

Music archeologist and collector, Mitch Blank, spoke to DR about his long experience following Dylan's career and about Dylan's live performances in New York, July 2018.

DR: You are an inveterate Dylan collector and a longtime aficionado of things Dylan. In fact, you recently donated your Dylan collection to the new Bob Dylan Archive in Tulsa. How many times, roughly, would you say you've seen Dylan perform? Does any performance or space stand out among others?

MB: I would say I've seen Dylan perform 243 times or 381 times, and I've seen him since about 1964. Does anything stand out in my head? You know what? I think the blend of footage I've seen and recordings I've heard stand out more in my head than anything that I've necessarily witnessed.

DR: Any particular pieces of footage?

MB: Well, if somebody has seen Bob Dylan perform "Ring Them Bells" with a giant orchestra at the World Music Experience in Nara, Japan, they'd understand what I'm talking about. I was nowhere near Japan, but I was lucky enough to have seen that on film.

DR: How many performances did you see at the Beacon Theater in New York last fall?

MB: This year Bob performed at the Beacon Theater seven times in nine days. I went to all of those shows this time, and while I can't say that there was great variation from show to show, as far as setlists go, for a few nights he did do a switch-out of his finale and included "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry", which I thoroughly enjoyed. Other than that, I think when people go to these shows on a weekly basis, it becomes like going to church or synagogue on the high holy days. The shows differentiate themselves based on what you ate that day or how you're feeling that day, or maybe who you met in the lobby; that might have more of a bearing on your interpretation of a show. Also, your seat might give you a different perspective.

DR: Was the size of the space agreeable? How was the sound system, and could you see Dylan and the band clearly? Was it a spectacle with shifting spots and backgrounds, or was it more straightforward?

MB: It was lions and Christians. It was Diet Coke and popcorn. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. I would say that, depending on where you're sitting at any given concert--say you're in the third or second row and you're on the right side of the stage where Bob is sitting with his piano and you look up and all you can see is a whiff of hair--that becomes your view of the entire concert. Or, you can be sitting in row 17 and have a full view of everything going on on the stage, and it gives you a whole different way of looking at it. I prefer seats that are back far enough that I can hear. I find that the Beacon sounds are exceptionally great though. I had no issues with the sound; it sounded great. The Beacon is a great place to see music in New York City.

DR: Was Dylan there for the Beacon performances—was he fully present in his singing and playing?

MB: I don't know if you can ask that of any human being other than yourself. How could you even know? If I interpreted that, it would be my own ego interpreting it. If you ask Bob, he's not going to give you an answer; he knows he was there because somebody got paid.

DR: How would you compare the New York performances to those that stand out in the past? [Often concert goers complain they can't even hear him, or that he doesn't seem interested in the performance.]

MB: It's further down that road. The things I saw on the country road are not the same things I'm seeing on the city road. Everything grows. Bob Dylan in the 21st century is an inspiration to anyone who witnesses what he does now and anyone who saw what was happening at another time; they would either be reinvigorated or not understand what they went to see.

DR: Which songs stand out as gems?

MB: That's very difficult. Certainly there's a lot of beauty in the Beacon show and a lot of things do stand out, but if it's more of a general question of what songs stick out in my mind it's a different song for every different part of that road; it depends on where I was on the road more than where Bob was on the road.

DR: Did Dylan improvise lyrics as he has often done? Which songs, and how well did it work?

MB: I can't say that my mind works like that; I probably wouldn't remember having realized it at the moment. I have colleagues with encyclopedic minds that could answer this question off the top of their heads in seconds, but my most memorable part of the Beacon shows was when I was sitting down and speaking to the person on my right and then suddenly looked to my left and found out my seating partner was Ringo Starr. Ringo and I had a short conversation about a variety of things, and it was my first Beatle encounter.

DR: Can you describe the audience? Pensive, middle-age (or older) fans? Young people, new fans? Did you see any of the fanatic worshippers who usually attend Dylan performances?

MB: Well the answer to that question is very simple: yes--all of that. I saw people that needed to be taken out with nets and some were. I witnessed people who have been coming to these shows for thirty or forty years that I see at every event like this. There were people who brought their children and grandchildren and both the children and grandchildren were enjoying the shows just as much as grandpa. I saw people who were seeing Bob Dylan for the very first time. There were people there who traveled from every corner of the Earth to see a cluster of shows at any given time. There were some of the great people behind the Bob Dylan networks that keep a lot of people intertwined, such as Bill Pagel of *Bob Links*, and Karl Erik Andersen from *Expecting Rain*. There were also some people there from nations that you wouldn't think have giant Bob Dylan fandoms, but it's all there, and it's a great opportunity to cross pollinate with people who have a variety of interesting journeys to this event.

Recently in Tulsa, Oklahoma even more of an international grouping showed up. There were five hundred academics and collectors from around the world and people who had not seen each other in thirty years. People made a million new friends and spoke to each other at lectures, in lobbies, in hotel rooms, and at group dinners. It's a great opportunity to have that community understand the importance of taking control of the known body of work in order to populate the future with the potential to teach what's come before.

