

Get ready for Bob Dylan's set at ACL Fest with our Dylan primer
You might wonder which Bob Dylan you're going to hear at ACL; here's our advice for tuning in

By Thomas G. Palaima

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"But me, I'm still on the road
Headin' for another joint"

- Bob Dylan, "Tangled Up in Blue"

Bob Dylan is heading to Austin to close the ACL Festival on Sept. 16. Troubadour, blues songster, pop balladeer, old-timey minstrel, singer of gospel hymns and country and western tunes - and introduced in concerts now as "the man who forced folk into bed with rock" - Dylan and his evolving traveling band are in their 20th year of what his fans call the Never Ending Tour.

If you are heading to the festival, you might wonder which Dylan you are going to hear. The straight answer is none and all of the above - and more. Forty-five years into his recording career and bearing down on 50 official albums, Dylan has mined virtually every American musical genre. His songwriting, singing and playing are always in the moment and full of experiment.

Credited with writing more than 450 songs, Dylan has performed live at least that many songs by other artists. He has sung Ricky Nelson's "Lonesome Town," Gordon Lightfoot's "Early Morning Rain," the Davis Sisters' No. 1 1953 country hit "I Forgot More Than You'll Ever Know," Hank Williams' "House of Gold," Woody Guthrie's "Deportees" and the White Stripes' "Ball and Biscuit."

When Warren Zevon was dying of lung cancer, Dylan on tour sang moving versions of Zevon's "Mutineer" and "Accidentally Like a Martyr." One of Dylan's birthday gifts for Willie Nelson's Big Six-O was a pathos-laden rendering of Stephen Foster's "Hard Times." No wonder that in his first major film, Dylan played a character named Alias ("Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid").

My advice to festival-goers at the Dylan set: Imagine yourself at a studio recording session where musicians are surprising one another. Expect to be awed and baffled.

If you are fond of particular songs or stylistic phases, you might get lucky and not even know it. The spare blues style of Dylan's lead guitarist, Austinite Denny Freeman, has moved once-familiar songs even deeper into uncharted territories.

Dylan and his band might have spontaneous plans of their own. But the more you know about the many Dylans, the more you will dig the sounds they are making. Here are some things you can do to increase your enjoyment.

Dylan is an oral poet. Read his lyrics on www.bobdylan.com. Luckily for us, the band and Dylan's voice will be coming off a 20-day break.

Judging by recent concerts, about half the 16-song set will come from the last three widely acclaimed albums: "Time Out of Mind" (1997), "Love and Theft" (2001) and last year's ironically titled "Modern Times."

Get prepared by listening to songs on those albums. Recent concert standards include "Summer Days," "High Water," "Nettie Moore," "Not Dark Yet," "Love Sick," and "Workingman's Blues #2." Also revisit earlier classics such as "Like a Rolling Stone," "All Along the Watchtower," "Highway 61 Revisited," "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," "Lay, Lady, Lay," "Watching the River Flow," and "Tangled Up in Blue."

But, remember, anything can happen.

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Dylan concert primer

Whether you are in Dylan grad school or kindergarten, here are some of the many Dylans you can get to know better before the concert. The official album releases of these songs are listed under lyrics at www.bobdylan.com. Live or video versions can be viewed on YouTube.

Politics

'We live in a political world'

-'Political World'

Although many think Dylan turned his back on political causes when he went electric in 1965, his songs, including those on this list, have continued to offer bracingly honest social criticism:

'Oxford Town,' 1963

'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall,' 1963

'John Brown,' 1963

'The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll,' 1964

'George Jackson,' 1971

'Hurricane,' 1975

'Slow Train,' 1979

'Union Sundown,' 1983

'License to Kill,' 1983

'Clean-Cut Kid,' 1985

'Political World,' 1989

'Not Dark Yet,' 1997

'Workingman's Blues #2,' 2006

Love

'This kind of love, I'm love sick.'

