

'MADE IN BRAZIL': BOB DYLAN'S 1991 BRAZILIAN TOUR

by Christopher Rollason, July 2007

Note: This article is based on a compilation of Brazilian press cuttings, kindly supplied by Roderick MacBeath, which I have read through in the original Portuguese. All translations are mine. In the case of the Dylan interviews I have preferred to paraphrase rather than retro-translate.

I

Rarely has Bob Dylan taken his live show outside the familiar confines of what is still conventionally seen as the 'developed world', or, let us say, the Western world (including the former eastern bloc) plus Japan. His performances elsewhere on the planet have been confined to Israel (1987 and 1993), East and South-East Asia (Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, all in 1994), plus, more substantially, four Latin American tours (1990, 1991 twice, and 1998) covering a total of five countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico and Uruguay. We may note that some of the countries on this 'exotic' list - Hong Kong, Singapore, Israel - are not third-world at all and the rest are 'emerging' or 'middle-income' rather than dirt-poor: 'Chimes of Freedom' has been covered in Senegal, but never once has Bob Dylan himself played between sundown's finish and midnight's broken toll anywhere that is on the UN's list of 'least developed countries'. That said, August 1991 saw Dylan play (in that order) Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil. This article will give an account, extracted from a reading of national press cuttings of the time, of the Brazilian section of that tour, the second of Dylan's three visits to Brazil.

II

This much-publicised visit came hard on the heels of Bob Dylan's first Brazilian outing: he had played São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (one gig each) just the year before, in January 1990. This time round, the tour more ambitiously featured five dates taking in a large swathe of the country: Porto Alegre (14 August, Ginásio Gigantinho), São Paulo (16 and 17 August, Palace), Belo Horizonte (19 August, Ginásio Mineirinho) and Rio (21 August, Emperor). The tour was amply covered in the press, and indeed the cuttings from which I distilled this article, dated from 11 July to 23 August 1991, come from a remarkable number of Brazilian press organs: *O Dia*, *O Estado de Minas*, *A Folha de São Paulo*, *Folha da Tarde* [evening edition of the above], *O Globo*, *Jornal da Tarde*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *Revista "D"*, *Revista do CD*, *Tribuna da Imprensa*, *Última Hora*, *Veja* and *Zero Hora*. This proliferation of titles, some of them carrying articles on Dylan almost every day during the tour, testifies to the enormous interest raised by his presence in Brazil. The shows attracted a total of approximately 25,000 people all told - Porto Alegre 9,000-12,000 (estimates varied wildly), São Paulo 3,000 each night, Belo Horizonte 7,000, Rio 2,000. The same opening act played all the shows, namely the young Brazilian guitar duo Duca Leindecker and Frank Solari. According to Olof Bjorner's site at: <www.bjorner.com/91%207%2008.htm>, audience tapes have been located for only three of the shows: Porto Alegre (incomplete), São Paulo II and Rio.

Brazil is Latin America's largest and most populous nation, and is indeed the most populous country after his native USA where Dylan has ever played. It cannot, however, be called a country that had loomed large on Dylan's lyrical or musical horizon before his two visits of the early 1990s. There is no equivalent in the Dylan canon to *The Rhythm of the Saints*, Paul Simon's then recent (1990) post-*Graceland* collaboration with Brazilian musicians. Joan Baez has recorded material in (Brazilian) Portuguese at least twice, attempting Heitor Villa-Lobos' 'Bachiana Brasileira No 5' and also covering 'Manhã de Carnaval [Luiz Bonfã/Antônio de Maria] / Te Ador [traditional]': Dylan's 'Romance in Durango' and his cover of the traditional Spanish is the Loving Tongue' are graced by

interpolated snippets of Spanish, but he has never made any such concession to Portuguese, and nor has he covered any Brazilian song in English. Brazil had featured in one, then fairly recent, Dylan song, 'Union Sundown' from 1983's *Infidels*: 'My belt-buckle's from the Amazon ... / All the furniture, it says "Made in Brazil" / Where a woman, she slaved for sure / Bringin' home thirty cents a day to a family of twelve, / You know, that's a lot of money to her.' However, the social concern expressed in that song (which he did not perform on the tour, and which, is, curiously, not mentioned in any of the press articles) does not seem to have been uppermost in Dylan's mind on that visit. Brazil is a country of extremes which supports both a burgeoning middle class and a huge proletariat: Dylan had, between 1965 and 1991, sold all of one million albums on the Brazilian market, but not to the likes of the woman who slaves for thirty cents a day. For better or worse, and whatever anyone's radical pretensions, a taste for Bob Dylan in Brazil is clearly a speciality of the intelligentsia.

