

HEARTS OF FIRE: The Press Conference

by JOHN BAULDIE

The film had been announced at the Cannes Festival at the beginning of May, and **Screen International** was rushed to the WM office: "LORIMAR SIGN UP DYLAN", screamed the headline. Another controversial Miss Ellie replacement? Surely not a Bobby Duke tear-arsing around on a stunt motorcycle? But no, only a major feature film budgeted at around \$13 million, give or take a couple of million. Shooting, originally due to begin in late July, had been put back to August 11th, but - revealed the trusty film magazine - the start was delayed yet again because of "star Bob Dylan's insistence on a script re-write". The True Confessions Tour, coincidentally, was unexpectedly extended. Conclusions on a wall, please.

Just as much of a surprise (well, nearly) was that the main part of the filming was to be done in England and Wales and it happened - as you all know well enough - that a press conference was announced for the day after Dylan's arrival, the aim being to keep further enquiry from a salivating press at a decent distance during filming. I only got to know about this historical gathering because Patrick Humphries took the trouble to phone me. WM credentials count for nothing with PR firms. The Sarahs and Fionas and Suzies who work for them must take courses in non-logic. "Look, we want as much publicity as possible so there are only a limited number of tickets available." At last she relented. I think my breaking down and crying real tears finally swung it. So, come with me now to the National Film Theatre on a bright and shiny Sunday morning, way back in August 1986.

I had my official invitation ready as I moved towards the door. The pretty girl didn't waft much of an eyelid as she read my name on the guest list: "John Bauldie - Wanted Man". Yes, it is embarrassing sometimes. The bank manager suspects it's a Christmas club for ex-cons; the postman used to think it was a homosexual contact group. I looked around, hoping no-one had heard. A famous person was sitting alone in the corner of the coffee lounge.

It was David Hepworth. A WM informant had only recently told me that Hepworth had interviewed Dylan in New York for a magazine he was about to launch. In the interests of furthering WM's information on this matter, I made my move. "Ah, John!" he said, as if I were a friend he'd not seen since last Christmas. This was unexpected. I asked him about the interview. "How'd you hear about that?" he asked. "Well, you know..." I said. The efficiency of the WM information network no longer surprises me - not since an American mole offered me access to Dylan's FBI files. I didn't take him up on it. Honest. "It was a dead loss, the interview. Dylan was very uncommunicative. He said very little." Oh. "You know, I was called away part way through, and a friend of Dylan's came up to him and asked him how the interview was going. 'Not so good' Dylan replied. 'Why's that?' asked the other. 'He keeps asking me questions' said Bob."

Across the increasingly crowded room Bob Shelton was looking pretty pleased with himself . He had a Hodder & Stoughton editor under one arm and an American copy of his book in his ubiquitous plastic bag . He waved the book at me . " I've read it , " I said . " I should've known " he grimaced . Outside , meanwhile , a pale cream Mercedes was rolling slow . In it was a famous person . The famous person . A lackeying tide of photographers waited on the riverside terrace . A couple of tramps , possibly hired for the day to give the cultural setting a bit of genuine Thameside atmosphere , looked on . A press kit was forced on me . I browsed :

*" After his two international box office triumphs , **Return of the Jedi** and **Jagged Edge** , British director Richard Marquand comes home for his next production , **Hearts of Fire** . And with him , hot from a sell-out tour of the USA , is the legendary rock star Bob Dylan . "*

Well , Marquand wasn't actually with Hot Bob , but was waiting to greet him as the car finally decided to stop : " Hey ! Bob , Man . . ! " said Marquand , trying really really hard to sound as cool and as groovily hip as he could , presumably so that rock star Bob would understand him . Marquand doesn't usually sound at all like this , having a fairly correct RP . Here he sounded like an over-enthusiastic extra from **Monterey Pop** .

" Marquand , a charming Welshman not given to subterfuge , plotted his approach to the reclusive superstar like a military siege . "

Reclusive , eh ? I'll bet it tells us next that Bob rarely gives interviews , that he's short , and . . . Marquand got to meet Dylan :

" Endearingly , Marquand still carries in his wallet the impersonal message from his hotel telephonist setting up the meeting . The note has become his talisman . "

" Charming . . . endearingly " ! " I wonder if Marquand pens his own press releases ? " typed the not-at-all pompous , handsome young **Telegraph** editor who ever-so-cutely but quite shrewdly really always carries a small amount of money in his right trouser pocket in case he wants to buy something .

