

Forty Years of Good Road

It is becoming something of a tradition now. Every two years Dylan comes to Britain to play shows that leave me bemoaning that my book on the ‘never-ending tour’ ended with the 2011 shows because the ones I just witnessed would have made a better, more uplifting, conclusion to that work. I put this very strongly in 2013 and again, though perhaps with a little less force, in 2015. It is now 2017, and, yes, I’m about to say the same once more and with close to the urgency of my 2013 complaint.

It is not that I didn’t enjoy 2015. The Royal Albert Hall was splendid and the stage set this year was very reminiscent of then, though more theatrical, more dynamic and yet carefully paced with the interweaving ‘blocks’ of older songs, songs since *Time Out of Mind*, the five *Tempest* offerings and the ‘Sinatra covers’ as we call them, in shorthand.

Once again the shows were more impressive than any I covered in the last decade of my book. Of course, the ‘never ending tour’ has changed radically since then. Its once core principle of ever changing set lists, and/or ever-changing style even if the song(s) stayed the same, being replaced with what has come to be termed “The Set” in an attempt to summarise the monolithic nature of nightly, near repetition.

The covers from the recent albums take my mind back to a time I scorned such music. I remember queuing for days for tickets back in 1978 in Glasgow. I think it was on the last night of the queue that Frankie Vaughan appeared from The Pavilion across the road from where we were queuing, after he had finished a gig there. We gave an ironic cheer. Quite poignantly he thought it was a genuine cheer and acknowledged the crowd happily. It was then sad to see his face fall as he realised the situation. We were quickly paid back for our bad manners when passing punks, on the way back from whatever they had just seen, poured vitriolic scorn, in a way only Glaswegians can, on the assembled motley crew sleeping rough for the night waiting on Dylan tickets. As striking a social commentary on different generations in three scenes as many playwrights would spend a lifetime reaching for had passed my eyes in a few minutes. Thinking back to that now I wonder how many songs that Frankie Vaughan performed that night were performed at the Dylan shows I witnessed in 2017. What goes around, comes around?

My thoughts on the shows are all from the experience themselves, as I have not seen or listened to them since. I realise that upon doing so I may change my opinions but that is the risk you take when reviewing straight after events and not having time to listen and re-listen.

I thought that the Friday and Saturday nights at the Palladium – a weekend of shows crying out for bootlegs with the obvious titles - were excellent shows. The fact the set-list was unchanging did not disappoint me at all, though it did feature songs I would not want to hear ever again if possible. No, not the mostly gorgeous covers, but what I nastily refer to as ‘In Here Lies Nothing’ and ‘Spiritless’. At the other end of the scale of quality ‘Love Sick’ was outstanding and ‘Desolation Row’ topped even that, in sensational style. I was told of a review, an enthusiastic one if I recall correctly, which managed to omit any mention of Desolation Row. One is reminded of Paul Cable’s comment re the BBC’s “Story of Pop” which attempted to tell the story of the 1960s without mentioning Dylan; Cable opined that it was like writing about the story of The Bible and not mentioning Jesus. I don’t think “Stormy Weather” worked at all but the other covers ranged from good to superb.

On Friday, as companion David Bristow noted ‘the bad bits were very bad and good bits were very, very good’. The good bits were the vast majority. As I say, ‘Love Sick’, ‘Desolation Row’ and all but one of the covers were outstanding as were others and even bits of others. ‘Pay in Blood’ seemed to

open badly but then picked up, for example, on the Friday. On Saturday things were more consistent. 'Stormy Weather' wasn't so bad, for example, but 'Desolation Row' probably wasn't quite as good.

'Tangled up In Blue' was another highlight each night and featured the most melodramatic of all staging. His postures, dramatic poses and wonderfully unique and affecting way of walking around all added to a distinctly theatrical (in the sense of dramatic staging) ambience. The band know exactly what to do and allow him to flourish in the secure knowledge that they will give him what he wants in every song. All five of the band were very impressive and together they brought subtle textures, driving rock and gorgeous pedal steel into the mix. For Dylan, there's no guitar or harmonica, there's a string of unused stationary microphones at the front of the stage and there's Bob, carrying and dragging a large mike stand around.

Although I was intrigued with the walk and postures, there's no doubt that he was moving very strangely. I hope he's not in any physical discomfort and is just missing his harmonicas. He wandered all over the place as though he was looking for one. Perhaps, however, he's omitting them to preserve lung power for singing. If so, it is a big success as the range, nuance (especially in the covers) and power seem startlingly improved on a decade ago. I don't really understand how a 75-year-old's voice sounds better than when he was 65 - but however he has managed that feat, I love the results.

