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BOB DYLAN'S ODYSSEY – BACK HOME IN AUSTIN

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BY TOM PALAIMA

Bob Dylan's odyssey—Dylan's devoted fans think of the last quarter century of Dylan's performance career wishfully as the "never-ending tour"—began in 1959 when Dylan, then Robert Zimmerman, was about as old as Telemachus, the college-age son of Odysseus, is at the opening of the "Odyssey," Homer's unsurpassed amalgamation of folk songs about the long, hard roads traveled by a fully human and world-weary hero who—this might come as a surprise—happens to be an accomplished guitarist songwriter himself. Odysseus longs to return home from a distant war to his wife, son, father, dog and loyal household, but he also is "much-turning" and "much-tuning," recording deep in the sound isolation booth of his lonesome soul the experiences, good and bad, life gives him.

Odysseus sings out songs about his own exotic, erotic, perilous and never-ending adventures in "Odyssey" books 9-12, a three-hour concert for the assembled crowd at the court of Alcinous, king of the idyllic island of Phaeacia. Odysseus leaves us with the sense that he could go on and on singing, in varied styles and narrative personae, about all that he has taken in about men and women, how they behave, think and feel in the many towns he has traveled through and in the many songs he has heard in those towns. Like Dylan at the end of "Tangled Up in Blue," all these people must have seemed to Odysseus like illusions, dream figures, phantoms. He, too, must have wondered, "how it all got started and what they're doing with their lives."

If Odysseus at the momentary end of 20 years of passionate wanderings is the prototype of an itinerant folk and blues singer of heroic stature, the first ethnomusicologist of the human condition, Dylan is his modern counterpart. Just about to turn 74, with 55 years of recorded performances in his and our rearview ears, he is still exploring how to make old things new.

Three months ago, Dylan released "Shadows in the Night," 10 personal realizations of jazz-era standards in the mode of Tony Bennett, Perry Como and Vaughn Monroe, but all sung by Frank Sinatra, and notably with the exception of "Stay With Me" (1963), all during Dylan's formative years, between the ages of 4 and 18. These songs were an education for youngsters Dylan's age in the mysterious ways of human hearts. They were truly popular, because, for better or worse, love takes us and shakes us all, on all rungs of the social ladder, paupers and peasants and princes and kings alike.

These songs have a tinge of nostalgia, literally in ancient Greek the universal human ache to get back home where our hearts can be content. They convey some of the heart-rending feeling that suffuses Dylan's early folk-song masterpiece "I Was Young When I Left Home." Still, if the songs on "Shadows in the Night" evoke remembrances of things past, they are not stuck there. In "Chronicles Volume One," Dylan writes that "a song is like a dream and you try to make it come true." Dylan and his band, including Austin's Charlie Sexton, give these 10 songs to us as dreams come true again. They please our ears and soothe our souls, whether we heard them long ago when we were young or are hearing them for the first time as listeners who are not merely young at heart.

Take "Lucky Old Sun." Made a big hit by Frankie Lane in 1949, it has since been recorded between 1957 and 2007 by Jerry Lee Lewis, Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Louis Armstrong, Aretha Franklin, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash and Brian Wilson, and more recently still by Chris Isaak. Dylan himself performed "Lucky Old Sun" live in concerts in 1986, 1991 and 2000. The song shares real and simple truths about working hard, day in day out, fussing with your spouse and doing it all for your kids. Meanwhile the lucky old sun just "rolls around heaven all day." The song conveys the wistful, that's-what-life-is resignation of Dylan's own "One Too Many Mornings."

Dylan's return to Austin is a homecoming of sorts, given the affinities Dylan has long had with local musical greats like Doug Sahm (recording sessions in New York City October 1972), Charlie Sexton in 1983 and 1996 and from 1999 onward, Denny Freeman (Dylan's lead guitarist 2005-2009), and his long-time friendship with Willie Nelson (notably co-writing and performing together the deeply moving song "Heartland" on Willie's "Across the Borderline" CD). But it also marks a new arrival of sorts.

