
Bob Dylan kicks off tour with a surprise show -- and makes a political statement about concert scene while he's at it

- [Joel Selvin, Chronicle Senior Pop Music Critic](#)

Friday, October 15, 2004



Bob Dylan looked decidedly life-size at his surprise show Wednesday at San Francisco's the Grand, a 1,200-seat ballroom on the site of the former Regency I movie theater that Dylan just put on the nightlife map.

Playing electric keyboard at the side of the stage, in the intimacy of the small hall, Dylan never looked more accessible or more vulnerable. He wore a rhinestone embroidered black shirt and black pants with silver studs on the seam, and bent over his keyboard without comment, scarcely looking up.

He stayed at the keyboard until the final number of his set, when the instrument went dead. A technician scuttled out from backstage, but Dylan shrugged and, for the first time that evening, strapped on an electric guitar as his band charged into the thundering introduction to "Summer Days" from his latest album, "Love and Theft."

He never did get around to singing the song. Instead, swept up in the four-piece band's enormous sound, Dylan simply picked out a funky four-note guitar figure and rode the waves of rhythm until the song came crashing to a close. He turned and walked off the stage and made the audience stomp, howl and applaud for several minutes before returning for an encore.

Opening his fall touring season -- a week after the release of his best-selling memoirs -- with a round of Northern California shows (that continues Sunday at UC Berkeley's Haas Pavilion), Dylan will play halls he's never played before. He announced the Grand appearance over the Internet only 48 hours before the show, a coup for maverick producer Gregg Perloff's Another Planet Productions, which has produced 15 shows at the ornate, balconied theater (built in 1911) since last November, with another 15 shows already booked.

Starting off with "Rainy Day Women," stumbling on his behind-the-beat vocal delivery, Dylan took his band out for this shakedown cruise, leaning heavily on shuffle drive and recent songs. He twisted old numbers, like "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" and "This Wheel's On Fire," into molten new shapes, but also gave the same treatment to recent material such as "Sugar Baby" from "Love and Theft."

His seasoned band could shift with ease from country-flavored rock to hard-driving blues. Guitarist Stu Kimball, a journeyman guitarist from the Boston rock scene, joined the band this year. But Larry Campbell, switching off between guitar and pedal steel, and bassist Tony Garnier have been with Dylan many years. Campbell and Kimball hung guitar hooks off lines all evening.

Dylan has always reshaped and retooled his songs in concert, sometimes forcing them into uncomfortable surroundings, but also sometimes revealing rewarding new facets. At the Grand,

he turned "Nashville Skyline" 's "Tonight I'll Be Staying Here With You" into a Jimmy Reed blues and anchored "It's Alright, Ma" on a Canned Heat guitar riff.

He tapped the big, swinging blues drive of "Watching the River Flow," an often-neglected number from his early '70s repertoire, in one of the early highlights of the set. He brought out the western swing in "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" and prodded "Ballad of a Thin Man" to its properly snarling climax. He also pulled out an obscure country ballad, "No More One More Time," from the songbook of Cajun singer Jo-El Sonnier.

He ran through five songs from his 3-year-old new album before leaving for the encores. When he did return, he slammed into a blistering version of "Cat's in the Well," a number from his 1990 album, "Under the Red Sky," that few in the audience probably recognized. But he went right into "Like a Rolling Stone" and followed that with a punishing "All Along the Watchtower."

With Bob Dylan, it's always real life -- not show business -- onstage. In his first nightclub appearance in San Francisco -- and probably the smallest room he's worked around these parts since he played the College of San Mateo 40 years ago -- he not only gave his most fevered fans a rare treat, he made a political statement on the Bay Area concert scene.

By planting his flag on the stage of the Grand, in a single stroke, Dylan gave the fledgling Another Planet enterprise a much-needed boost. He divided his regional concert dates evenly between Clear Channel's Bill Graham Presents and the renegade Another Planet, whose top executives split from Graham more than a year ago. But he gave the prize to Perloff. He didn't have to -- Clear Channel's Fillmore Auditorium was dark on Wednesday.

Bob Dylan plays at 8 p.m. Sunday at Haas Pavilion on the UC Berkeley campus. Tickets: \$37.50. Call (415) 421-8497 or www.ticketmaster.com. Student tickets available at Zellerbach box office.

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Bob Dylan played keyboard almost exclusively in his show Wednesday.
Chronicle photo by Lance Iversen



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