

Review by Terry Kelly for *The Bridge*

The Never Ending Tour (NET) doesn't exist. Bob Dylan tells us so, in his slightly more than tongue-in-cheek liner notes to **World Gone Wrong**, eccentric spelling and grammar included: "by the way, dont be bewildered by the Never Ending Tour chatter. there was a Never Ending Tour but it ended in '91 with the departure of guitarist G.E. Smith. that one's long gone but there have been many others since then. The Money Never Runs Out Tour (fall of '91), Southern Sympathizer Tour (early '92)..." etc etc. This is an example of Dylan amusingly playing with fans' heads, but is also, I think, a semi-serious blast against the career categorisation our man has detested from day one. Andrew Muir first explored the musical phenomenon known as the Never Ending Tour in *Razor's Edge*, published in 2001. Now older and perhaps wiser, Muir revisits that book, while bringing his and his hero's globetrotting up to date in *One More Night - Bob Dylan's Never Ending Tour* (CreateSpace, 2013). The book is, in one sense, a lavishly detailed tour diary, Muir combining subjective opinion on each night's performance with the often widely various views of fellow fans, while charting the practical hassles of being a highly committed fan. His book becomes a kind of critical echo chamber as Dylan devotees try to describe their feelings about this or that show. But *One More Night* is principally a Beat-like personal odyssey, with Muir travelling at home and abroad with his musical hero, often baffled and bewildered, absorbing and attempting to make sense of Dylan's peripatetic musical bandwagon.

In fact, as Muir points out, it was Dylan himself who first coined the phrase "Never Ending Tour," to describe the restless musical show that began on 8th June 1988, at the Concord Pavilion, Concord, California, and which still shows no sign of reaching the end of the line. Even US President Barack Obama referred to the NET while introducing Dylan at the White House in February 2010. Dylan generally plays around 100 shows a year as part of the NET, with Muir speculating that this allows him the freedom "to focus on the here and now, presenting the songs and himself as present and changeable, rather than ossified in some former incarnation." Muir's aim is to put this vast touring phenomenon into context, in terms of Dylan's career, comparing and contrasting parts of the NET, and revealing how this heavy touring schedule has interconnected with the personal life of the author, the former editor of the Dylan fan magazines *Judas!* and the earlier and even more exotically named *Homer, the slut*. The latter magazine plays a central role in one of the highlights of both *One More Night and Razor's Edge*, as Muir dashes across London, a copy of *Homer, the slut* in his sweating palm, for an apparently casual but actually brilliantly engineered meeting with His Bobness, who squeezes the author's left shoulder (such details are *crucial*) as he accepts a copy of the magazine. Muir amusingly describes his state of Dylanesque ecstasy, as he almost becomes a human puddle during this heart-stopping brief encounter: "I am now beyond death, beyond rebirth, beyond Nirvana. I am also almost completely incapable of movement." Muir would enjoy another fairly close encounter with Dylan when the latter picked up his honorary degree at the University of St Andrews in Scotland in 2004.

*Razor's Edge* concluded around 2000 and *One More Night* picks up the story from there, chronicling the often exhausting touring schedule of artist and his critical 'Boswell.' The NET proved a learning experience for Muir, who is the first to admit that he often gets it wrong with the value of this or that show. For example, Dylan's infamous Hammersmith residency in 1991 initially found Muir overpraising what were generally regarded as dreadful performances. Muir's passion for Dylan had clouded his critical faculties: "It quickly became clear to me that my co-reviewers had been more accurate and direct than I had been. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as this was at a time when I averred, with no hint of a lie, that I would be happy to see Dylan walk on stage and read from the telephone directory." At such points, Muir gets close to the irrationally passionate heart of fandom, in its most extreme forms. In fact, as much as it's a meticulously detailed diary of the NET, the book is also shadowed by larger, moral or philosophical questions about why and if anyone should devote so much time and hard-earned cash to a single artist, abandoning family and friends, and sacrificing large swathes of one's precious life into the bargain. As the NET

progresses, such questions start to nag periodically at the narrative, as Dylan's fading vocal powers and erratic performances begin to feel like the norm. What Muir calls "this process of disenchantment" started in earnest in 2003, as he explains how "the NET for me had moved from being central to my life to being something of a side issue. Yes, I realize this is a shocking admission, but my role in this book is to tell you how it felt for me throughout the NET so it is only fair to record these thoughts, harbingers of a personal 'touring crisis' that hovers ominously, not far in the future." By 2005, Muir's "process of disenchantment" has reached the stage where he is vowing to only attend one Dylan show a year, instead of spending much of his disposable income on shadowing his musical hero. He "fell out of love with the NET," which leads to a lengthy disquisition in the book about Dylan's "authenticity" as an artist and the troubling, disparate critical views on Dylan's ability to actually communicate something genuine on stage. Essentially, Muir's doubts had smothered his original, all-consuming passion for the NET, with Dylan's compensatory tactics for the loss of his vocal powers - from his controversial 'upsinging' to his gargling, Wolfman' voice - raising more questions than answers. But, at the eleventh hour, like George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, Muir's faith is restored by **Christmas In The Heart** and a new, refocused Dylan in shows in late 2011. But read the book to find out how. *One More Night* represents the most comprehensive, lovingly detailed and passionately argued case for and against Bob Dylan's apparently endless musical travelling show.