“Johnny's in the basement
Mixing up the medicine I'm
on the pavement Thinking
about the government”
Bob Dylan Brings it All Back Home, to Lowell

BOB DYLAN IS THE GREAT AMERICAN MINSTREL on a never-ending road trip. And tonight, he’ll be staying here with you.

Dylan has always treated Lowell well. It is the fourth time he’s performed in the Mill City, following Tsongas Center gigs in 2000 and 2010 and nearly four decades after he first rolled into town and onto the UMass Lowell campus leading the remarkable, ramshackle Rolling Thunder Revue.

A caravan of friends and compadres old and new, Rolling Thunder was a broad, loose Dylan trek, on the heels of the previous year’s high-expectations reunion tour with The Band. It took place between the recording and the release of Dylan’s 17th studio album, “Desire.” Sometimes, the show seemed like a honky-tonk jam, others a folk-revue, still others the quest of a man throwing off his old selves while creating a new one. Or all three at once.

And on Nov. 2, 1975, Lowell’s university was Rolling Thunder’s fourth stop, the first to feature Dylan in whiteface. The lineup included Joan Baez, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot, Roger McGuinn, Bob Neuwirth, David Bowie guitarist Mick Ronson and a crack band led by future super producer T-Bone Burnett.

Riding shotgun was poet Allen Ginsberg, who had run hard with Lowell homeboy Jack Kerouac during the movement of the Beat writers.

Tickets were $7.50.

Kathy Rourke was visiting her sister, who had a baby that day. Rourke was 23, recently returned to her Acre neighborhood from a stint on the West Coast, a new mom herself, and a Dylan fan. A third sister showed up at the hospital, clutching a Dylan ticket.

“Look what I got!” she said. The show was that night.

Rourke, hearing of Dylan’s performance for the first time, fled the hospital. She scored a scalper’s ticket for $10. Though it was hours before the show, she stuck around. She was first in line, and when the ebb and flow of the crowd’s push was relieved with opened doors, Rourke scored floor space at the front of the stage.

Things have changed. The Rolling Thunder show took place in Costello Gymnasium, which has since received a major facelift and the more formal name, Costello Athletic Center. The institution itself bore a different name, the University of Lowell (though the ticket and subsequent references have mistakenly dubbed it Lowell State University—perhaps appropriately, given that Dylan started out as Robert Zimmerman).

On that day in 1975, Adam Ayan, a future graduate of UMass Lowell’s Sound Recording Technology program, was not quite 3 weeks old. Now living in Portland, Maine, Ayan is one of the recording industry’s behind-the-scenes stars, earning Grammys and other accolades for his ability to weave sonic magic as a recording engineer.
Three days, UMass Lowell is bigger and more diverse, a bastion of synergy and synthesis. UMass Lowell is not merely a less expensive option, but a Division I honeycomb of challenge and innovation.

Tonight’s performance, at the 7,000-seat Tsongas Center, takes place in one of the University’s state-of-the-art facilities. (Kathy Roux—who has worked at the University for 30 years, now serving as the M.B.A. coordinator for the Manning School of Business—bought her Dylan tickets early this time.)

Lowell, where the American Industrial Revolution was born, a place cut in half by a mighty river, remains a perfect setting to see Dylan.

On that November night in 1975, Lowell and its college gym offered “an honest, unpretentious, down-home working-class environment,” wrote Larry “Ratso” Sloman in his book “On the Road with Bob Dylan.” The gym’s hardwood was covered by a green tarp, and as the show opened, Neuwirth greeted the crowd, packed into the venue a la festival seating.

“There’s an on-the-road song for ya,” Neuwirth said.

He went on to dedicate several songs to Kerouac while Dylan paced backstage. The band was “smoking” enthused Sloman, everyone was “really on tonight.” Neuwirth did his opening song, Ronson did “Life on Mars,” and Ramblin’ Jack played his mini-set.

