

The Salt Lake Tribune

Utah turns Bob Dylan into a grinning, mic-stand-grabbing, piano-pounding showman

Review • Dylan is back Wednesday for a second show at the Eccles Theater.



FILE - In this Jan. 12, 2012, file photo, Bob Dylan performs in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Chris Pizzello, File)



By Rich Kane

Published: October 18, 2017
Updated: October 18, 2017

Bob Dylan can still surprise you.

He's given us bad surprises, like acting in that embarrassing "Hearts of Fire" movie. Weird surprises, like when he turned up in a Victoria's Secret commercial leering creepily at a decades-younger lingerie-clad model. Funny surprises, like his cameos in "Dharma & Greg" and "Pawn Stars." And did-that-really-happen surprises: Hunt up the segment on the "Theme Time Radio Hour" series he had in the aughts, where Dylan — Poet of a Generation — blurts out "Fo' shizzle my nizzle."

But since embarking on his "never-ending tour" in 1988, his shows haven't incited much passion. Much as with Van Morrison concerts these days, you never know what you'll get. I've seen Dylan on nights when he's looked completely uninterested, as if he

wanted to be anywhere else but onstage, going through the motions and running off to his tour bus.

Rare have been wonderful nights like Tuesday at the Eccles Theater in downtown Salt Lake City, where Dylan played the first of a two-night stand, which continues with a sold-out show Wednesday. While he could easily just slam through a hits-laden set and pick up a check, on this evening, he was engaged and energetic, even coming back for two encores (which he never used to do), giving thank-you nods to the audience and ... *smiling!*

He doesn't play guitar live much anymore, preferring to hang behind his piano or shuffle over to a microphone to perform songs from his recent standards albums. Those records, and the vocal chops they require, have given his famed craggy voice some thrilling muscle. Tunes like "Summer Days," "Melancholy Mood" and "September of My Years," where he even nailed the number's high notes, made you think that maybe Dylan should've been a Tony Bennett-style crooner all along if that whole greatest-American-songwriter stuff hadn't gotten in the way.

He gripped his mic stand at an angle, kind of like Steven Tyler would (no high leg kicks please, Bob, you're 76), and bent his knees as if he were waiting for a fastball at home plate. After finishing a number, he would pause with a hand on a hip, as if asking the crowd to acknowledge his total badassery. Which they did, often.

Dylan has never been in finer voice, and his Charlie Sexton-led backing band is stellar, pumping along from an opening "Things Have Changed" that sounded fresh and full of life and drifted into "It Ain't Me, Babe" and "Highway 61 Revisited," where he ended each verse with a beefy "*sixty-wuuuuun*" exclamation point.

The guy seemed to really be enjoying himself, honing a sense of actual fun that's been missing at many of his shows over the past 30 years. He pounded out piano riffs as if he were attacking the speedbag at one of his boxing gym sessions, and bopped his head back and forth during the slow blues of "Early Roman Kings."

Dylan being quirky Dylan, though, he threw up wildly different arrangements of some of his classics. “Tangled Up in Blue” was disguised as a jazz standard, unrecognizable unless you paid attention to what he was singing, as were “Desolation Row” and “Blowin’ In The Wind,” the latter done up like a country-fried, fiddle-heavy slow dance you might hear at a Georgia dive bar. All of it strange, all of it wonderful.

As usual, he didn’t say a word to the crowd, no how-ya-doin’-Salt-Lake-City pandering or your-alcohol-laws-sure-are-crazy quips. That *would* be a surprise. But when you’re Bob Dylan, you can do whatever the hell you want.

Perhaps Dylan’s energized set was borne out of necessity to not be outshined by the just-as-legendary Mavis Staples, who Dylan once proposed marriage to (she turned him down).

The 78-year-old soul singer belted out a masterful set that left you craving more, a gospel-kissed 45 minutes that she closed with the 1972 Staple Singers smash “I’ll Take You There.” The “there,” of course, is heaven, and with the Eccles’ starry ceiling overhead and listening to that voice, it was easy to imagine that’s exactly where you were.

Dylan set list, Eccles Theater, Tuesday, Oct. 17, 2017

“Things Have Changed”

“It Ain’t Me, Babe”

“Highway 61 Revisited”

“Why Try to Change Me Now”

“Summer Days”

“Melancholy Mood”

“Tryin’ to Get to Heaven”

“This Nearly Was Mine”

“Honest With Me”

“The September of My Years”

“Pay in Blood”

“Tangled Up In Blue”

“Early Roman Kings”

“Soon After Midnight”

“Desolation Row”

“Thunder on the Mountain”

“Autumn Leaves”

“Long and Wasted Years”

Encores:

“Blowin’ in the Wind

”Ballad of a Thin Man“



rkane@sltrib.com