

Here is the full transcript from the interview with me that Bob Wilson did for Live For Live Music. Naturally, they had space restrictions; however I am free of those here and so offer you the full interview that Bob was kind enough to conduct.

Numbered questions all from Bob Wilson.

1) Despite what many felt about the quality of the tour with the Grateful Dead (I myself liked it, despite the warts), it seems Dylan keyed into the way the Dead handled tours.

What thoughts come to your mind about how Dylan suddenly became the Road Warrior?

Well, we have Dylan's own explanation for this, the famous 'Epiphany at Locarno'. Certainly I credit the Grateful Dead in the book for the approach to the material both in the sense of fluid set lists and improvisation and undoubtedly Dylan wanted at that point to have a following and a touring experience like the Dead. He was later to turn against this idea as far as the followers went, quite viciously at times. The last chapter of the book – the second appendix – is my take on why he tours, using many quotes from himself. There are some interesting interview comments in 1986 too that are in a similar vein and, as we know, he has been touring every year since then, two years before the NET started. Someone asked him in Australia why he still toured/produced music and he more or less said the same thing about it being what he does. They pushed him by saying "but you don't have to" and his reply was that he wasn't sure about that, strongly implying he felt that maybe he did have to. Then, a year or so later he knew it was, in his own words, "I've got to go out and play these songs. That's just what I must do".

In *Razor's Edge*, the Dead get all the credit but – as with many other things in the books – evidence came to light in the intervening years that told another tale. It turns out that Dylan was the most adventurous one in suggesting material that they should cover.

2) The Never Ending Tour featured so many gems of cover songs. What songs were the true gold nuggets that stand out?

Oh Bob, we could be here all night! The traditional covers from the very beginning of the NET were absolutely outstanding, night after night for me the highlight of the shows. I think back to things like Barbara Allen, Trail of the Buffalo, The Lakes of Ponchartrain Little Moses, The Green Briar Shore...

There's so many....and then other types spring to mind, the religious openers in early 2000, the October shows in 2002 saw an explosion in covers, many of them exquisite. The Warren Zevon ones stand with the very best of the previous ones in my mind. There have been many other covers of modern artists that I have found extremely moving. I am particularly fond of his versions of Cohen's "Hallelujah", they have never been bettered in my mind, despite all the many other covers of that - ranging from the puerile to the beautiful. Dylan really gets hold of it; he tackles the song in a very committed way and makes it so powerful. I saw Cohen himself do it in Helsinki in 1985, that was special too but not a patch on Dylan's two. I love Peace In The Valley from 1989, I know Michael Gray for one does not share my opinion (to put it mildly!) I remember him ticking me off for something I wrote in praise of it once. It is all so subjective, though, isn't it? I thought Dylan's Moon River cover was a wonderful tribute to the recently deceased Stevie Ray Vaughan but I have found that to be very much a minority opinion.

3) Why do you feel there is such an obsession with fans in collecting tapes of so many Dylan shows?

That's quite a complicated area really. It's probably a mixture of positive and negative reasons. The positive reasons are to do with one of the main things behind the book and that is Dylan's constant recreation of his art. This means that every time he performs, be in the studio or live, there is every

likelihood that what you will get will be something new and fresh albeit the same song even in the same arrangement with the same backing musicians (far less the many times these also change.)

If you pause for a minute and actually try to bring to mind all the Dylan material that we currently have be it officially or an unofficial collections, the sheer quantity of quality material is staggering. And as each year seems to continually prove there is still even more that we didn't know about. Just before coming on to answer you I was listening to tracks from 1969-70 that I'd never even heard had existed, far less collected into my somewhat obsessive looking collection.

That brings us onto the negative side of 'collecting for collecting's sake'. It a personality trait that many people have, whether they are Dylan fans or not. I suffer from it – well I say suffer but it has its positive sides as well, such as researching books - and not just with Dylan.

I collected football (soccer) programs when I was young, then science fiction books in my later teens - also to obsessive degrees. When I was 18 I gave the former away and the last time I moved house I sold off, for a pittance, large parts of my SF collection. In the last couple of years I've taken nearly all of the rest to Oxfam. Collecting is a strange compulsion and even when I was collecting all my Dylan C 90s, I did hear a voice on my shoulder singing "While paupers change possessions, each one wishing for what the other has got". Wise words – not that I followed their warning.

4) Despite his own answers for it, what do Dylan's actions say about why he so limits stage banter?

