



## IS IT ROLLING BOB?

Scratch a Bob Dylan fan, and you'll find an amateur Dylanologist. Seems like everyone has a favourite little story or piece of theorising about the man, and his appearance in Auckland last month stirred up a bigger hornets' nest of speculation and dubious anecdotes than any well-oiled publicity machine could hope for. Of course such ready-made popular interest has its drawbacks. The audience at Western Springs on March 9 had enough contradictory expectations to make sure that they couldn't all be satisfied, and sure enough, they weren't.

The most common catch-cry was one that must have been heard a dozen times since 1960 — "He's sold out!" Many of those who had come along with hopes that they would be able to say to their friends (the ones who weren't attuned to the benefits of sloppiness), "Sure, it was rough, but . . ." had to go away without a missed cue, a bum note or a forgotten word to apologise for. Instead they went out muttering words like 'slick'.

The man whose last two studio albums have been largely one-take wonders, who conducted an American tour which owed more to Barnum and Bailey than Bill Graham; who released a live album and a television special which seemed to have been chosen from the most chaotic moments of the tour; and who has just produced a reportedly self-indulgent movie, had the last laugh again. On the evidence of his concert here, Bob Dylan is back on course for the ambition he has had since he was a greasy little teenager in Minnesota more than twenty years ago — to be a rock and roll star, to be bigger than Elvis Presley.

It would be a fool who predicted that this show somehow defines a whole new Dylan period, but still, the obvious care and thought that went into the preparations for it reflect a willingness to plug back into the mainstream

rather than live off an established following of fanatics. The complete rearrangement of virtually every song played showed that Dylan feels that he has no loyalty to old fans other than to give them the chance of having a good time. After all, it was living up to the loyalties of old fans that made self-parodies out of Elvis and a whole generation of show biz troopers before and after him.

Down the front, among the photographers and real hard-core word-hangers, the whole thing passed almost in silence. The band was playing at a moderate volume, the huge PA system was aimed up the hill, and there was no more than moderate applause reaching the front of the stage. In the midst of this comparative calm Bob Dylan, entertainer, operated. With only an occasional pause for a wide-eyed "you're too kind" or "thank you", he ran through a bewildering series of complete overhauls of songs going back as far as "Blowing in the Wind".

The band was pretty much a standard stadium line-up. Take a lead guitarist, bass-player, drummer, keyboard pilot, horn-player, multi-instrumentalist (violin, guitar, pedal steel, mandolin), percussionist and three back-up singers, throw in a rhythm acoustic guitarist, a few harmonies by various of the musicians and you've got a setting that wouldn't disgrace Boz Scaggs. In fact the dominant impression, especially in the first half was of a more muscular version of the backings for *New Morning* with the organ, gospel back-ups and good old R'n' B sax giving the music a New York edge that hasn't been since that record.

In such a huge collection of songs, there seems little point in delivering individual opinions on each of them. There is no chance that you would agree with me if you were there, and even less that the descriptions would

mean a thing if you weren't. Still, it seemed to me that the second half of the show, after a ten-minute intermission, contained a greater proportion of truly stunning renditions, and a good deal more energy than the first half.

The turning point seemed to come during "A Simple Twist of Fate", which after the longest introduction of the evening, "This is a song I wrote a few years ago about a couple of friends of mine who sort of disintegrated", built up a considerable amount of tension. Then there was a moment when Dylan completely changed the words to a verse. Instead of feeling an emptiness inside, the character in the song finds his departed lover's discarded shoe. The band, taken by surprise, broke up with laughter, Dylan turned and joined in, and they slammed into the chorus with twice the vigour they had shown up until then.

From then on to the end of the show, Dylan set about justifying the new style to the die-hards. The last few songs, including a devastating rendition of "It's Alright, Ma" were reason enough in themselves for the gospel/rhythm and blues bias in the band, with the three back-up singers coming increasingly into their own and Steve Douglas playing some remarkably hot tenor for someone who had been playing for well over two hours.

The show proper finished with a gospel "Forever Young", before the band returned to thrash out "The Times They Are A'Changing". Through all the years of trying to undermine the expectations of his audience about such anthems, Dylan, as far as I know, has never before dared to touch this most sacred of cows. Even "Blowing in the Wind" received the treatment with the Band in 1974, but until now a genuine encore-rock version of "Times" seemed impossi-

ble. I suppose it is some measure of Dylan's confidence in his songs and his current cohorts that he should carry it off so well.

Mind you, if "The Times They Are A'Changing" took confidence, what did it take to perform the originally foot-stomping "I Want You" with only electric guitar, sax and organ? Or to knock out a reggae version of "Don't Think Twice"? Or to open the show with a new song? All these are tokens of what seems like an increasing interest in the music, and less of the one-take casualness which has bewildered many of those asked to perform on recent Dylan studio albums.

This change was also reflected in an on-stage air of complete confidence. The star of the show carried the weight of all those thousands of Dylanologists with no apparent strain.

There were people all around me trying to catch Dylan's eye or ear with a gesture or a request, people shooting off scores of photographs, even a lady trying to note down all the variations between recorded lyrics and the lyrics sung. Further back, I hope, there were thousands of people dancing.

All too often, these people who try to convince others of the merits of Bob Dylan (and he must have more missionaries for his cause than most) turn into apologists. They explain why his music is rough, why his lyrics seldom survive transcription, they even try to explain his voice. All the time they should be confident enough to come out and call him what he is — the world's best rock and roll songwriter. I've never heard of Bob Dylan claiming to be a poet, or a mystic. There are plenty of others who insist on doing it for him.

Western Springs, March 9, 1978 was just another step on the way to being bigger than Elvis.

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