

Dylan's powerful presence stands on 50-year history

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The Americanarama Festival, aka the "traveling circus," as My Morning Jacket called it - featuring English folk singer Richard Thompson, rock bands My Morning Jacket and Wilco, and all-time great singer-songwriter Bob Dylan - entertained a rain-soaked Riverbend Saturday night.

My Morning Jacket was the hardest rocking band on the bill but integrated pedal steel guitar and a sax into their songs.

They rocked and rolled so much that when Wilco performed, someone in the audience complained it wasn't loud enough. Frontman Jeff Tweedy responded: "You guys are just deaf from My Morning Jacket. We're never gonna be that loud, so forget about it."

Honestly, I felt Wilco was indeed loud enough.

"Circuital" opened MMJ's hour-long set, with the frizzy-haired lead singer Jim James railing through the melodic and distortion-filled number.

The band performed head-banging songs like "It Beats 4 U" and slow jam tune "Wordless Chorus," but a defining moment arrived when Wilco joined MMJ on a cover of George Harrison's "Isn't It a Pity." Tweedy and James performed as a duet and played their guitars side by side, and akin to Harrison's recording session, about 10 musicians were involved in the performance.

MMJ played three more and ended on the electrifying "Gideon," exemplifying why they're such a tremendous festival band.

Wilco stuck to their Americana roots and began with "Either Way," with the apropos line "Maybe the sun will shine today" - by the end of their set, the sun did peak out.

The band performed two Woody Guthrie covers (a Dylan influence) including "When the Roses Bloom Again" and the excellent "California Stars," with Thompson helping out on vocals and guitar.

Playing for 80 minutes (only Dylan performed slightly longer), Wilco performed "War on War" and "Poor Places" from Yankee Hotel Foxtrot, and demonstrated their rock chops on "Art of Almost."

As the sun set, headliner Dylan and his banjo- and upright bass-toting backup band took to the intimately lit stage.

Dylan doesn't play guitar anymore, so throughout his 15-song set - from "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" to last year's "Tempest" - he maneuvered from the front of the stage to his piano on the side.

Despite not having a guitar, he still played the heck out of his harmonica. Between his graveled vocals and the band's rambling and bluesy beats, Dylan's songs were pretty much unrecognizable, especially reimagined classics like "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall," "Tangled Up in Blue," the crowd-pleasing "All Along the Watchtower" (the most recognizable) and his Academy Award-winning "Things Have Changed."

Say what you will about Dylan: that he should take a hiatus from touring, his lyrics are more unintelligible than ever - and maybe those criticisms are true - but when he silently stood in front of the audience after playing the encore "Ballad Of a Thin Man," we just understood that after 50 years of touring and being Bob Dylan, he really didn't need to say anything.

The five-hour show started with Thompson, former Fairport Convention lead singer, performing a few songs from this year's Electric album - the only artist on the bill who has a new album to promote.

Like the bands who would follow, Thompson stretched out his songs, broadening them into long jams filled with electric guitar riffs.