I believe that he really just wants to concentrate on the music and each show as a show. There's little in show business as false as someone coming out and saying 'hello \*insert town name\* great to be here' every time you appear in one city or another. Most of the time with Dylan, I think the music does the talking more than eloquently enough. It also makes it all the more dramatic and noteworthy when he does talk to the audience. I know a lot of fans wish he would talk more on stage but you have to be careful what you wish for; some of the on-stage banter I quote in the book does not exactly do his reputation any favours. I really would have preferred not to have known that he was of the opinion that 'most people don't know Hitler wasn't German', for example. Mind you as time has passed by, I have probably grown more worried about the fact that nowadays he may even be right -- ha ha just ignore that, I'm slipping into 'old man speak': "this younger generation don't know they're born, you know?" and all that kind of nonsense, please stop me if I do it again.

5) Legend has it that Dylan may have staged the motorcycle accident to avoid touring obligations (i.e. "I can't do more shows"). Why do you think Dylan suddenly became so obsessed with touring?

I think I've answered this elsewhere, Bob – it's the last bit of the book again. The differences in the mid 60s situation are that he was in a terrible state at the end of the European 66 tour, the onerous schedule was being imposed by his manager and he was married with young kids.

6) LIVE AID was indeed a debacle, but it was easy enough for him to recuperate, and stand out at FARM AID.

Then you wrote so well about his MASTERS OF WAR debacle at the Grammys? ~What leads to these "misses".

It seems such a "tuned-in" guy would "get" the effect these shows have. Especially since he may perform so well a week later. It is like he courts the ire sometimes.

Part of it could be 'no publicity is bad publicity', that is, controversy sells. The amount of press coverage he got for the Grammys in '91 was amazing and quite a lot of it complimentary, which was unusual back then. Mainly, though, I think that long ago he just decided to do his own thing. If people didn't like it, so what? "Take me as I am or let me go" seems to be the attitude and it has worked so well for him throughout his entire career, why should he change? Even as I answer your questions, the "Self Portrait" era is being acclaimed – 'everybody comes round to my view eventually' must be how he sees it.

Live Aid I think was a terrible misjudgement, the chats the three amigos have in the rehearsals explain a lot of it. I go into this in some detail in the book; I can't really condense it all here for you. He was less sure footed in the mid 80s than at any other point in his career, I feel, and his intro to many years of NET shows agrees with that view. Still, without this period of artistic uncertainty we would not have got the NET, presumably – not when we did, anyway.

7) When Dylan's bands are tightest (such as under GE Smith), what aspects pull them together?

Is it usually the lead guitarist *de jour* pulling the band into a tight unit?

Yes, you'd have to say so in general and in Dylan's past bands but there was a sea change after G.E. departed. Since then, Tony has done a great deal to help things, I'm sure. He's such a survivor – there should be statues erected in honour of Tony's endurance.

8) Duke Robillard departed the tour recently very quickly. Any thoughts on what may have led to that?

The early signs were that it was quite acrimonious. I know it was quickly played down/smoothed over but I think there was a real rift. Duke is used to being his own man, running the show – perhaps he was taken aback at how Dylan likes to control everything on, what is after all, Dylan's stage. Perhaps the reasons are related to your last question.

9) What years were your favorites in the Never Ending tour? Any most favorite shows? What stands out?

1988 and 89 are definitely my favourite years. It was so new and thrilling in 88 and in 89 I saw my first N.E.T. shows live so that was also new and thrilling for me. After those years I have favourite bits of years rather than whole years. Like Spring 92 and 95, and late in the year a lot, come to think of it: ..91,97, 99, 2001, 2002... even in the years that were amongst my least favourite I often found the last leg the most rewarding. On the other hand, 2000 peaked in the first half of the year, though...oh there's too many years in it for me to generalise like this. The easy way for anyone to know exactly which portions are my 'favourites' and why is to read the book. "Buy, buy!!!" 😊

10) What happened at the show in Locarno, Switzerland to bring about the resurgence?

Listening to that show you can't actually hear anything particularly different There's not any evidence of Dylan's revelation (you could argue for such evidence some other night round about the same time, Basle perhaps (from memory), but not there. Still, memory is like that, we all construct our own pasts, things that we think for sure definitely happened actually did not. Or at least objectively speaking they didn't, subjectively they are "true" to us. I've no doubt Dylan feels and thinks this is what happened and that it happened during Locarno, maybe it did, it isn't necessarily the case that we'd hear anything to alert us to it on the recording. Or maybe it's a 'constructed

memory' combining different things that happened at that time, or maybe it happened exactly like he describes and he got the venue mixed up. Lots of "maybe"s!

