

Bob Dylan book to get first talk at 2018 Rancho Mirage Writers Fest

Bruce Fessier The Desert Sun

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The Rancho Mirage Writers Festival has become one of the finest literary events in the country in four short years. The repercussion of that is passes now sell out within hours of going on sale.

Tickets to the fifth annual Rancho Mirage Writers Festival go on sale at 9 a.m. Wednesday at the Rancho Mirage Public Library and rmwritersfest.org, and they could sell out by noon. Founding chairman Jamie Kabler is selling fewer passes to the Jan. 24-25, 2018 event to reduce overcrowding in the library, where all of the daytime events are held.

Kabler and his nonprofit board also are reducing the number of passes available to “angels,” who generate 80 percent of the festival budget with their \$5,000 contributions. That means the number of general admission passes, at \$500 for the weekend, should be only slightly fewer than last year. Kabler also may sell additional tickets at a later date if he can find ways to expand the festival site, perhaps by adding a tent in the parking lot.

As of right now, Kabler is planning to allow about 1,000 people to attend a “Gloriana Britannia”-themed festival featuring eight top English writers and a surprise “Royal” to be announced. Star authors Dave Barry and Bret Stephens are returning, as is educator H.W. Brands, author of “The Strange Death of American Liberalism.”



Douglas Brinkley, appearing at the January Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, will return in 2018 with his first talk on a new book about Bob Dylan *Lani Garfield/Special To The Desert Sun*



Wall Street Journal columnist Bret Stephens shakes hands with historian Douglas Brinkley as author Geoff Cowan and former California Gov. Gray Davis look on at the January Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. *Lani Garfield/Special To The Desert Sun*

But, just as the 1960s produced one American rock and roll artist who measured up to the Beatles, Rolling Stones and The Who, the 2018 writers festival will have an author to balance the “British invasion” with a marquee talk about America’s greatest songwriter.

Douglas Brinkley, a 20th century American historian who spoke at last month’s festival on Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, just announced he’s writing a new book on Bob Dylan. It isn’t an authorized biography, but he says the recent Nobel Prize for Literature winner has given it his blessings.

“I have full the cooperation of Dylan’s company,” Brinkley said in a recent telephone interview. (His manager,) Jeff Rosen and Bob Dylan, they have cooperated with me. So, I’m getting to be the scholar to go look at a lot of (Dylan’s) stuff right out of the gate.”

Brinkley, a history professor at Rice University and a CNN historian, has interviewed Dylan for Rolling Stone magazine. He’s also written extensively about alternate pop culture figures such as Hunter Thompson, Jack Kerouac and Ken Kesey. He just won a Grammy Award Feb. 12 in the Best Large Jazz Ensemble category for producing the Ted Nash Big Band album, “President Suite: Eight Variations on Freedom,” featuring Wynton Marsalis and members of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra.

“Music is a great passion of mine, it’s just not my main job,” he said. “I’m not a musicologist, but, as a professor at Rice University, I talk about American popular music quite often. All the songs (of Bob Dylan) have been the soundtrack of my life. I’m one of those people, he’s brought more joy to me than any other musician.”

Brinkley, 56, decided to do a book on Dylan after learning the folk rock icon had sold his archival material to the University of Tulsa for at least \$15 million. The university already had the archives of Dylan’s hero, Woody Guthrie, so now it will now have continuity between the greatest folk songwriters of the 20th century from the late 1930s on.

“It’s now being archived, so I’m going in before others to go look at it,” Brinkley said. “I’ve already (looked) at some diaries, alternative versions of lyrics, original demo tapes -- the entire Dylan collection, which is one of the really interesting probes of Americana. So, all of Dylan’s papers are just being moved into Tulsa.”

Dylan may have been the voice of the 1960s, but he largely dis-associated himself from the turbulent final years of that decade. So Brinkley is focusing on Dylan’s life in the 1970s, a decade of introspection that began with his surprise appearance at George Harrison’s “Concert For Bangla-Desh” and ended with his conversion to fundamental Christianity. The man who first performed the scathing “With God On Our Side” in 1963 won his first individual Grammy for the zealous “Gotta Serve Somebody” in 1980.

Brinkley says Dylan is still “spiritually-driven,” but his recent recordings have reflected his interest in the kind of songs recorded by Frank Sinatra, who Brinkley says Dylan befriended in the final years of Sinatra’s life.

