

Bob Dylan releases first original album in almost a decade

US folk and rock legend Bob Dylan released his first album of original songs in eight years on Friday with the ten-track "Rough and Rowdy Ways." Dylan's 39th studio album, which comes 58 years after his first, features a 17-minute ballad about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, as well as a tribute to American electric bluesman Jimmy Reed. "Rough and Rowdy Ways" is the Nobel winner's first collection of new material since "Tempest" in 2012, although he has released a number of cover albums in the interim. It sees Dylan mix gritty blues with folksy storytelling, his signature raspy voice delivering lyrics that switch between bleakly haunting and darkly humorous. At times he sounds warm, at other times scathing. In the album's opening song "I Contain Multitudes," the 79-year-old grapples with mortality. He starts by singing tenderly, "Today and tomorrow and yesterday too / The flowers are dying like all things do." Later he says: "I sleep with life and death

in the same bed." Dylan was asked about the lyrics in a recent interview with The New York Times, his first since he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016. "I think about the death of the human race. The long strange trip of the naked ape," he replied. "Not to be light on it, but everybody's life is so transient. Every human being, no matter how strong or mighty, is frail when it comes to death. I think about it in general terms, not in a personal way."

The songs run through 20th century pop culture, touch on myths and refer to historical and fictional figures - some light, others tragic. In "I Contain Multitudes," Dylan cites Indiana Jones, Anne Frank and the Rolling Stones in the same verse. "Murder Most Foul," first revealed in March, retells the shooting of President Kennedy in Dallas, Texas while describing the evolution of 1960s counterculture. The song, which rose to the top of the Billboard chart, is packed with artist name-drops including the

Eagles, Charlie Parker, Stevie Nicks, Woodstock and The Beatles.

'Absolute classic'

Dylan - some of whose most-loved songs from the 1960s and 70s addressed police brutality and racism, such as "Hurricane" - also mentions the Tulsa race massacre of 1921. The "Birdman of Alcatraz," a convicted murderer who became a respected ornithologist raising birds in prison, gets a mention, too. Recounting Kennedy's slaying, Dylan sings: "We're gonna kill you with hatred, without any respect / We'll mock you and shock you and we'll put it in your face / We've already got someone here to take your place." In "False Prophet," the album's six-minute second track, Dylan sounds cocky and unapologetic as he addresses his own mythology. "I ain't no false prophet / I just said what I said / I'm just here to

bring vengeance on somebody's head," he sings over a slow blues riff.

British music magazine NME called the album "arguably his grandest poetic statement yet." In a review on its website, critic Mark Beaumont wrote "Rough? Perhaps, but it certainly has the warmth and lustre of the intimate and home-made." Rolling Stone magazine hailed it an "absolute classic," calling it one of Dylan's "most timely albums ever." "As Dylan pushes 80, his creative vitality remains startling - and a little frightening," wrote critic Rob Sheffield. Despite his years, Dylan, awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama in 2012, has toured almost non-stop for the past three decades. The coronavirus crisis forced him to cancel a string of dates in Japan and North America this spring and summer, but he has promised to be back on the road as soon as it's safe to do so. — AFP



Hong Kong actors Ng Chi-sum (left) and Tsang Chi-ho act in the television show 'Headliner' at a studio in Hong Kong. — AFP Photos



Hong Kong actor Ng Chi-sum (center) has his makeup applied before filming the television show 'Headliner'.



Hong Kong actors Tsang Chi-ho (left) and Ng Chi-sum act in the television show 'Headliner' at a studio in Hong Kong.

CURTAIN FALLS ON HONG KONG'S OLDEST SATIRICAL TV SHOW

Hong Kong's oldest political satire show will air its final episode Friday evening, against a backdrop of pro-democracy unrest and fears that an incoming anti-subversion law will help Beijing trammel local freedoms. The swansong show by "Headliner" also comes after the government launched a review of RTHK, the public broadcaster that makes the program, which has faced accusations from Beijing loyalists of being overly sympathetic to the opposition. For the last 31 years the irreverent show has sparked government ire with its skits and often rough lampooning of public figures.

But a recent episode critical of police, following months of pro-democracy protests, has effectively ended the show, after sparking a rebuke from regulators. Back in February, as the coronavirus first surfaced in Hong Kong, the program featured a scene showing a police officer jumping out of a rubbish bin to deliver a skit about protective equipment. At the time, local media had run reports that police had ample supplies of face masks, while residents and health care workers were scrambling to get their hands on them. The show sparked hundreds of complaints, including from the city's police chief, and a probe by the Communications Authority.

Last month the regulator agreed with the complaints, that the skit showed "denigration and insult" towards the police, contained inaccuracies and failed to show a broad range of views. In a statement, RTHK apologized and said "Headliner" would soon air its last show while it reviewed satirical programming. That sparked criticism from rights and employee groups, which said it had caved to pressure.

"'Headliner' is a satire and different audiences will have different reactions, so it's unfair to ask the show to be responsible for everyone's feelings," Gladys Chiu, head of the RTHK Program Staff Union, said after the decision.

Caught in the crossfire

On Wednesday, actors from the show were filming their final episode under hot studio lights. "I would like to say 'see you again' but how can I tell such a

big lie," said Ng Chi-sum, a veteran of the show, who was dressed as a dynastic-era empress to mock Hong Kong's deeply unpopular pro-Beijing leader Carrie Lam. RTHK has increasingly found itself caught in the crossfire of Hong Kong's intense political polarisation.