III

It is clear from the press build-up that expectation was high and tense well before Dylan arrived. Emblematically, on 24 May that year the most famous songwriter of the twentieth century had celebrated his 50th birthday. His most recent studio album was *Under the Red Sky*, but more significant was the release, timed for his half-century, of *The Bootleg Series vols. 1-3*, and that collection was strategically launched on the Brazilian market, in a 5,000-copy edition and to rapturous reviews, in July 1991, a month in advance of the tour.

Dylan arrived at the Porto Alegre airport, from Montevideo, on 13 August, and checked in at the Plaza São Rafael hotel. His sole gig in Uruguay, the night before, had included one novelty: the first-ever performance of 'When You Did You Leave Heaven?', the 1930s number composed by Walter Bullock and Richard A. Whiting which he had covered on 1988's *Down in the Groove* (he would play the song again in Rio). A dozen newspapermen, whether or not 'eating candy' and apparently not 'held down by big police', were waiting for him at the airport: Dylan simply ignored them. *O Globo* reported the next day: 'Dylan arrives in Brazil in silence', and indeed the local journalists, clearly not au fait with the great man's usual tour habits, expressed surprise at his reclusiveness and his unwillingness to step out of the hotel the first day (though the *Jornal do Brazil* did report on the 16th that Dylan had been spotted inspecting the sights of Porto Alegre). On the first night, Dylan dined with his entourage at the hotel: it is recorded that his gastronomic choice fell on the eminently Brazilian *frango de churrasco* (barbecued chicken) and that he drank red wine. Meanwhile, the press build-up to the concert, as was to be expected, had been loyally promoting the man dining on chicken with the usual, well-worn slogans, of which *Zero Hora*'s 14 August headline can stand as typical: 'The grand troubadour of protest folk' (say no more!!). The concert itself was generally well received by the press, but here as at all the shows the reports did also register a degree of perplexity and even disappointment amongst an audience very few of whom would have been familiar with Dylan's established tour practice. As can happen at any concert with the less well-informed, there were complaints from those who wanted to hear the 60s hits and nothing else and were turned off by the later material, and from those who expected every song at a Dylan concert to be a carbon copy of the studio version. Thus, the *Folha da Tarde* (16 August) said of the Porto Alegre concert: 'Dylan ... sang only a few songs known to the general public, out of the 18 selections. The famous *Blowin' in the Wind* was presented with a new arrangement. Many in the audience could scarcely recognise it'. We have of course heard these complaints elsewhere, before and since. When Bob Dylan plays there is nothing new under the sun, not even the Brazilian sun. Nonetheless, *Zero Hora* for 15 August concluded, with visible relish: 'The idol fulfilled his role. He aroused the crowd and filled them all with ecstasy, as they sang along with him and made the Gigantinho stadium tremble'.

Porto Alegre may stand as typical of the pattern of reception for the entire tour, and it is therefore unnecessary to go into the other concerts and the pre- and post-concert coverage for the other cities in such detail. The basic schema reproduced itself each time: press hype repeating the usual clichés - folk troubadour, protest poet, rock'n'roll prophet, bard of hippiedom (!), author of pacifist (?) anthems, sixties legend, voice that shaped the consciousness of a generation, etc, etc (with the occasional perplexed nod to the Christian period), and, in the less informed cases, the usual solecisms ('Bob Dylan' as his 'pseudonym', Robert Allen Zimmerman as his 'real name'); perplexity at Dylan's aloofness and withdrawal; and responses to the concerts swinging between euphoria (yes, yes, this really is Bob Dylan in Brazil!) and frustration over 'obscure' song selections and 'unrecognisable' arrangements. There was of course the predictable crop of misspelt names and mangled song titles, as well as grosser errors. *Revista D* (18 August) committed the howler of evoking Dylan's 'forays into Catholicism [sic]' - though *Le Monde* once made the same mistake - and *O Estado De Minas* (again 18 August), in a fit of sentimentalism, called Dylan 'the spokesman of a whole generation that protested against wars and social injustice, its only weapon the slogan "love and peace"'. Between a Catholic Dylan and a hippy-dippy love-and-peace Dylan, some of Brazil's press readers had the right to feel that something was happening but they didn't know what it was ...