-'Love Sick'

Oral historian Studs Terkel nailed it in 1963 when he said a Dylan love song lets us know that love isn't all 'moon, June, spoon':

'Girl of the North Country,' 1963

'To Ramona,' 1964

'It Ain't Me, Babe,' 1964

'Just Like a Woman,' 1966

'Love is Just a Four-Letter Word,' 1967

'Lay, Lady, Lay,' 1969

'You Angel You,' 1973

'Simple Twist of Fate,' 1974

'Shot of Love,' 1981

'Ugliest Girl in the World,' 1987

'Blood in My Eyes,' 1993

'Love Sick,' 1997

'Moonlight,' 2001

'Nettie Moore,' 2006

God

'Well, God is in his heaven'

-'Blind Willie McTell'

Inside and outside of his gospel-flavored born-again period (1979-81), Dylan has speculated on God's mysterious presence in our wide, wide world:

'With God on Our Side,' 1963

'I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,' 1968

'Three Angels,' 1970

'Gotta Serve Somebody,' 1979

'When He Returns,' 1979

'Solid Rock,' 1980

'Every Grain of Sand,' 1981

'Foot of Pride,' 1983

'Ring Them Bells,' 1989

'God Knows,' 1990

'Tryin' To Get To Heaven,' 1997

Family

'There was a little boy and there was a little girl'

-'Under the Red Sky'

Dylan knows what it is to be somebody's dad or mom. My son loved to be lullabyed to the images and sounds of 'Desolation Row' and 'Delia,' but the following Dylan songs fit a more traditional bill. Try singing the beautiful wishes in 'Forever Young' to your own sweet kids without getting misty-eyed:

'Forever Young,' 1973

'Under the Red Sky,' 1990

'Diamond Joe,' 1992

'Froggie Went A Courtin',' 1992

Folk and blues

'Strap yourself to the tree with roots'

-'You Ain't Goin' Nowhere'

Dylan has claimed Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie as prime inspirations. And he once called Smokey Robinson 'America's greatest living poet.' For his folk and blues roots, listen to the following recordings and then read www.bobdylanroots.com.

'Bob Dylan,' Columbia 1962

'The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3,' Columbia 1991

'Good as I Been to You,' Columbia 1992

'World Gone Wrong,' Columbia 1993

'No Direction Home,' Columbia 2005

'Bob Dylan: Live at the Gaslight 1962,' Columbia 2005

'My Back Pages'

If you have time to read only one thing about Dylan, make it the Rolling Stone interview (Nov. 22, 2001) with Mikal Gilmore, in Jonathan Colt's collection, 'Bob Dylan: The Essential Interviews' (2006). Dylan can smell phonies a million miles away. Gilmore's older brother is Gary Gilmore, subject of Norman Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning 'Executioner's Song.' Dylan knew he was talking with someone who had been through some of life's what's what. And it shows.

Then move to Dylan's own autobiography, 'Chronicles Volume 1,' followed by MOJO magazine's 2005 compilation of Dylan pieces: 'Dylan: Visions, Portraits and Back Pages.' Even Bono's celebrity introduction is real.

Bob and others

'The 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration,' Columbia 1993: star renditions of 28 Dylan classics.

'A Nod to Bob,' Red House 2001: 14 Dylan songs done by folk and blues artists, including Austin's Eliza Gilkyson.

'Gotta Serve Somebody: The Gospel Roots of Bob Dylan,' Columbia 2003: Gospel artists and Aaron Neville give 11 Dylan gospel compositions the full treatment. Old flame and gospel great Mavis Staples pairs with Dylan on the closing 'Gonna Change My Way of Thinking.'

'Postcards of the Hanging: The Grateful Dead Perform the Songs of Bob Dylan,' Grateful Dead/Wea 2002: live versions by the band that toured with Dylan in 1987.

'Garcia Plays Dylan,' Rhino/Wea 2005: Jerry, that is.

Jimmy LaFave, 'Austin Skyline,' Bohemia Beat 1992: Of all the artists who have covered Dylan, LaFave may enhance Dylan's lyrics the most, because he appreciates Dylan as a vocalist. Of the four live Dylan songs here, give special attention to 'Shelter from the Storm.'

- Thomas G. Palaima