

POP

# Dylan overwhelming in long, star-packed show

BY ROBERT MARTIN

NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y. — The Rolling Thunder Revue went through here Saturday like a slow but inexorable steamroller. That's its official name, but it's really Bob Dylan and Friends. He has a lot of friends and at the end of the three-hour-and-40-minute show I felt emotionally and physically exhausted.

The concept of Dylan's latest tour is unique. The basic core of performers includes Dylan himself, Joan Baez, Bobby Neuwirth (an old New York musician friend who runs the back-up band), and Ramblin' Jack Eliot. What makes each show different from the preceding one is Dylan's friends, who pop up here and there to play a few songs. Here **Joni Mitchell** showed up to sing harmony with Nashville movie star Ronee Blakley and to do a couple of numbers on her own. Roger McGuinn, former leader of the Byrds, who had a string of hits with Dylan songs back in the sixties, suddenly emerged from the forest of sidemen on stage to sing a number.

It was almost impossible to keep track of who was on stage. It varied from Dylan alone to, I think, 18 people for the closing song. The man who stage manages that mess deserves a medal and a year's supply of psychotherapy.

The idea of the tour. It was claimed, was to keep everything very relaxed and casual, to have friends drop by and join in a song or two, to play small halls and bring back that old-time, club-circuit atmosphere.

That casual angle of the tour has rapidly fallen by the wayside. As for small halls, the convention centre where Dylan played here holds about 10,000 people and Dylan was playing two shows. The atmosphere was that of a tightly-run commando operation. A squad of public relations people was polite but firm. No press photographers allowed. Officially taken and approved photographs only were cheerfully provided. No photos of **Joni Mitchell** could be provided on Saturday because they would not be processed rapidly enough to pass censorship before the reporter's deadline.

It's too bad really. Dylan probably



Joan Baez and Bob Dylan: others kept popping up to sing, then disappear.

started out with good intentions and discovered himself trapped in his own stardom. Because of pressure from fans and media, either the tour became a para-military operation or it ground to a halt in chaos.

Enough of the logistics. Meanwhile, up on stage, Neuwirth led the band through a few numbers, then introduced Blakley who sang three numbers. Blakley in turn brought on **Joni Mitchell** for three numbers. Neuwirth returned to sing that song asking the Lord to buy him a Mercedes-Benz, then introduced Ramblin' Jack Eliot. Finally Dylan came on, but by then I was already gasping. And that was

only the first set.

Any one of these people could have carried a concert on his own, yet here they all were belting out three or four numbers and disappearing. It really didn't do justice to any of them.

The event started to look like a movie when Joan Baez sang Swing Low, Sweet Chariot a cappella during the second set. It was very reminiscent of her amazing solo during the movie Woodstock. A rider on the back of my ticket warned me that I might be filmed. Suddenly it all fit into place. Woodstock was the filmed rock history of the sixties. Dylan was creating his own folk-rock history of the

sixties with this tour. He had gathered all his friends into a travelling Woodstock, a medicine show complete with antique-looking curtain that rolled down between sets. If a movie is made Baez will be the only person who was in both.

What an ego trip this must be for Dylan. How many people can have that sort of lineup as a front act? Or sell out one show and do very well on a second with only a few days notice for the public.

Dylan himself was excellent. Last year the hero then newly returned from the dead performed like a fossil, but I think now his supporters must agree that Dylan looks like an Olympic gymnast in comparison to his former cigar-store Indian routine. He bounced around the stage. He directed the band. He toyed with the audience, concealing a harmonica only to spring it on the house at the end of a song. He gave every appearance of an artist totally in control of his art, his music, his band, his audience, even Joan Baez.

They came on together singing The Times They Are a-Changing. "I want to remind you that carnal lust cannot replace true love." Dylan said before he and Baez sang I Shall Be Released.

Whether that referred to Dylan's wife, the former fashion model Sarah Lowndes, or to Baez, whom he had known before his wife, or to both, is hard to say. What is certain is Dylan's reasserted control. Baez even dressed like Dylan, in blue jeans and a black vest, although her shirt was pale pink instead of white.

Dylan played a number of new songs combining protest material in his old style and complex narratives like the new song Isis. His new song, Hurricane, about a convicted murderer, fit right in with his rendition of his 1964 song, the Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll, which he also sang. Much of his new material was in the protest vein. It appears that we are in for a new era of Dylan songs and action. Optimistic people have been welcoming Dylan back ever since he issued the album John Wesley Harding, in 1968. Maybe it is *really* time for a welcome.