IV

On a more anecdotal level, some may like to know for their fact files that the audience for São Paulo I included, along with his Brazilian wife, Australia's Nick Cave, who was later to cover Dylan's 'Death is not the End'. Brazilian musicians were reported as attending the concerts, though there is no mention of any real 'name' ones (a point I shall return to later). Nor is there much sign of official recognition from the Brazilian political and cultural establishment. Sony's representative in Brazil, however, did, in São Paulo, present Dylan - as *O Globo* reported on 19 August - with a trophy to commemorate his one million sales in the land of the samba, in the form of a framed montage of replicas of three of his CDs. It is worth noting that the Mineirinho stadium in Belo Horizonte was described by the local paper, *O Estado de Minas* (21 August), as a disastrous location for a concert: 'The sound is dire. The stadium is in an appalling state. Forest trees grow up around it, the iron structures are rusting away'. The paper nonetheless concluded that Dylan rose to the occasion and: 'If finally there was no disaster, it was thanks to Dylan's grit (*garra*)'. We may add that in São Paulo it appears that the reclusive visitor took time out (as he had in Buenos Aires) to explore the megapolis, and even to make a trip to the old colonial city and onetime gold-rush town of Ouro Preto, whose name means 'black gold'.

The setlists (available at the Bjorner site, URL as above) were representative enough of that period of the Never Ending Tour: half a dozen 60s hits (and on the second São Paulo night the less well-known 'Bob Dylan's Dream'), a couple from the 70s, a couple from the religious period, one or more tracks from *Oh Mercy*, 'Wiggle Wiggle' from *Under the Red Sky* (the only song played from that album), and some nights one or two cover versions. The covers were: the traditional 'Trail of the Buffalo' - Porto Alegre; John Prine's 'People Putting People Down' - São Paulo II; and 'When Did You Leave Heaven?' (as seen above) plus the Johnny Cash number 'Folsom Prison Blues' - Rio. All five concerts opened with 'New Morning' and signed off with 'Ballad of a Thin Man' as second encore. It is true that some nights featured more 'familiar' material than others (Belo Horizonte, with four songs from *Oh Mercy*, would certainly have perplexed the audience more than the more 60s-faithful São Paulo I), but if we analyse all the songs played over the five concerts we get the following breakdown: *Freewheelin'* 3, *The Times They Are A-Changin'* 1, *Another Side* 1, *Bringing It All Back Home* 5, *Highway 61 Revisited* 3, *Blonde on Blonde* 2, other pre-accident 1, *Basement Tapes* 1, *John Wesley Harding* 2, *Nashville Skyline* 1, *New Morning* 1, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* 1, *Blood on the Tracks* 2, other 70s 1, *Slow Train Coming* 2, *Shot of Love* 1, *Empire Burlesque*

1, *Down in the Groove* (cover version) 1, *Oh Mercy* 4, *Under the Red Sky* 1, unreleased cover versions 3. That makes a total of 38 songs, of which 16 are pre-accident, 9 span the period from the *Basement Tapes* to *Blood on the Tracks*, 3 are unreleased covers and the remaining 10 are from the supposedly 'obscure' period from *Slow Train Coming* on. Statistically, this seems a perfectly reasonable compromise between audience expectations and Dylan's legitimate desire to represent his whole career, and the perplexity in the ranks of the Brazilian spectators is perhaps best ascribed to the failure of their own media to prepare them adequately for the 'really real' experience of a Dylan concert as it is.

V

The Brazilian tour produced a major surprise in what was hailed as Bob Dylan's first press conference for seven years. On 17 August in São Paulo, at the Palace concert hall two hours before his second show there, Dylan stunned Brazil's media by announcing that he would talk to the press. According to the *Jornal do Brasil* (19 August), he invited the bemused scribes to step up to his private box two by two and ask him questions directly in English (i.e. no interpreters). Thanks to this method, there was no syndication and each newspaper published a different interview text. *O Jornal do Brasil*, *A Folha de São Paulo*, *A Folha da Tarde*, *O Globo* and *O Jornal da Tarde* all featured a Dylan interview in their 19 August editions. Dylan did not, though, give away a vast amount. Still, something rather than nothing was delivered, and a few nuggets from the various interviews now follow.

