels are left for those who can open their minds and control their expectations. While the madness of who he is and what he means rages around him, he just gets on with the job of being Bob.

The atmosphere outside the Roundhouse was electric. The crowd stretched for hundreds of yards as the desperately ticketless looked toward the heavens for a miracle. Once inside, the expectant atmosphere was palpable as he made his understated entrance. At first it was hard to digest that it was, well, really him. A slim figure in black, with a white hat atop his head, still endless curls framing that Mount Rushmore worthy face, finished off with a Vincent Price moustache. It took the slightest raised eyebrow and glint of the eye to send the crowd into frenzy. Unlike most acts of a certain age, (stand up Mick and Keith), more than half of his set was drawn from his last three albums. His superlative band, honed to a fine point from many years of touring, led the way as Dylan howled at the microphone, leaning over his keyboard. That indescribable voice told tales of the last 45 years, songs that defy age and change lives. The paradox is that in live performance you witness that which would elicit poor reviews of anyone else - he lets the band carry the weight, his voice is a cross between a cat and a wasp that makes Tom Waits sound like Caruso and his keyboard skills are average. And yet, none of these things take anything away from the show. How he makes these clear flaws simply not matter, is part of the Dylan sleight of hand.

It's hard to write about him, it's all been said before. You can only be thankful that you're around in his time. You can only try to explain what he means to you. My father witnessed this same man saying 'Play it fucking loud!' in response to the, no doubt now embarrassed, Judas shouter in May '66 at the Manchester Free Trade Hall. As this great American songbook played before my eyes, all I could do was simply call my parents and hold the phone aloft, trembling with emotion, bringing them to him and completing the circle.

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- Kid Harpoon..
- Slow Club..
- Basement Jaxx..
- Quartershade..
- The Duke & The King..
- Straight Lines..
- Spectrum 7..
- Dan Lyth..
- Beans On Toast..
- Thea Gilmore..
- Bicycle Thieves..
- Run Toto Run..
- Roy Smiles..
- Danny Mahon..
- Hayabusa..
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- The Marder..
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- Husky Rescue..
- Asobi Seksu..
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