In all his times playing in Austin (from Austin Municipal Auditorium: 1965 to The Backyard: 2010), Dylan has only made music on the Forty Acres of the University of Texas at Austin for two days in 1993 when taping for KLRU the television special “Willie Nelson: The Big 6-0” in the old ACL studio on the corner of 26th and Guadalupe, as Louis Jordan would have put it, way on the outskirts of campus. Now he will perform in the heartland of campus, center stage at the University of Texas at Austin’s Bass Concert Hall on Wednesday, May 6.

There are two ironies in this. One, of course, is Dylan’s expressed dislike of being pigeonholed, categorized, reduced to a type, or made into an espouser or practitioner of causes, philosophies, musical styles, often all at once, by university and college professors.

I am probably doing some pigeonholing here of my own, but a conspicuous case is Dylan’s own account of the ceremony granting him an honorary degree at Princeton University in 1970. The professor charged with reading the proclamation declared that Dylan “preferred isolation from the world” and remained “the authentic expression of the disturbed and concerned conscience of Young America.” Dylan writes that he felt “tricked once more” into being presented as the spokesperson for American youth, that this made him so angry he wanted to bite himself, and that when the prof said that Dylan “preferred isolation from the world,” it was “like he told them that I preferred being in an iron tomb with my food shoved in on a tray.” He lets his friend David Crosby’s comment as they drove away from the event sum things up: “bunch of dickheads on auto-stroke.” Dylan’s gift to us distilled from all his personal bad feelings is his song “Day of the Locusts” on “New Morning” (1970), with a nod to Nathanael West’s 1939 classic novel of nearly the same name about how an artist can feel way out of place.

Another irony is that it took so long to bring it all back home to UT Austin. Dylan revered music ethnographer Alan Lomax, who was a relentless pursuer of real music, to his core intolerant of intolerance, a champion of cultural equity for people of any race or creed, and a collector and preserver of the truths sung by common people. In the fifties and early sixties Dylan was influenced by the music Lomax collected and took note of the vital reverence that Lomax applied to his chosen path in life. Lomax was a graduate of UT Austin (1936 BA Philosophy, summa cum laude), just like his father John A. Lomax, who co-founded the Texas Folklore Society.

At an outdoor concert in Virginia in late August 1997, Dylan took a break to say from the stage, “There is a distinguished gentlemen here who came ... I want to introduce him – named Alan Lomax. I don’t know if many of you have heard of him. I used to know him years ago. I learned a lot there and Alan... Alan was one of those who unlocked the secrets of this kind of music. So if we’ve got anybody to thank, it’s Alan. Thanks, Alan.”

Dylan pointed to the truths in blues and folk songs unlocked by Lomax in his set between “Blind Willie McTell” and “Highway 61,” both cases in point of what he did with those secrets. In “Blind Willie McTell,” Dylan sings about how the songs of the Piedmont (Georgia) blues singer get across to him the human meaning of slavery and racism in Texas: “I traveled through East Texas / Where many martyrs fell / And I know no one can sing the blues / Like Blind Willie McTell.” In the second song, Dylan, electric and electrifying, tells his own metaphorical truths, distilled from the blues, along the highway that winds and stretches 1400 miles linking the remembered and forgotten dreams of Louisiana and Mississippi with those of Dylan’s native state of Minnesota.

Back home at Bass Concert Hall this month, other secrets will be unlocked and the ghost of Odysseus will be happy for a while.

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BOB DYLAN DATES IN AUSTIN

1965 9/24 Austin Municipal Auditorium

1976 5/12 Austin Municipal Auditorium

1978 11/25 Frank Erwin Center

1986 6/21 Frank Erwin Center (w/ Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers)

1990 9/9 Palmer Auditorium

1991 10/25 City Coliseum

1993 4/19 KLRU studio (Willie Nelson: The Big 6-0 TV taping)

1993 4/20 KLRU studio (Willie Nelson: The Big 6-0 TV taping)

1995 11/4 Austin MusicHall

1995 11/5 Austin Music Hall

1996 10/26 Austin Music Hall

1996 10/27 Austin Music Hall

1999 9/15 Frank Erwin Center (w/ Paul Simon)

2002 2/24 Frank Erwin Center

2003 4/19 The Backyard

2003 4/20 The Backyard

2007 9/15 Stubb's Waller Creek Amphitheatre

2007 9/16 Zilker Park ACL Fest

2009 8/4 Dell Diamond (w/ Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp)

2010 8/4 The Backyard

2015 5/6 Bass Concert Hall