Outside this liggng world of flat bucks fizzes , **Guardian** reporters , Steve Turners and pretty dimpled girls with press credentials from **Which Knitting Needle ?** and **Practical Crow Keeping** , the photocall was being set up . I gave liberty to my Olympus Quick-Flash and moved towards the door . " You can't go out " said Fiona , or Sarah or Suzie , suddenly seeming not-so-pretty , " you'll only get in the way and spoil it for the photographers " . Did she know who I was ? Well , she possibly did , this pig-face who was almost as resolute as Mick Ronson . " You can go out , but you can't come back in " . So , I had to stay put , staring out the window at Bob and Rupert and Fiona together on a piece of plastic grass , having their pictures taken .

Fiona was a tiny bird-like figure with silveryblue sparrow legs . It said in the press kit that she was " a wild , outspoken American rock singer " . Rupert looked skinny and (rather like a Rupert) not at all suited to his black leather



jacket . Mean and moody never . He and wild , outspoken Fiona looked like little boy and little girl lost next to a rather twitchy Bob Dylan .

Into the auditorium . Half a dozen film crews were setting up . I noted that a handful of drooling fans had grabbed the front row seats in the hope , no doubt , that some of Bob's exhaled breath might go up their noses . I had to settle for the third row . I read on :

" The film is about creativity , stardom and success " says Richard Marquand . " Can you handle the heat and continue to function ? Can you and your work survive the glare ? It's about some of the profound differences between Britain and America , two countries separated by a common language . . . "

This explains , then , the phoney transatlantic turn of phrase with which the director had greeted his star-prize prisoner .

" It's about a young woman discovering what kind of person she is , with the freedom to be exactly and precisely herself . "

Does Bob know about this ? It sounds quite awful , doesn't it ? Do people actually get paid for writing this stuff ? Do you want to hear some more ?

" It is also a red-hot triangle : this young woman is a singer and the sparks fly in her relationship with two very different men - one of them older but . . . "

Quite right too , this 'but' . But what ? " Older but wiser than wise " ? " Older but absolutely the last word in wonderfulness " ?

" . . . older but , like herself , an American ; the other younger and English . "

And a bit pinched , and slightly spotty if my eyes hadn't deceived me from the coffee lounge . Rupert looked decidedly uncharismatic , and sulky rather than moody .

" Both men are megastars : the Englishman at the peak of celebrity , the American in retirement , having tried to turn his back on fame . "

I begin to wonder again why Dylan is doing this film . I'm thankful , at least , that Marquand didn't think of him for **Return of the Jedi** . Bob might have ended up as a cuddly teddy bear .

" Bob Dylan's look will be maintained by Susie Pullen , the Australian who has worked alongside him during the 1986 world tour and whose previous films include **Mad Max III** . . . "

Well , I know I'll only have irate subscribers telling me to mind my own business , so I'll say no more about the maintenance of Bob Dylan's look in 1986 , save that Susie Rotten Pullen must have a very twisted sense of humour .

A door opens to my right . In reading the press kit , I've forgotten to put the Wanted Man tape recorder on the table . I have to wave it feebly from where I am . The first question comes like the rapid rattle of a manic machine gun . The questioner looks and sounds disturbingly like Ian Woodward . It's uncanny .

" I'm Philip Norman from the **Sunday Times** and I'd like to know why one of the biggest poets and musicians of this century feels he has to play someone who's a retired star . Why isn't he a performing star , as he is , such a great star . Why is he bothering ? "

Of all the questions in all the press conferences . Here wasn't a question , here was an outrageous demand . I mean , I'd never presume . . .