11) Any thoughts on how fantastic some of the Gospel Tour shows sound on tape (etc.), and how vicious some of the reviews were at the time? -Is avoiding the ire why TEMPEST was not the "overtly religious" album Bob says he maybe should have released?

I definitely don't think he's avoiding the ire. For two reasons, one is, as Gregory Peck said: 'Bob Dylan's never been about to get out of town before the shooting starts' and secondly nobody is vicious to him nowadays. Virtually everything he does or says is interpreted in a favourable light. The mainstream media's approach to Dylan has gone from one extreme at the beginning of the never ending tour when he could do no right to the other know where it seems he can hardly ever do anything wrong. In any case ,as Bob has always proved, controversy sells.

Did he even mean it literally, I wonder? He does tend to say a lot of things that are just to wind people up. To be fair, lots of them turn out to be true in time. Like advertising 'ladies' undergarments'.

He has said in the past that he would do an album of children songs, did he mean that? I thought he was just making a point about not being pigeon-holed, a point underlined by protest singer *par exemplar*, Woody Guthrie having done just that. To remind people he was, after all is said and done a song and dance man. On the other hand, if he had said he would release a traditional Christmas album one day, I'd have presumed that a wind up too; so, it's important to keep an open mind on his pronouncements. And, you know, you could probably construct an album's worth of released children's songs: Man Gave Names, This Old Man, Froggie Goes A –Courtin', Tattle O' Day a couple from *under the red sky* and a few from *Christmas In The Heart* and,...sorry I've drifted off topic....

His 'religious album' comment may have another element to it and that is that Dylan must be sick and tired of people asking what his religion affiliation/beliefs is/are. He probably thinks it as ludicrous a question to ask a singer than when people asked him about US foreign policy.

I mean, he was constantly asked this even when he was singing hymns like I Am The Man, Thomas, Pass Me Not, O Gentle Saviour, Somebody Touched Me, Rock of ages and so forth.... How insulting and ignorant was that? He must have felt utter contempt for those questioning him.

I think he takes a kind of revenge by sending people off on wild goose chases and watches it unfold in a predictable manner in the years that follow. Remember he made that remark re critics not spotting that he'd based an album on Chekhov short stories? That's turned out exactly as I am sure he knew it would. Everyone seems to think Dylan meant *Blood On The Tracks* (I am not sure he did, but that's by the by) and you now read time after time, casually mentioned, as though it is either obvious to all or at least to the well read journalist/critic/blogger you are reading at the time that *Blood On The Tracks* is based on Chekhov short stories.

Now I've read Chekhov many times in my life, in different translations. I'm not obsessed with him like I am with Dostoyevsky where I've read everything multiple times over and compared different translations chapter by chapter, but still I've read him on and off since around the time I first heard *Blood On The Tracks* and I've never noticed a connection. That's not to say I am particularly clever at such things, I may just have missed something obvious.

On the other hand I did notice a connection between one short story, in one particular translation, (and suspected it was not strong in the other translation I had read it in years before from memory, which I later corroborated) and "Shooting Star", so you would think that if I noticed that I'd have

clocked the whole of *Blood On The Tracks* being based on a particular collection. You can make connections, but then you can make connections between artists very easily. I remember in **Homer, the slut** someone opened an article with a paragraph that you would swear blind must be about Dylan but was actually about Charles Dickens. There are thematic similarities at times with Chekhov and some stylistic parallels but then, as I say, there are with a multitude of other artists too, it is inevitable and, in any case, this is a far cry from “based on”.

Perhaps it is all very obvious to others out there and they are just not pointing it out but I think it more likely Bob was having fun, knowing that it would soon pass from “Bob Dylan said....” to definitive statements all across the media to it as an accepted fact and obvious to anyone by people who’ve probably never read Chekhov in their lives. Even if it is absolutely factual, I think he’d still enjoy saying it just for this reason; he still likes “needling” folk. Which is good, we all need to be needled every now and again – it keeps us on our toes.

12) What shows should a newcomer seek out to collect first?

Easy answer is to say start at the very beginning and work your way through show by show! However, I am not sure there is enough time for anyone to do that and I suspect it’d drive you mad to try it.

