

# BOB DYLAN A RARE INTERVIEW

"If Hank Williams was sitting here now what would you ask him?" I said to Bob Dylan, who has listed Williams as one of the people he'd most like to have interviewed.

"I'd probably ask him where he gets his drugs," Dylan replied, laughing for the only time in our half hour interview. "What else would I ask him? I think that would be enough. I always liked his clothes and I probably would have wanted to know where he got those."

Dylan was sitting in the downstairs bar at Auckland's tres expensive Regent Hotel after his second New Zealand concert. He seemed relaxed and in a playful mood. Probably sensing an extremely nervous journalist sitting opposite him, he threw on one of his masks



Tom Petty, Bob Dylan and manager Elliot Roberts arrive at Wellington airport.

and prepared for another verbal sparring match.

Bob Dylan doesn't often give interviews. When Lincoln Hall, one of three Australians who climbed Mt

Everest, wanted to interview Dylan when he was in Australia for his third concert tour, the answer was a definite no. "Tell him that climbing Mt Everest is easier

than getting an interview with Bob Dylan," said Elliot Roberts, Dylan's manager.

Dylan has rarely been an easy interview subject. As a rule he doesn't give many, although in the last year, with the release of *Empire Burlesque* and the retrospective *Biograph*, Dylan has entered into one of the most verbose periods of his career. But in Australia the 44 year-old Dylan's response to questions was closer to the clever, evasive, confident Dylan of the mid-60s who had reporters tearing their hair out. Twenty years later though Dylan is not quite so clever, or quite so verbally quick — just like his records of the last decade.

Possibly the most telling — and honest — answer Dylan gave at the press conference was when he was asked how much of his music was pulled from his subconscious. "It gets less and less that it's pulled up from my subconscious," Dylan replied. "I used to pull a lot of it out. I pull some of it out once in a while but not too often."

In 1986 Dylan appears as

someone who's been asked, and answered, every conceivable question and is totally reluctant to respond expansively to any question that doesn't interest him. Dylan's consent to do interviews, press conferences, and videos (three things he obviously loathes) seem to be at the behest of manager Roberts, a heavyweight in the American music industry whose other clients include Tom Petty, Neil Young and the Cars. The Sydney press conference was a typical encounter — Dylan didn't want to be there, and the media were hardly being showered with brilliant insights:

*Why did you decide to tour Australia with Tom Petty?*

Because of the money.

*What is the difference between the Bob Dylan of the 60s and the Dylan of today?*

Not much because I still do most of the same material.

*In the 60s your songs were described as anthems for a generation. Do you still feel a responsibility in that direction?*

No. Do you think you've passed the apex of your career?

What career? I've never had a career. I'm someone who doesn't work for a living.

Maybe you could put it down to the Australian media's notorious reputation for asking dumb questions, but after my interview I'm of the opinion that Dylan's told when he should do an interview and no matter how good or bad the questions, Bob Dylan talks about what he wants, when he wants — and nothing, excepting maybe a telex from God, is going to get him to change that.

My Dylan encounter had a sense of "event" from the start. "No interviews" had been the position until after the Wednesday night's concert in Wellington, when the prime mover in Frontier Touring Company, Michael Gudinski, informed me that Dylan would probably do one interview, probably after the Auckland concert or on the plane to Sydney — but the publishing of the interview was to be delayed. It's rumoured that Frontier had paid Dylan for six Sydney concerts and were having trouble selling five, so a widely circulated Dylan interview was deemed necessary to sell the remaining seats.

After the Auckland concert I drove back to the Regent with the entourage and waited in Gudinski's room. After half an hour Roberts calls to say that Bob wanted to have a bath. Three quarters of an hour later Bob was clean, relaxed and wanted to call America, supposedly to speak to his children. A half hour later I was told that Robert Zimmerman would see me in the downstairs bar — but the interview may or may not happen. "Talk to him for a few minutes and see how you get on," said Gudinski.

I'm introduced to a slightly pudgy Dylan who gives a rather weak handshake, his manager suggesting we retire to a table where he remains for the entire period of the conversation, assuming alongside the presence of Dylan an equally intimidating role, wincing at questions he obviously doesn't find suitable and helping Bob out with responses to others.

I started badly, suggesting to Dylan that his association with the Heartbreakers was good for him, bringing out performances full of fire and spirit, the likes of which he hadn't given for a long time.

"Since when," Dylan taunted. "Come on, tell me when I last gave good shows, you tell me when I last gave spirited shows."

The last truly great rock and roll shows I can recall hearing on record from Dylan were back in 1974 on his triumphant American tour with the Band, and this prompts Dylan to discourse about how much he enjoys playing with the Heartbreakers and what a good rock and roll band they are, something Tom Petty had also said earlier that day: "He's told me that this is probably the happiest he's ever been with a group because it is a group, and it's like Bob's just talking to one guy, and I think we just have a sympathetic musical style," said Petty. "But I do think he's kind of in a rock and roll mood right now."

Dylan's two New Zealand concerts were certainly real rock and roll shows, starting loosely, but as the performances went on the playing became more inspired, Dylan singing with

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