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STEP OUT OF THE LINE

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Bob Dylan and his band Township Auditorium April 10 2004

Don't go see Bob Dylan to hear him sing. These days he can't. It's more like listening to someone with chronic laryngitis. All you get is a bunch of grunts, mostly in key. His harmonica didn't necessarily have laryngitis but sounded as if it could have benefited from some more wind. While Dylan did play a keyboard almost the entire show, it was mixed so low that it was little more than a prop. What you got was a lead guitar showcase as a decoy to Dylan's inactivity and extended jams to disguise breaks for his vocal chords. The two gunslingers on this leg of the never-ending tour are Larry Campbell and Freddy Koella, along with Tony Garnier on bass and George Recile on drums. While Dylan's songs were the reason people bought tickets, Campbell and Koella's playing were the highlights of the show. Both guitar wizards have their own styles. Campbell has sure footing in the '50s roots rock sound and the '70s arena rock pool. His playing was heavier and more aggressive, similar to Jeff "Skunk" Baxter's work with Steely Dan and The Doobie Brothers.

Koella is to guitar what Bob Dylan is to lyrics. His playing was in a league--class, plane, whatever--all it's own. For several years Charlie Sexton has made a big impression as Dylan's lead guitarist, but believe me, as good as he is nobody's going to miss him. I've seen B.B. King, Eric Clapton, and Keith Richards, and none of them would be able to shame Koella in phrasing, feeling, or imagination. Koella's playing was beyond the usual blues/rock scope, having more in common with jazz virtuosos like Grant Green.

This concert was flush with new material. Although I am familiar with most of Dylan's best albums, I recognized only two songs from the whole show. "Like A Rolling Stone" and "All Along The Watch Tower" were saved for the encore. The newer songs were still worth the money though. I mean, a bad Bob Dylan song is better than most acts' good ones.

By Milton Hall

