

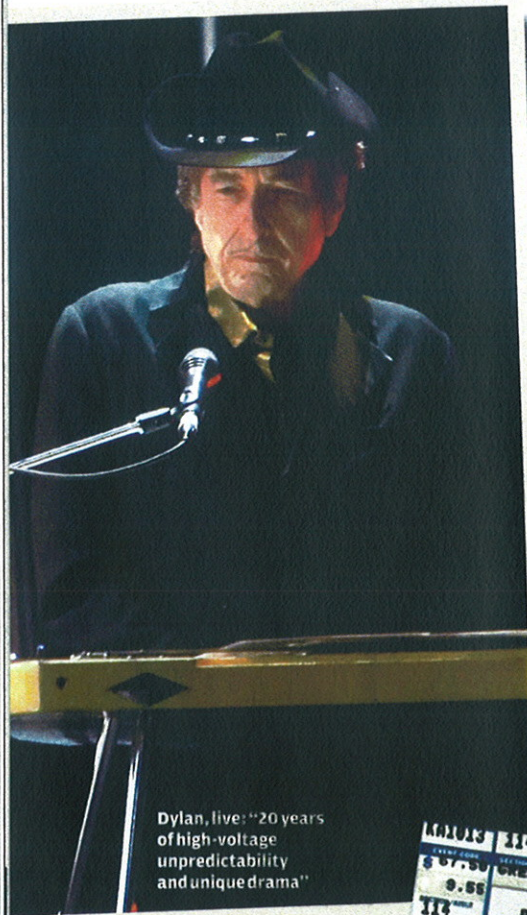
The noise of the crowd is now akin to the feral howl of some animal you couldn't put a name to, kept for too long on a leash, finally uncaged, yelping dementedly at a looming moon.

Bob Dylan, about six feet – if that – from where I'm standing in the front row of the cavernous Vancouver Coliseum, peers out from beneath the brim of a towering Stetson, grins squintily, turns to his band and laughs, with a look to each of them that says 'mission accomplished'.

It's a glorious climax to a triumphant performance, the first since *Modern Times, Uncut*'s Album Of The Year, gave Dylan his first US No 1 since *Desire* in 1976. That made him, at 65, America's oldest chart-topper – a statistic that may have amused him greatly if he pays heed to such things.

Vancouver also marks the resumption of Dylan's noble Never Ending Tour – the extraordinary saga that's been running now for nigh on 20 years of high-voltage unpredictability and unique drama.

Dylan has been imperious tonight, his voice occasionally a blistered groan at the world's eventual end, a solitary growl, that turns when you least expect it into something approaching a favoured caress. There has been a playfulness to him, too. You might also say that over the coming nights, as the tour trawls down America's Pacific Coast, that Dylan may not have been so engagingly outgoing in performance since the charmed youth of The Gaslight, Gerde's Folk City, Town Hall, Wha? and the other Greenwich Village folk clubs he took by storm more than 40 years ago.



Dylan, live: "20 years of high-voltage unpredictability and unique drama"

In a couple of nights, in Seattle, it's more exuberant on stage than I've ever seen him. Joking with his band, goofily directing them from behind his keyboards, beaming at the crowd's uncompromising devotion, the Oscar he won for "Things Have Changed", from Curtis Hanson's movie, *Wonder Boys*, is on a nearby amp. At one point, doing a delicate shuffle it looks like he might need a script at the jitterbug, but evidently thinks better of it, settling instead for a version of the Twist. These days, spiffily turned out in a variety of sharp suits and sharper hats, he cuts a resplendent figure – a far cry from the ragged penitent, largely discredited, who set out originally on the NET to reclaim his crown at the lowest ebb of his career.

Much of his good humour is inspired by his clear delight at playing with a band who bring out all that's best in him – guitarists Denny Freeman and Stu Kimball, former BR5-49 multi-instrumentalist Donnie Herron on mandolin, fiddle and dobro, drummer George Receli and long-serving bassist Tony Garnier, as formidable a line-up as Dylan has ever fronted.

The highlights in Vancouver are plentiful, with a 15-song set list opening with a roaring "Cat's In The Hat" from *Under The Red Sky*, and ending almost two hours later with a typically majestic "Like A Rolling Stone" and a torrid "All Along The Watchtower".

Along the way, there are rejuvenated versions of "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere", "Don't

Think Twice, It's Alright", done as a lilting country waltz, a dark fiddle-led take on "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)", an improbably funny "Desolation Row" and rare first live outings, too, for a couple of songs from *Modern Times* – a beautiful "Under The Deal Goes Down" and an epic rendition of "Washington's Blues #2".

If the main theme to date on the Never Ending Tour has been Dylan's search for personal redemption, tonight seems more than anything like a celebration of his salvation. Dylan, for so long restless and yearning, appears more than ever to have finally made it to the place he's been looking for. You could even call it home.

And it's perhaps a touching measure of his major artistic rehabilitation and the affection he endearingly inspires that, as opening acts for this particular tour, he can call upon younger titans like Kings Of Leon (who do the honours tonight), Foo Fighters (see Dave Grohl panel on page 61) and Jack White's Raconteurs.

"It means everything to me to be supporting Dylan," Jack tells *Uncut*. "*Modern Times* is a great record, and I'm loving the fact that people are loving it so much. When I first bought it, I went, 'Wow! It's so great everyone's going so crazy over this rhythm and blues record – that doesn't happen very often any more, and it's nice that people want that kind of reality still.'"

It begins for me with what Dylan calls The Temples In Flames tour, when he plays Wembley Arena in October 1987, with Tom Petty and Roger McGuinn in tow, an evening of ominous drama.

That night, a hurricane famously roars through the south of England, bringing with it chaos and ruin, a wind from **CONTINUES OVER**

