

COMMENTARY *Austin American-Statesman*

Palaima: Authentic songs guide us in turbulent times

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Wonderful sounds and sights were coming from the terrorist-free Athens Olympics. Terrible violence swirled around a sacred mosque in Najaf. Swift boat veterans prevaricated about prevaricating. Chechen terrorists were blowing up planes in Russia. Pre-convention protesters were threatening to transform Manhattan into 1968 Chicago. And a Florida father set a Marine van and himself ablaze in overwhelming grief that his son lay dead in Iraq.

It is understandable then that many Americans would long to reconnect with what this country is by listening to Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan sing songs that define America.

The two American icons started out in early August in Cooperstown, N.Y., birthplace of the all-American sport of baseball, and wandered westward through small-town minor league baseball parks. A magnificent concept in our troubled times.

Willie believes that there is only one song and that it is deeply human. He keeps on singing it. Bob has never abandoned his Walt Whitman love of music that sings of and to the American people. Like Willie, he keeps singing and blending rural spirituals and folk songs, blues, jazz, boogie-woogie and rock 'n' roll.

About the tour, Bob was quoted as saying, "Willie and I are going to hit the ball out of the park, touch all the bases, and we hope make it home safely."

Dylan's song poetry has just been compared by an Oxford professor of poetry to the craft of Donne, Milton, Eliot, Shakespeare, Wordsworth and St. Paul. But his statement and his cornball performance banter tell us that he still models himself after folk-singers like Woody Guthrie, itinerant blues artists like Skip James, Irish minstrels like the Clancy Brothers. There is only the common man's Shakespeare in the Dylan stage-joke, "Larry bought a pig the other day. I asked him where he was gonna keep his pig. He said, under his bed. I said, what about the smell? He said, 'He'll just have to get used to it.'" (For more examples, go to www.expectingrain.com/jokes.html).

Austin was not on the tour schedule, so I headed to Warner Park in Madison, Wis., on Friday, Aug. 27, the 14th anniversary of Stevie Ray Vaughan's tragic death in a helicopter crash in Wisconsin.

It was a beautiful night at the old ballpark, with temperatures in the 70's and a gentle breeze. The stage was set out in center field. I sat with old friends in the farthest stands, where I took in the beauty and meaning of the whole event.

If you don't think that average Americans yearn for something authentic in music and something that speaks to and for them, you should have been there. Three generations and more of Americans were packed into the outfield grass, standing, wanting to be close to real legends.

From conversations I had with people of all ages, it was clear that world events and contemporary politics have made them feel what Bob sings in "Not Dark Yet": "I've been to the bottom of a world full of lies. / Ain't lookin' for nuthin' in anyone's eyes." But here they were, looking up to musical icons who were genuine and open in their feelings for what we go through as humans and in trying to create and spread joy in the moment.

The announcer, in introduction, emphasized Willie's Farm Aid concerts and promoted Willie as a viable presidential candidate from Texas. Willie constantly exhorted the crowd to sing along, with first a giant American flag and then a giant Texas flag unfurling behind him. His son played percussion, his sister piano. And with great long-time sidemen like Mickey Raphael, the whole had the feel of a picnic songfest.

The highlight of the evening was Willie coming out to do a duet with Dylan on Willie's classic "Heartland." Willie's jazz-inflected voice and Bob's low rasp worked off each other to reveal the pathos of family farmers and just plain American who continue to face hard realities: "My American dream/fell apart at the seams./ You tell me what it means./You tell me what it means."

Dylan closed the evening by reinforcing the modern world's danger and perplexity, with a song whose images are drawn from the Book of Isaiah: "Outside in the distance, a wildcat did growl./Two riders were approaching and the wind began to howl."

A real downpour started 10 minutes after the concert ended. Thoughts of Vaughan's take on Elmore James' "The Sky is Cryin' " made it seem as if the heavens were weeping in sympathy for the state of our world in these cold, cruel times.

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