" Well , it's just a movie . . . "

" Why aren't you writing poetry ? Why aren't you doing the things you're really great at ? "

" Well , I do ! I'm just taking some time off here . "

" Does that mean you're relaxing ? "

" Yeah . "

" So you're not going to be trying ? "

" Oh no , no , I'm gonna be trying very much . "

That Dylan was very trying indeed on set will later be confirmed by a WM mole , who will tell tittle-tattle tales of a particularly purple-faced dialogue coach . But now ain't the time . Philip Norman sounds like a Perry Mason man . He'd get drummed out of my court for outrageous leading of the witness . A fellow press-kit reader takes over the worrying of sheepish Bob :

" Bob Dylan's written four songs for this movie . Can he tell us anything about those , please ? "

" Well , I haven't written those songs just yet . "

Marquand looks worried now .

" I'm about to . . . "

" What are they going to be about ? "

" They're gonna be about the movie . "

" Are they going to be protest songs ? "

" I hope so , yeah . "

" Protesting about what ? "

" Protesting about the elements in the movie . You have to see the movie . "

Wow ! That's just like the Les Crane Show in 1965 . Perhaps I should announce this . " Bob , do you realise that you used those very words , with exactly the same intonation . . . " And " about to " , remember when . . . I think , at this point , that there's definitely something fetishistically unhealthy about my mind's abilities to make these connections . It's not as if I'm an obsessive ; I tend to think that I'm a fairly regular sort of . . .

" You seem very uncertain , Mr. Dylan . Do you know a great deal about this movie yet ? "

" It's ten-thirty in the morning ! " interjects the wildly outspoken Fiona , who must have been watching Play School to find out about those big and little fingers . It's funny , but I'd forgotten about her - and moody Rupert (the dirt of gossip will whisper later that he began to sulk when he found out that Bob Dylan was to be his co-star) has put on some non-mean , unmacho metal-framed glasses which were nowhere to be seen for the photo-call . Fiona's announcement of the time of day is presumably meant to be supportive of a bemused megastar who seems to be on the end of some quite aggressive questioning . Fiona , of course , is not on the end of anything . She perhaps wishes she were , and decides to speak out . Fiona is totally ignored , while Rupert seems to be in danger of fading quite away into his own non-entity .

" I know enough about the movie . I didn't write the movie though . A lot of the questions you maybe want to ask the writer . "

" Nobody's interested in anybody but you . "

Philip Norman again .

" What ? "

" Nobody's interested in anybody but you , in this hall . "

As if to immediately refute this , a girl asks Rupert if he's been taking singing lessons . Rupert is thus given the opportunity to prove himself to be as communicative and as engaging as an empty milk bottle .

Marquand's thoughts on Dylan are included in the press-kit :

" Dylan's a very real person . There is an essential difference between being a singer/poet and being an actor . The former is completely unphoney , someone who expresses himself to a vast audience . The latter is exactly the opposite : essentially an interpretive person using technique to appear natural .

Bob Dylan has a degree of truth that is rarely attained by an actor . It's the kind of performance James Dean , Marlon Brando , Robert De Niro and Jack Nicholson occasionally achieve , an ability to somehow take a part inside themselves and then give it back as though it isn't a performance at all . "

How does he know all this when shooting hasn't even begun ? Bob Brando ? One wonders about Marquand's judgement , unless it's entirely based on the beans scene . He can't have seen the chin-drop in **Renaldo** . Oh , he must know what he's doing . He's got Emmies after all . Someone's just given him \$13 million to spend - they must trust him too .

" I'm from **The Guardian** . Can I ask Bob Dylan if he says it's the right place as well as being the right time , is that place England ? What do you think of England since you were last here ? Do you like England ? "

" Oh yeah . "

" What are your thoughts on this country at the moment ? "

" Well I just got here yesterday . "

" Are you looking forward to working here ? "

" Yeah . "

These are obviously the wrong questions and demand nothing more than the 'yeahs' they get . Dylan's getting bored . It needs a specific Ginsbergian Mexico City Blues question .

" You took your name from Dylan Thomas . Have you ever been back to Wales ? I see you're going back there now . Are you still interested in Dylan Thomas ? "

" Oh yeah . "

Ho hum .