Dylan said he found Brazilians friendly and relaxed; yes, he had listened to some Brazilian music (he didn't say what); he claimed a new Brazilian-themed song might come out of the tour; asked what he was currently reading, he answered (most mysteriously), *History*; asked about his current musical tastes, he named no contemporary artists but said he listened to Elvis Presley, [50s country singer] Patty Page and Dean Martin (*Jornal do Brasil*). He flattered his hosts by declaring that *his head felt great* in Brazil, and compared São Paulo to Chicago (*O Globo*). He also spoke warmly of his recent shows in Eastern Europe (June 1991), including Budapest and Ljubljana, saying he had enjoyed performing there (*Jornal da Tarde*). Unsurprisingly, he rejected the mantle of 'prophet' out of hand and said he took little interest in politics (*Folha da Tarde*). Asked about his recent album *Under the Red Sky*, he said that all had gone well but it could have been better. Asked what were the most significant moments of career, he declined to answer and numinously declared: *I don't look back* (*A Folha de São Paulo*). All in all, little was revealed: the impromptu press conference offered the world a Dylan in relaxed, even genial mood, but ... speaking like silence. The *Jornal do Brasil* concluded: 'We discovered that Bob Dylan does talk, even if his answers always seem to be blowin' in the wind (*soprando com o vento*)'.

VI

The promised Dylan composition about Brazil never materialised (Dylan in any case would release no new songs until *Time out of Mind* in 1997). Overall, the general impression of the tour is positive on both sides. Dylan was appreciative of Brazil, and took a genuine interest in his young Brazilian support act. The Brazilian journalists had done their homework reasonably well, and some among them were obviously genuine Dylan fans: the clichés and howlers, the misspelt names and distorted titles were of course there, but these things always happen when Dylan is written about in the media and were not noticeably worse than elsewhere before or since (indeed, very recently, in 2007, many of the same clichés and solecisms resurfaced in the Spanish press when Dylan was awarded the Prince of Asturias Prize for the Arts). Still, somehow there is a persistent sense of remoteness about the whole encounter: despite the *frango de churrasco*, despite the interviews, in this collection of

press records Brazil feels remote from Dylan, and Dylan feels remote from Brazil. Perhaps it couldn't be any other way, especially in those (now irremediably distant) pre-Internet times.

And yet, and yet ... there could have been more. Brazil has a remarkably rich and varied musical past and present, covering a cornucopia of genres. There is the (ethnic-influenced) classical composer Heitor Villa-Lobos (whom, as we have seen, Joan Baez has covered); the celebrated bossa nova movement, spearheaded by the composer (and poet) Vinicius de Moraes, the composer-guitarist Antônio Carlos Jobim and the singer Astrud Gilberto, who first recorded the world-famous 'Garota de Ipanema / The Girl from Ipanema'; the Latin jazz wave featuring Astrud's husband João Gilberto and his work with Stan Getz, and, later, such figures as Airtó Moreira and Flora Purim; the more reflective jazz productions, released on Germany's very arty ECM label, of the guitarist and multi-instrumentalist Egberto Gismonti and the percussionist Nana Vasconcelos; the more traditional guitar music of the likes of Baden Powell; and, of most relevance to Dylan, the entire wave known as MPB (Música Popular Brasileira), fronted by singer-songwriters and performers such as Chico Buarque (also a poet), Caetano Veloso, Milton Nascimento, Maria Bethânia, Gal Costa and many more. It is somewhat bizarre that those latter names are conspicuous by their absence in the press reports. There is no mention of any MPB celebrity attending any of the concerts. The journalists had not thought of aligning Dylan with MPB's hall of fame or speculating on his influence on that genre's artists (with those million records sold, he must have impacted on many of them). Indeed, the only MPB figure who gets even a namecheck in the Dylan framework is Caetano Veloso, whom the *Tribuna da Imprensa* (21 August) quoted as having called the religious period 'Dylan-Zimmerman's Christian trip'; but there is nothing about what Veloso might have thought about the master in 1991. Somehow, all this feels like a lost opportunity for a creative and critical dialogue between the work of Bob Dylan and a Latin American country with a huge musical tradition. Meanwhile, it is now almost a decade since Bob Dylan last visited the 'other' America; and we can only hope there will still be time for a more fruitful and mutually enriching encounter, some day soon, somewhere 'down in the South American towns'.