“The main focus of my book is going to be built around Bob Dylan and the American road,” he said. “What is Dylan’s tradition as a troubadour? He did a tour for the nation’s bicentennial called the Rolling Thunder Revue, where Bob Dylan toured the country with Joan Baez and Alan Ginsberg, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott, playwright Sam Shepard, T Bone Burnett and others. Martin Scorsese is doing a documentary right now on the Rolling Thunder Revue and I’ve been able to get copies of all of the interviews that have been done by the Scorsese team over the decades as a primary source for my book.

“I’m also focusing a lot on what I think is his great masterpiece, the album, ‘Blood on the Tracks.’ That album includes what I think are some of Dylan’s finest songs, like, ‘Idiot Wind,’ ‘Tangled Up in Blue,’ ‘If You See Her Say Hello’ and ‘A Simple Twist of Fate.’ These are considered monuments to American songwriting.



Bob Dylan, shown here in 2012 in Los Angeles, is the subject of a new book that will be discussed at the 2018 Rancho Mirage Writers Festival. *Getty Images*

“I’m going to be looking at his whole life and times, but I think some of those ‘70s works, such as ‘Desire,’ which was his greatest selling album -- he was at the top of his form. He made an album called ‘Planet Waves’ (his first No. 1 charting album), which the song “Forever Young” is on. I’m looking at ‘Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid,’ which he did for the director Sam Peckinpah, and on which he has the song, ‘Knocking On Heaven’s Door.’ I’ll also be writing about his time with The Band. For people that have admired Bob Dylan, like myself, we’re not shocked that he won a Nobel Prize for Literature.”

Brinkley is not one to ascribe the word “genius” to just anyone who excels in a field, but he says unequivocally that Dylan is a genius.

“Bob is an extraordinary musicologist,” he said. “He knows all of America’s folk ballads and jazz standards, and country and Western songs. You could talk to Bob about songs from the Revolutionary War and Civil War. He’s so well read, and it comes from the well-spring of his soul, his love of our native music. When you have an opportunity to talk to him about the blues or rock and roll, it’s really like talking to a historian. I can’t tell you enough what a genius (he is), knowing almost all of the back catalog of American music. Everybody talks about the songs he’s written, which is this amazing catalog, but really the amount of other songs he knows by heart is mind-boggling.”

Brinkley feels he’s been able to engage with Dylan more easily than music journalists because, as a historian, he can talk about other cultural matters that interest Dylan and put them in context with what was happening politically.

“He processes his life from a historical point of view,” Brinkley said. “Dylan told me when he was touring America, he stopped at a World War II memorial in Indianapolis, the home of William Jennings Bryan or a battlefield in Mississippi. So, when he travels around the country, he constantly visits historic sites and art museums. He travels about 150 days a year, but he doesn’t just go to perform. He’ll look at what’s going on with the local culture.

“I’ve had interesting conversations with Bob Dylan about Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg and T.S. Eliot. He’s such an intensely literate person. I’ve found him to be, although suspicious of things at first, really a mensch once he warms up to somebody. He’s very warm-hearted, kind and considerate, but he does things on his own terms. He goes to the beat of his own drum much more than about any human you’ll meet. But I do, too. So I find that to be a side of him that resonates with me.”

Brinkley is hoping to do some more interviews with Dylan, but he’s talked to him since his 2009 Rolling Stone interview and he’s eager to start writing. He plans to give his first talk about his Dylan book at the 2018 Rancho Mirage Writers Festival, which he called “the finest I’ve ever attended.”

“I feel I’ve talked to him enough to do what I need to do right now,” Brinkley said. “That’s why I’m getting in the writing mode right now.

He doesn’t yet have a title for the book, but he received an advance from HarperCollins with no immediate deadline. He said, “I’d like to get it up in the next couple of years, maybe ‘18 or ‘19.”

Kabler will be announcing more writers for the 2018 festival in the coming weeks. It will feature more than 70 sessions over two days and certain sessions will be offered twice. Talks in the library’s large community room will be simulcast to a screen in another room and the time between sessions will expand from 10 to 20 minutes to give people more time to talk and meet the authors. Lunches on the library grounds are included in the \$500 ticket and the festival is planning “literary” dinners at local restaurants between the daytime programs at the library and the evening talks at another site.

A link for purchasing tickets will be made available at rmwritersfest.org at 9 a.m. Wednesday.