" Will you be making a trip back to his village , to where he was born and wrote ? "

Marquand whispers endearingly in Bob's ear : " We're gonna be very close " . For a moment Bob hallucinates Allen Ginsberg , but quickly regains composure . " We're gonna be very close " , Bob assures the lady enquirer , whose turn it is to wonder whether he's prophesying an imminent and intimate relationship or suggesting a daytrip to the Boathouse . But isn't all this beginning to get draggy ? Should I go on ? Aren't you tired ? Oh , one last gasp - for history :

" How were you persuaded to do this film with Mr. Marquand ? What sort of bargaining chips did he use ? "

" Didn't have any bargaining chips . "

" But why did this film stand out ? "

" Well , y'know , I'm not really doing nothing right now . Seemed like a good thing to do . "

Marquand says a little about meeting Bob : " We seemed to like each other . Did you like me ? " he asks .

" Did I like you ? Yeah . You drank a lot . "

Ah-ha ! AH-HA !! A variation on a theme all-too-familiar to devotees of **The Telegraph** ! If you get drunk with Bob Dylan , he'll be in your film ! It all begins to fall drunkenly into place . The whole world's a bottle . Now begins the four-month celluloid hangover .

" In the words of Billy Parker : ' This business is gonna eat you up . Just like it was gonna get me . It's this big machine . It gets you in its teeth , it sucks everything out of you . You wake up , you're a star ! But there ain't nothing to you no more . You're empty . ' Is that a sentiment that you would agree with ? "

" Some stars are like that , yeah . "

" Are you ? "

" No , I'm not like that , but I'm playing another character who is like that . I'm getting into my character right now ! "

" Can you tell us what it is you find fascinating about this character ? "

" Well , he's a very self-made person . Nobody ever gave him anything . He had to take it . "

" Why didn't you write the script yourself ? " (Guess who)

" I couldn't have written a script like this . It's beyond me . "

" I don't think it is . Why are you so modest ? Why are you pretending to be inadequate ? You're one of the great writers of this age . Why don't you write a script yourself ? "

Fiona is asked how she became involved in the movie , the producer gives some budget details - " The budget is about seven million dollars " - " I get about six " interjects Bob , mindful of how much he's just paid the Heartbreakers for the tour . After mumbly grumbly replies to a couple of non-questions , Dylan stands accused again by Philip Norman :

" Are you easily bored Mr. Dylan ? "

" I'm never bored . "

" Have you any notion of how bored you're gonna be doing this picture ? "

" Well . . . maybe you'll be around . "

Even now Norman won't let go .

" Can I ask why you want to be an actor ? "

" I want to see what it's like . "

" But you've seen what it's like before . It obviously sickened you . It obviously put you off , because you haven't done it for ten or twelve years . "

" Well , we'll see . "

And so the Press Conference drags itself on and I'm tired of all this , these pointless enquiries and Dylan's non-answers . He speaks briefly about America , the Sixties , himself as myth and legend , but there's nothing really nothing to report . I want to ask a question , but I'm not sure what . Having in mind the Ginsberg advice and remembering that this is supposed to be a conference about film , I decide to throw **The Maltese Falcon** into the arena , bringing the **Empire Burlesque** echoes to Dylan's attention and hoping that he'll say something about recent viewing habits , perhaps taking us towards some other areas of influence and idea . So : here's my question as **Telegraph** street-reporter :

" Bob , I was watching **The Maltese Falcon** recently , and it was full of lines that sounded as though you could have written them . . .

(Pretty tricky , eh ?)

. . . do you recall watching that film before you wrote the **Empire Burlesque** songs ? "

" Which film ? "

" **The Maltese Falcon** "

" I see . Were there lines from it in there ? "

" Lots of them . "

" Were there really ? "

Dylan is grinning at me and suddenly I recognise why . He's playing the question-for-a-question gambit for the first and only time in the Press Conference and it's taken me so long to notice . There's little hope of a way out now unless I'm really sharp . He continues to smile .

" Yes . Is it one of your favourite films , that ? "

" Which lines were they ? "

Damn . Another question . Come on , John , question-for-question - slug it out !

" Do you want a list ? "

But in comes yet another hackess , and the enquiry is done for . And so am I , and so is the entire escapade . A few minutes later Dylan is melodramatically hustled away by two security guards . Lights , camera , Alka-Seltzer !

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