

Review by Chris Franklin

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Last night's concert was a great gig, but this time, I've got front row and have been treated to amazing performances already today by Paul Kelly and Gurrumul Yunupingu prior.

The set up is precise as always. The pony tailed roadie 'leader' is in control, mics are tested and cleaned. The Grammy sits proudly on the amp. The big white harp mic lies in waiting. This is the first tour I have seen Dylan step out and play harp as a solo instrument, away from the guitar and keyboard.

Hard ass Dylan fans have been waiting front row for over 12 hours. Watching the roadies set up is an exciting part of the gig. The repetition, and exact nature of where everything is positioned conjures barked orders from Bob over the years to hone the process to minimum set up time. Any minute now 'that' recording will announce from the darkened arena, the arrival of this crazy revolving door.

Dylan struts onto the stage but immediately steps back off, something is not as it should be, Seconds later Dylan returns followed furiously by 'Pony Tail' roadie and 'Stiff Leg' roadie. Heads bowed like naughty children, earlier in their element, in control, confident, but now desperately at Dylan's side with the missing set list. I'm sure that wont happen again at the next gig.

Dressed in black, red pin stripe, white hat, one leg up on the rail underneath the keyboard, Dylan starts bouncing to the first tune. Between 15 and 20 times I have seen Dylan since '86, and I still can't work out what is really happening here. A true Mr Jones I am. The grimaces which look like smiles, the head twists, the flicking of the hair, the back leg strutting out, and the barking of each line as he thrusts these gems at us with gusto.

This tour I feel his playing, keyboard and guitar, are more pronounced and distinctive. Audible and melodic. Definitely more fancy than the one-note solos of tours past. Bob is more in control, Tony is more set back. And the subtleties are hypnotic.

During 'Spirit on the Water', Tony is thrust into a panic, as his double bass is not properly tuned. His head spinning to find his tech, his mouth roaring "FLAT" or "F%#&" I cant quite decipher. His fingers flicking and tuning between notes in lightening speed to desperately get the beast inline with his colleagues. Touring with Bob would have its dull repetitive moments I'm sure, but a single miscalculation or lapse in perfection and the wrath of two beady eyes from across the stage, drives these grown men into a panic and frenzy at the slightest hiccup.

Charlie Sexton adds a sideline of animation to the show, he struts and plucks centre stage, almost swimming over, behind and through some of Bob's finer moments, but never in front of. Bob is the attraction here and Bob leads with vocal, solo and style, in Bob's mind and everybody else's.

Highway 61 drapes the stages in deep red; the logo behind oozes a crimson resonance as Bob growls out this most famous fable. More a rhythmic shaman now, Dylan entrances his gathered tribe into an angry, scowling dual between his voice, his keyboard and the rest of the band. There is definitely a solo battle between the keyboard and Charlie's guitar. Back and forward they parry and thrust. Donnie Herron on pedal steel, rocks to and fro, challenging Bob to take it further, smiling broadly, and handshaking Bob in between songs in congratulations.

First of a two-song encore, Bob launches into the most popular tune of the 21st century, Like a Rolling Stone, and drives it with an amazing force. This song will be covered forever more, it's an incredible feeling standing 30 feet from the creator as he belts it out across the ocean air of Byron Bay Australia. Charlie solos briefly towards the end, and Dylan as casual as you like, left hand resting on the side of the keyboard, right hand adding the iconic organ wail, nods his masterpiece to a close.

At this point, Bob speaks to the audience in showman melody...

"Well thankyou frieeeeennnnds, wanna introduce my band right now, its Stu Kimbal playin on eerrrr... rhytym guitar... Stu Kimball.

Donnie Herron playin on steel guitaaarrrrrr..., Charlie Sexton playin on electric GUITaaaarrrrr, [Bob continues needling on his keyboard behind his introductions, and Charlie drops to his haunches as Bob introduces the back line] ... George Recile playin on the drums.... Tony Garnieeeeerrr playin on the bass GUITaaaarrrrrrr....

And with that - straight into 'Forever Young'. This song is anthemic and apt for Bob turning 70 this year. The show's end is signalled with the obligatory line up of serious band faces 'frontish' of stage, with Bob in the middle raising his arms oh very slightly. No smiles, no individual acknowledgments, just a band of mean looking cowboys having shot up the crowd with all the ammo they got. Bob nods and it's back to the horses to get the hell out of this here one horse town.

Or at least that is how I was imagining it to be.

The stage darkens and Bob is gone. And so concludes an amazing road trip of 4,794 kms by car, train, bus, scooter, tram, taxi and foot. Four concerts, Adelaide, Melbourne and two at Byron Bays' Bluesfest, a support by BB King and two front row shows.

Until the next tour Bob.

Chris Franklin