DR: In the recent Scorsese film, Scarlett Rivera's chauffeur speaks of the audience-performer relationship at a Rolling Thunder concert as one battery charging another. Did you get a sense of mutual battery-charging at the Beacon?

MB: Of course. Anywhere you put a group of like-minded, common-loving people in an environment, you're going to have a better experience, and it's going to feed off of itself. Recently in Tulsa we had a screening of a lot of rarely seen Bob Dylan footage that had been compiled by the Bob Dylan archive to show to the very enthusiastic audience who watched it all together in one room. Joy experienced in a large environment with your people will only reinvigorate the experience. Now, a musician who's going to be receiving this kind of outpour while performing is of course going to respond to an audience like that. I can't think of any artist who doesn't. I can think of Miles Davis turning his back to the audience for his own reasons, but you could have a mediocre artist do a life changing performance if the audience is into what that person is doing and you can have a genius on stage performing to a bunch of assholes and nothing is gained.

DR: What did you think of the film in general?

MB: I don't know how much light I could shed on it, plus I don't want to be a spoiler. For someone reading this who didn't get to see the movie it would be like giving away some of the best punchlines and best things to discover on your own. Generally, this is a film that will make anyone who was alive during this period of time and anyone who is now alive to witness it leave smiling.

DR: What was Dylan wearing? Do you put any stock in his outfit, in the song-and-dance man aspect of the spectacle? Or does the music supersede its theatrical element for you?

MB: I have no idea what he was wearing, and I'm sure he changed every day. I would say his pants were great, he looked great, and the band looked great. It had no effect on the music. You know, in 1975 we had perfected the 60's which allowed us to let our freak flags fly. Perhaps in the 21st century, you don't need to wear neon clothing to draw a crowd anymore, if what you're doing is legitimate.

DR: You started out in the folk music movement, and you continue to play traditional music. Do you consider folk music a form of nostalgia?

MB: Okay well, I didn't start out in the folk music scene because I started out in 1950 and the number one songs of 1950 were "How Much Is That Doggie In The Window" and "Tzena, Tzena, Tzena." I listened to America's Hit Parade music growing up and once I was handed a transistor radio, I suddenly had a soundtrack. One thing leads to the next and the musical journey is very winding--anyone who is my age will tell you that they didn't get there by accident. I listen to everything now; I listened to almost everything back then. I listen to things now that I've never heard before, much like when I first started listening to music.

Nostalgia? Some people will tell you that nostalgia is a form of depression because you're not comfortable where you are, so you look back to a place where your involvement with the world around you was more cushioned and you felt more comfortable. It's certainly not nostalgia--I'd be happier if it was nostalgia--but it's just a comfort zone. I've often said that whatever you may have listened to when you were fifteen years old, no matter where you were, is always going to be the music that you will always feel most comfortable with. It'll always be your comfort zone, your body temperature water, that you could sit in without twitching. If you were fifteen when Motown exploded, you will always feel comfortable in a Motown environment. If you were fifteen when *Blonde on Blonde* came out then that's going to be a great zone for you, but you may have been

fifteen when Tempest came out and that might be the place that you feel the most comfortable. We don't have a clue what the next group of fifteen-year-olds are going to be listening to' let's just hope it's healthy music.

DR: Where do you stand on Dylan nostalgia?

MB: Well, I don't really know what that means, unless it means putting on a leather jacket and playing to a crowd who throws things at you. I don't really see anything as Dylan nostalgia. I listen to the music that he was recording before he had any musical contract and I find it a comfortable place to be; the music I hear today is just music that I'm acclimating to. It's not so easy to find places in your nervous system to store new music because of all the music you've already got living there.

DR: How many of the very old songs did Dylan play; songs that almost seem like traditional songs now?

MB: I have a sheet in front of me so I'm going to cheat. At the Beacon, he did some of the 60's songs: "It Ain't Me, Babe", "Highway 61 Revisited", "Like a Rolling Stone", "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right", "Blowing in the Wind", and "All Along the Watchtower". From the 70's he did "Simple Twist of Fate", and "When I Paint My Masterpiece". I mean, what is there to complain about?

DR: Were you able to gauge the audience's response to these supremely familiar songs as opposed to others from other eras of Dylan's career?

MB: The only time I ever notice the audience is when the guy in front of me takes off his shirt and spills beer on me.

DR: How would you characterize Dylan's attitude on stage that night (or those nights)? He never panders to an audience.

MB: I think on one of those nights someone had a scuffle in the third or fourth row and there was a bit of a moment where he stopped playing--I forget exactly what happened--but I could see that sort of disrupted his attention. Other than that I think he's completely focused all the time, he knows what he's doing, he knows what the audience is going to respond to before they even respond to it, and he

is always pleased--as any musician would be--to hear the positive response from an overwhelmed and joyful audience.

DR: Did he challenge you at the Beacon? Electrify you? Connect with you, or wall himself off from all those dark eyes?

MB: The only time I was challenged at the Beacon was economically.

DR: Is there anything else you would like to add?

MB: Don't follow leaders watch your parking meters.