



# BOB DYLAN AND HIS BAND



20TEN20ELEVEN

**Well, where are we? Yes, it's been a while since The Snake got back into Bobland. Two years have passed since the release of both the great Rothbury summer soundboard and the Amsterdam trilogy, that brilliantly captured the three Heineken Hall concerts. So let's turn back the clock to find out where we are going.**

During the summer 2009 tour Dylan was joined by old compadre Charlie Sexton for one show only. The renewed collaboration worked so well that Charlie was invited on a permanent basis in Dylan's band for the U.S. autumn that year. Old guitarist Denny Friedman left and with him some of the stabled setlists and an ungoing lack of interest from the singer finally got rid of the stage. It took both Dylan and Sexton a while to find each other. More important, as a man who seldom looks back, Dylan had to work on a new show. Most of 2010 Dylan searched for a new platform to reach his audiences all over the world. Reports from the summer 2010 European tour were great. Dylan found some of that missing fire and he started experimenting with a new presentation of his stage act. Standing frontstage with just a microphone and a harmonica he blew new life into old classics.

He returned to Europe for a brief number of mostly outdoor shows in the summer of 2011. Now fans really became ecstatic: in Hamburg Dylan played a show that neared perfection. At the age of 70 the artist then played at Alactraz, a tiny club in Milan for a crazy audience of just 2,000 fans. He delivered a tour-de-force that left us with probably the definitive version of "Can't Wait". So fans were delighted to hear in August that Dylan would return to Europe for an extended autumn tour.



But the press update also brought us the news that Mark Knopfler would be co-headliner on all shows. The usual 17-song setlist would be brought down to 14 and, with expensive ticket prices (varying from € 70 to more than € 110 in Germany and Scandinavia – as always strong markets for the man), many fans felt somehow betrayed by the way this tour was promoted.

Yes, this tour was a long one and quite some euro cash was made during those 34 shows that started on October 6<sup>th</sup> in Dublin and ended six weeks later with the much raved about Hammersmith triple finale. As always, it took Dylan quite some gigs to finally get into the groove, but by the time he and his fabulous combo hit Bournemouth and Nottingham all hell broke loose. Dylan spent about half of the show frontstage, facing his fans with crazy dance moves, hypnotic harp solos and most of all some extraordinary singing. OK I know, before we go into a discussion of his latest singing, let me clear the picture for you. For the last 23 years of the so-called "Never Ending Tour", Dylan has rarely been praised by the press for his vocal abilities. For sure, he ain't the choirboy of the early sixties, or the syllable pumping maniac of the seventies.

Now as a 70 year old performer, Dylan sings differently. Some people call his voice shot. That's partly true, but I bet you ten bucks you won't be on the same planet after hearing this recording from Rotterdam.

Because not only in Rotterdam, but for all of the European shows, Dylan embarked on a never seen war on stage. Going through all motions, delivered with a rare punch and vitality, he revisited his back catalogue with the guts of a man half his age.

So let's go to that October 20<sup>th</sup> night at the Ahoy Hall in Rotterdam. Sold out weeks in advance, Dylan hit the stage just before 10 PM for a 14-song set and left drenched in sweat some 87 minutes later. He stormed on stage with a note perfect "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat": not so much a warming up act as during previous Dutch visits, but singing the "Blonde On Blonde" evergreen with power and precision. Sexton threw some dirty licks out of his Gretsch while the rest of the band performed with fire and skills as if to hit the last flight to New York. While previous concerts in Holland featured quite some guitar work from Dylan, this time he touched and played his Fender for song number two only: a reinvented "It Ain't Me Babe", slowed down during the chorus to stop the massive singing from the 8,000 devotees. Next was a double speeded-up "Things Have Changed", with Dylan being centre stage. For those who attended this show, these days centre stage is an understatement in the Dylan logbook. For the second verse Dylan ran like a hungry tiger from left to right, stopped for a second, blew an out of the blue Chicago drenched harp solo and forced a second attack to the bewildered front row fans.

Oh yes, that voice again! It was harsh, croaky and full of gravel, nothing new in there. But his almost commanding will to get somewhere with that raspy instrument made many fans cry. And that's where we arrive at the first of the higher-than-highlights. The way Dylan got his teeth into "Mississippi" was no less than sensational. Gone was the "Love And Theft" melody, in came the bluesy waltz arrangement: demanding and teasing at the same time. Both "Hard Rain" and "High Water" stood side by side as if they were composed during the same year: words and music melted into a new territory of performing art. This was Dylan, the song and dance man who finally found his confidence on stage.

Commanding rhythm changes to bass player Tony Garnier, nodding to powerhouse drummer George Recile and smiling during keyboard solos to pedal steel player Donnie Herron.

Second time stood-still moment: "Blind Willie McTell". For those who did not witness this tour de force during these European gigs: check out Bob's latest version on the net at Martin Scorsese's private party. Hell yeah, it sounds nowhere near the studio version, nor can one make comparison with the great, but traditional versions during the '97-'99 gigs. This time the maestro transformed the song into a run and stop game with fabulous harmonica breaks. The last couple of years some fans complained about the one-note-keyboard playing. Well, you'd better check out the Rotterdam versions of both "Highway 61 Revisited" and "The Levee's Gonna Break": it seemed that Bob was definitively on a roll during this European tour: New Orleans swing jazz, Nashville country jangle and Memphis rockabilly beat, it's all to be found during these two songs. The keyboard is mixed high in the mix to prove Dylan's point: better one keyboard player in the band than none at all!

Which brings us to the third momentum of the show: a note perfect rendition of the "Modern Times" classic "Working Man Blues". Superb singing, gentle phrasing and lots of black humor to be found in the slightly altered lyrics. Finally all fans inside the Ahoy rose out of their seats for a song that is now, for more than three years, the epic show-stopper, night after night. "Ballad Of A Thin Man" exploded without smoke bombs or cheap fireworks. The chorus got a magnificent reverb echo, Dylan slammed all over the stage like a warrior, pointing his hand like a shadow boxer and singing every line like we were thrown back in the time machine to the 1966 Royal Albert Hall slaughterhouse.



Of course, both "All Along The Watchtower" and "Like A Rolling Stone" have been far too long on the encore list, but even these stables were performed with enough conviction to close your eyes and hear a dedicated performer making his final statement.

This was a night to remember and The Snake did an excellent job finding the best tapes, remastering them with respect for the original grooves and presenting them on a single disc. 87 minutes of ragged glory: if Dylan decided to stop after this extraordinary European tour, your next best seat inside the Ahoy is right there in your living room with this album. Play it loud!

*The Gentlemen's Club Of Spalding Treasurer*