The opposite extreme is probably the sanest advice – just dive in anywhere and see where it takes you. We tend to automatically think in terms of years, whereas for the NET there are so many different legs per year; different moods, bands, arrangements. What to collect? All of 88; a big sample from beginning, middle and end of 89 and 90. Stuttgart 91 (everyone should suffer) then jump to autumn 91 and compare that with Wilkes-Barre, Madison (which Bob hated but he sounded fabulous), Ames. Follow the beginning of 92 and note how Idiot Wind developed, grab a hold of Mr Tambourine Man and follow its development through every show in Spring 95 ....and so forth, it’s too big a subject to just answer like this. Overwhelming large choice.....Prague 95 is a must, all three shows, but there’s so many different periods that deserve collecting all of their own. 2001 closing tour, 2002 from October onwards, 1997 pre and post illness; legs with album debuts featuring prominently.

13) When old BOOTLEG SERIES releases come out, they are often viewed as Masterpieces. Privately, do you think in some way Dylan struggles with that? As he has said, you can't compete with your younger self.

I don’t think he struggles with it any longer. I assume it may have been a bit of a problem when the shows and his current albums were being regularly panned. Again the contrast with the beginning of the Never Ending Tour and now could not be stronger. It would be presumptuous in the extreme for me to say that I knew it bothered him back then and into the 90s - but it is really hard to imagine that it didn’t, especially when he turned 50 and the *Bootleg Series volumes 1 to 3* came out to acclaim while contemporaneous shows and *under the red sky* were routinely savaged. You would think that would get to anyone, even Dylan.

Against that, you could argue that so many times in his life he has been right to stick to his own opinion and ignore those of others so perhaps he just ignores all the fuss about his past achievements. Generally speaking, however, I don’t think any artist would like to continually be competing with his past self, I think you’d have to put it completely out of your mind otherwise creating something new and true to the self you now are would be almost impossible.

Nonetheless, I don't think it's been a struggle, if it ever was, since 1997. Ever since *Time Out Of Mind* he's been riding the crest of an extraordinary wave; his current work has consistently been acclaimed as masterpieces of a stature commensurate with his previous achievements.

Still, I can't imagine he enjoys it, who would? But I think it would long have ceased to have been a struggle.

14) Dylan has surprised us so many times. Any ideas on how long the touring may keep up at this pace? Any news on what he may be writing now?

As far as touring goes - absolutely no idea and that's the way I like it! It is how it has always been and how it should be.

I remember Clinton Heylin reporting that Susan Ross claimed Dylan had told her that he knew when he was going to stop touring, had already decided. However as we all know, and as Dylan himself put it, his moods are like clouds: he has one, it moves along to be replaced by another. So whether that was ever true or something he said but has since forgotten about/changed his mind on, or it is something she claims he said and he didn't, or that he does indeed have a long-planned date to call a halt on in mind, I doubt we'll ever know.

As long as he's healthy, the pace doesn't seem to be bothering him. I know by the second song he's sweating buckets every night but that's been the case for a very long time. He seems to be enjoying the shows in the last few years as much as at any time, he has kept touring at times when he seemed considerably less fit and enthusiastic than he has so far this decade. So I see no reason to fear the touring is going to stop.

There have been rumours about stopping for so long now that I just can't really pay much attention to them. I think 1990 was the first time there was a groundswell of opinion that it was going to end. Of course, one day it will, and someone who has just predicted it will say: "told you so".

Having said all of which, honesty compels me to admit that I try to make a point of going to the last show of the European tours just in case it turns out to be the last show of the NET. Then again, I have been doing that for years now too and will continue to do so for as long as he keeps going. That is down to my own repetitive, slightly compulsive, behaviour rather than any fore-knowledge.

This interview is beginning to make me feel uncomfortably as though I have not shaken off quite as much of my Dylan obsession as I am wont to think that I have. Most 'normal' people still think me totally obsessed, but I am nowhere near the level I once was or so many others currently are. Honest, your honour ☺.

As to your second question again I've also absolutely no idea, but in this case that's not the way I like it!

15) Any thoughts on the COPYRIGHT ALBUM release from about a year ago?

That was quite an odd situation, you can see why they wanted to do it but on the other hand they must have realised it would just lead to an absolute deluge of bootlegs and other copies. I see the laws have been changed - the copyright has extended to 70 years rather than 50 from now on, so it will be 2034 before 1964 could be treated the same way. I think that is the case, anyway. I've not followed this particularly closely, sorry - I am deep into another book now, not Bob this time, and never have time. It is on my "to do list" though.