Modeled on Britain's BBC, it is a public broadcaster which officially remains editorially independent of the government. It has long been seen by the city's pro-Beijing camp as biased towards their pro-democracy opponents, a charge the broadcaster

denies. Last month, Lam's government announced it had appointed a task force to "review operations and management of RTHK". Critics fear the move is an attempt to mold RTHK into something that more closely resembles the heavily censored and relentlessly positive state broadcasters of authoritarian mainland China. — AFP



Hong Kong actors Ng Chi-sum (right) and Tsang Chi-ho (left) enter a studio before filming the television show 'Headliner' in Hong Kong.



Hong Kong actor Ng Chi-sum (left) acts with Tsang Chi-ho (shown right in monitor) in the television show at a studio in Hong Kong.

France shakes off its virus blues as cinemas, casinos set to open

France will begin to shake off its coronavirus blues today with cinemas opening on the stroke of midnight and thousands of people taking to the streets for its midsummer music festival. The annual Festival of Music usually brings millions of people out in towns and cities across the country with a mix of large-scale events and impromptu concerts in cafes and on street corners that go on long into the night.

But this year there are few big set-piece extravaganzas beyond what French electronic music legend Jean-Michel Jarre has billed as the world's first live virtual "avatar" concert - "like in the Matrix". The veteran performer hopes to go one better than the lockdown gig performed by the US rapper Travis Scott inside the shooter game Fortnite in April, which was watched by more than 12 million players. Social distancing means that the Accord Arena in Paris will only be able to welcome 2,000 fans - a tenth of its normal capacity - for a show featuring a stellar line-up of francophone talent.

While gatherings of more than 10 people are still banned in France, its culture ministry said police would be tolerant with outdoor jamming sessions on the night if people keep their distance. Having rushed back to the terraces of their cafes and restaurants earlier this month, millions of French people are also waiting with bated breath for cinemas to reopen Monday. Casinos will also welcome gamblers from Monday while stadiums and racetracks will reopen on July 11, subject to a limit of 5,000 people, the government announced late Friday, due to progress in the fight against COVID-19.

Red carpet and champagne

Some cinemas will start screenings on the stroke of midnight to celebrate the return of the big screen, with one close to the Champs Elysees in Paris hosting a red-carpet champagne preview screening of "Les Parfums" (The Perfumes), starring Emmanuelle Devos and Sergi Lopez. France is one of the most cinephile countries in the world. A poll earlier this week claimed that 18.7 million people - almost a third of the population - plan to go see a film in the next month. "I only have one word - finally!" Emmanuel Delesse, one of the directors of cinema chain UGC, told AFP as he prepared to reopen the group's near 400 theatres. He said cinemagoers will have to wear masks as they queue for tickets and in the corridors.

The authorities also insisted that screening rooms can never be more than half full with a free seat either side of each filmpoer. But with French as well as Hollywood producers having put back the release of some of their biggest films, there may be very little new fare to see. Instead film fans will have to content themselves with movies like "De Gaulle", a biopic of France's wartime leader, whose release was interrupted by the lockdown. However, a handful of likely Hollywood blockbusters are already looming on the horizon for July, led by Christopher Nolan's thriller "Tenet", about a spy who must stop World War III breaking out, and Disney's Chinese historical action epic, "Mulan". — AFP



Fabrice Fridmann poses with a protective face mask outside his surfing shop in Trois Bassins, a western village on the French Indian Ocean island of La Reunion as France eases lockdown measures taken to curb the spread of the COVID-19. — AFP

Plants can camouflage odors to avoid being eaten: Study

Plants in dense tropical forests are able to mask their chemical scents in order to avoid being detected and eaten by insects - a key advantage in the "information arms race" between themselves and plant-eating herbivores, according to a new study. International researchers from Europe and North America examined 28 species of insects and 20 plant species in Chamela-Cuixmala, a tropical forest reserve on the western coast of Mexico. Their research - published Thursday in the journal Science - sheds light on how individual members of "complex plant communities" evolve to emit similar odors, a pack mentality that keeps them alive and confuses hungry herbivores.

"Easily distinguished odors are to the herbivores' advantage and plants' disadvantage," said Professor Phil Stevenson, a researcher at Britain's Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. "So, we have an information arms race. Plants want to avoid being located and eaten so do their best to smell like other plants." Thursday's study was the first time scientists were able to analyse the interactions between such a wide variety of plants and insects, lead author Pengyan Zu at Massachusetts Institute of Technology said.

Previous attempts to understand the cat-and-mouse evolution game between plants and insects relied on the study of only individual plant

species in controlled environments. This is a far cry from the ensemble of plant and insect species that coexist in real-life forests, the authors wrote. To do this, Zu collected chemical odors emitted by nearly two dozen plant species in silicon tubes, which were then brought back to Kew to be analyzed. Through a combination of "information theory" - a technique for understanding communication patterns in humans - and existing understandings of evolutionary biology, scientists were able to construct models of these plant-herbivore communication networks.

"We now know that all the chemicals produced by plants carry information which has an important role in chemically camouflaging plants in a complex plant community," Zu said. The study could also help scientists better understand how information is passed between different species in the food chain, such as carnivores and insect-eating herbivores - potentially paving the way for future research. "Herbivores, consequently, have to evolve to be finer tuned with the information for locating specific plant hosts," Zu said. "The information can be further shared by carnivores that hunt insect herbivores, resulting in an information chain along the food chain." — AFP