Tempest provides no fewer than five songs per show. 'Long and Wasted Years' and 'Soon After Midnight' are probably my two favourite songs from the album and although they now play a less important part of the overall set I still like to hear them. "What a blithering fool he took me for" sang bob and my heart melted. Again. 'Early Roman Kings', the ill advised and ill-fitting 'Roll On John' aside, is the song I least like on *Tempest* but I liked it at the Palladium and, to jump forward a bit, even more so at Glasgow. 'Duquesne Whistle', which I find somewhat of a throwaway number, was a jaunty interlude carefully placed in the set's overall design and 'Pay In Blood' is still a powerful and apt-to-these-grim-times number.

So I was very happy at the end of my Palladium visits. As an aside to the shows there was a small postscript to Friday. Joe McShane, having for some reason failed to score a ticket for the Friday night, was waiting to join us after the show. He spotted Bob's car and rushed after it like a teenage groupie, obviously forgetting he is of an age to be grandfather to such a one (some folk never grow up, eh? You'd never catch me....etc.). Joe was devastated to see Bob looking absolutely drained and shattered almost beyond description. We had to reassure him that the Bob we had just witnessed performing was opposite to what he had seen and the reason he looked in the state was that he had left everything on the stage, once again.

I was with Joe again the following Sunday at Glasgow. Joe had seen the Saturday and Sunday at the Palladium and Cardiff in midweek but felt the Glasgow show was the best of this lot. For me it was the opposite but there could be many reasons for that. Firstly, I have sleep apnoea and must sleep with a breathing mask. That mask was not functioning the night before so by the time Bob hit the stage I was more than ready to hit a pillow and go for a long sleep. Secondly, the security was a lot more obtrusive or at least it was around me. Lord knows I am pleased they've clamped down on mobile phones, as the sight of a sea of thousands of them throughout 2011's shows still sends a chill down my spine, but a Mr Manson – whom I'd known of before, but had just met for the first time – was stopped from using opera glasses. I can't see what harm there was in that, but what was obtrusive was security clambering all over us to get to him. On the second London night, in contrast, I was lucky enough to be with young Lauren Macready. She was heading off after the gig, and so she had a sizeable bag with her. As she entered the venue, security gave that the most cursory of

“inspections” and waved her in. I’ve a feeling it would not have been the same in Glasgow. I used Bob’s kindly placement of ‘Spirit in the Water’ as an intermission and quizzed the security staff about the small binoculars and why they were a problem. They were very pleasant and sympathetic but said it was rules from “Dylan’s people” and they had to comply with these instructions.

Mainly, however, it’s hardly surprising that I found the first night the most impressive having not seen him since 2015. The following night, although very fine, perhaps even finer overall, was the same set list as I had seen in the night before and the rush of seeing Dylan for the first time since 2015 could no longer be present. Or in the case of Glasgow it was less than a week since I’d seen him. This time though I had changes to the set list. I’ve dearly loved ‘To Ramona’ since I first heard it, which must be approaching 45 years ago, and I hadn’t seen it on this tour but it did very little for me. I thought ‘Don’t Think Twice’ had worked far better. None of this is to say that I didn’t enjoy the show though. After all, how could I not when it featured, as far as I could tell, the finest of the three Desolation Rows I heard with every one being a standout in the respective shows. ‘Love Sick’ was another dramatic centrepiece once again and ‘Stormy Weather’ really worked for the first time for me. We were also treated to a live debut, another song from *Tripligate* namely: ‘This Nearly Was Mine’. Also ‘That Old Black Magic’ was a joy. Hey, wait a minute, perhaps Joe has a point, for once. Even better, he’d messed up our ticket arrangements again and so once again I was seated beside a lovely lady, this time Alison Meenagh, instead of him. Bonuses all round on this mini-tour for me.

The strange but enchanting walking around the stage that I had seen from Dylan at the Palladium had much diminished by Glasgow. I still vividly recall seeing Dylan’s legs, under the piano, as he gave himself a little warm-up before ‘Tangled Up In Blue’ started on April 28th. Then he went for an extended stroll around the stage, looking for all the world as though he was surprised his harmonicas were not there, as though it was another surprise that there wasn’t a magic door in the wall for him to disappear through. We did now have much more movement of his hat, instead, as he put it on and took it off, song per song, as the set progressed. I am glad I caught it then because a week later it seemed to have all but vanished.

So, I saw three cracking shows in two lovely, intimate venues: ‘thanks for coming, Bob’ as dear old Lambchop used to holler. Each night ended with an intense ‘Ballad Of A Thin Man’ driving home the point, with quite some force, that something is still happening whenever the Bobster is around.

I worry, as I always do, about when or if I’ll see him again. Apart from all the other possible reasons, the world is deteriorating rapidly and carefree international travel may become a thing of the past. I was at a writer’s talk at a university recently and the author mentioned how, for people his age – late fifties, so mine also – there’s a realisation that the world we grew up in has vanished forever. Before I get too melancholy however, I’ve worried about not seeing him again since my first shows in 1978. Forty years of fearfully thinking “this could be the last time.... may be the last time, I don’t know”. And forty years of continuing to see Him again - long may we run.