Dylan took the stage to a roar and did “When I Paint my Masterpiece.” He was tough and deliberate, spitfire out “Ifis” as if it had betrayed him. After an intermission, Baez and Dylan duetted on four songs (including a cover of Johnny Ace’s “Never Let Me Go”) followed by Baez and Dylan.

Dylan spoke of his Kerouac affinity. “On the Road,” said Dylan, “had been like a bible for me. I loved the breathless dynamite bop poetry that flowed from Jack’s pen. ... I fell into that atmosphere of everything Kerouac was saying about the world being completely mad, and the only people for him that were interesting were the mad people, the mad ones, the ones who were mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, devoid of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn, all of those mad ones, and I felt like I fit right into that bunch.”

Kerouac echoes through some of Dylan’s work, from “Desolation Row” to the mention of “Mexico City Blues” in “Something’s Burning, Baby,” from the 1985 album, “Empire Burlesque.”

“Dylan isn’t short on influences,” says Michael Millner, co-director of UMass Lowell’s American Studies program. “He’s a sponge. But Kerouac’s writing must have been on his mind as he was writing many of the songs from the mid-’60s. There are Kerouac-like titles—‘Visions of Joan,’ and ‘Desolation Row’—songs where every line turns into a wave of words. You just can’t believe the cadences of Dylan’s songs from the period. I’m thinking of ‘It’s Alright Mama, I’m Only Bleeding’ and ‘Desolation Row’—songs where every line turns into a wave of words. You just can’t believe...
that Dylan can get that many words into a line of song just like you couldn’t believe those long, looping sentences in “On the Road.”

And there is “If Dogs Run Free,” from the 1970 “New Morning” album, which sounds influenced by the sort of scat-poet Beat wordplay Kerouac engaged in during live sessions with David Amram. (Fittingly, Dylan played “Dogs” here in 2000.)

In their spontaneous session at Kerouac’s grave, Dylan and Ginsberg read verses from “Mexico City Blues.” Dylan said he read the work in 1959 in Minnesota, and “it blew my mind. It was the first poetry that spoke my own language.”

Footage from the graveside visit (plus some brief images from the Grotto stop) showed up in “Renaudo and Clara,” as well as a 1991 Dylan video for “Series of Dreams.”

Ginsberg and Dylan improvised a slow blues chant in Kerouac’s honor.

nd the tour rolled on to Providence.

Paul Marion, UMass Lowell’s executive director of community and cultural affairs, was in the crowd that night in 1975, just a few months before he graduated from the University. Marion is a poet, too, who penned “Dylan Sings to Kerouac,” in the wake of the concert.

A quarter-century later, Dylan returned to a stage in Lowell, on Nov. 11, 2000. Marion was there again. He thought of the man onstage as an American treasure on par with a National Park.

“I had the feeling that we were at a scenic overlook, seeing a master artist doing his work, like watching Picasso paint, but this figure was distinctly American with the grit of the Mesabi Range in his bones and traces of the Mississippi River and Empire State Building and Grand Canyon and Malibu Beach in his veins,” he said. “He took it all and made a sound of it, put words together to transmit what it feels like and means and where it comes from.”

In 2000, Adam Ayan was well into his career, working with the esteemed engineer Bob Ludwig in Portland.

By the time Dylan rolled through for his third Lowell show on Nov. 20, 2010, Ayan had earned three Grammy awards, a slew of other industry accolades and worked with everyone from Pearl Jam to Carrie Underwood.

A year ago, Dylan’s songs and the University’s Sound Recording Technology program linked, in a sense. A four-CD set of Dylan covers, “Chimes of Freedom. The Songs of Bob Dylan Honoring 50 Years of Amnesty International,” was released, featuring 80 popular artists, from Addele to Ziggy Marley, interpreting Dylan songs. Ayan was among the technical pros who volunteered to master the project for free to help benefit Amnesty International, which is celebrating 50 years of fighting for justice, freedom and human dignity.

People still examine every Dylan twitch for meaning. When he hits the stage, audiences and