

Troubadour Eric Andersen on New Album and Why ‘A Complete Unknown’ Was a Tad ‘Sugarcoated’

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Eric Andersen was a key figure on the Greenwich Village folk scene. He just released a new album. - Credit: Paolo Brillo

It's taken a few months, since he lives in the Netherlands, but Eric Andersen finally found time to watch *A Complete Unknown*. And the troubadour legend, who haunted those same Village clubs during that same time, was...a bit underwhelmed.

“It seemed a little sugarcoated,” he says. “It was a little two-dimensional. But I found it quite amusing and quite entertaining. I was looking at it more like a cinematic situation than something I knew. I was watching a *movie*. So, I enjoyed it from that standpoint.”

Then again, Andersen has a right to critique. At this point, many of the songwriters and musicians from that hallowed Greenwich Village scene have either died (mostly recently [Peter Yarrow](#)) or retired from touring (like Tom Paxton last year). Only a handful of those who helped make the Village a musical hotbed are still out performing and even making new albums — Bob Dylan, of course, along with Judy Collins, Carolyn Hester, Noel Paul Stookey, and very few others.

Andersen, who turned 82 this year, is also still on that list. Although he’s never had a Top 40 hit, the American-born songwriter has written a handful of songs that are part of that new American folk songbook — “Violets of Dawn,” “[Thirsty Boots](#)” — and albums like 1972’s *Blue River* are considered high-water marks of the genre. His impact was especially felt on the recent tribute album *Songpoet: Songs of Eric Andersen*, which includes renditions of his songs by [Dylan](#), [Linda Ronstadt](#), Mary Chapin Carpenter, Amy Helm, Lenny Kaye, Dom Flemons, Willie Nile, the duo of Larry Campbell and Teresa Williams, and the late Rick Danko (who formed a band with Andersen shortly before his death).

In the last few decades, Andersen, who moved to Norway for a period and then relocated to Amsterdam 20 years ago, has occasionally returned to the U.S. for shows. In those years, he’s made albums based on the words of Lord Byron, Albert Camus and German writer Heinrich Böll; released a collection of his own spoken-word pieces; saluted his peers with recordings of Village covers (*The Street Was Always There*); and cut a full-album, live-recreation of *Blue River*. But last month, he finally rolled out his first new set of songs, *Dance of Love and Death*, in over 20 years.

With its ruminative ballads and rhythms, the album is very much of a piece with the territory Andersen began carving out for himself when he arrived in New York in the Sixties. Like Dylan, he was championed by *New York Times* music critic Robert Shelton, which also helped Andersen land a record deal. With songs like “Close the Door Lightly When You Go” and “Come to My Bedside,” Andersen injected an air of mystery and sensuality into the scene. He befriended the likes of Paxton, Collins, and the late Phil Ochs and witnessed an increasingly isolated Dylan spar with his peers at the Kettle of Fish bar. He was so ingrained in that world that, he says, he missed Dylan’s historic Newport 1965 show because he was booked into the Gaslight Café, one of the essential Village venues.

Talking about the way that community has been recreated in films, Andersen feels that another recent movie rings a bit more true than *A Complete Unknown*. “[*Inside*] *Llewelyn Davis* was much more of the scene that I remember,” he says. “Even to the point where I went up to Vanguard Records to get some money, and the guy actually handed me a \$20 bill. I was living on the Lower East Side cooking for junkies and I needed the money to go to the vegetable market to buy stuff for them. I was walking back home, and I just stopped at

the Vanguard offices. There's a scene identical to that in *Llewyn Davis*. It couldn't have come from me, but the vibe, the scene, and the lighting was more realistic than the other film."

Along with many of his peers at the time, Andersen isn't a character in *A Complete Unknown*, although he took heart in Ochs' "There But for Fortune" heard in one of Monica Barbaro's Joan Baez performance scenes. "That was really beautiful," he says. "That came out being the best song in the film, which is hard to believe, because there are so many great songs. What was a little bit tragic was that Bob was such a word guy. He can talk. Not chatty, but he said things, you know. Usually talking about writing and stuff like that. None of that seemed to come through. But you can't do much in a movie. You got to gloss things over."

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Whether it's the result of those movies or a degree of rediscovery, Andersen has felt more openness to his style and that era than he has in a while. "I remember playing a couple of shows in Boston, when parents took their kids," he says. "And they were the ones who came up to talk to me. Maybe it blew their minds that somebody could stand up there and sing songs about things they think about. Maybe there's some kind of deprivation going on in terms of their musical world. I don't know. But even though their parents dragged them to this show, they were the ones who got it, which was funny."

Starting during that period and continuing over the decades, Andersen very much [lived the life](#) of the wandering, nomadic poet-writer. He was featured in an early Andy Warhol film, appeared on Johnny [Cash's TV variety show](#), wrote songs about his close relationships with Janis Joplin ("Pearl's Goodtime Blues") and Patti Smith ("Wild Crow Blues"), and asked [Joni Mitchell](#) to be the godmother to his daughter. He's also had his share of disappointments: signing with Beatles manager Brian Epstein right before Epstein's death and having the tapes for his all-important follow-up to *Blue River* lost. (They were finally discovered and released, but 20 years later.)

Over its 17 songs, *Dance of Love and Death* reflects on some of those past times, most movingly in "Every Once in a While," about his wife Debbie Green, who died in 2017. "Were you jealous of my future? Was I jealous of your past?" he sings. "Yeah, that was about her," Andersen says. "I think everybody has a situation where you think about somebody every once in a while and that person comes back, and I just sat down and that song poured out." The album also has moments of harrowing storytelling ("River Spree [Berlin]," about a junkie), relative lightheartedness ("After This Life"), and his signature deep-voiced intimate romanticism (the title song).

Although Andersen isn't known as a topical songwriter, he also ventured into that topic with the climate change-inspired "Season in Crime (Crime Scene)," spurred on by a California tour with violinist and Dylan alumnus Scarlet Rivera. "She was living in Topanga Canyon and her house was going to burn down," he says. "We were talking about sparks and embers in the air. It started to write itself. It doesn't take much to start a song." Thanks to producer Steve Addabbo and contributing musicians like Kaye and Dylan bassist Tony Garnier, the music is a mix of chamber-folk beauty and galloping rock & roll.

In early September, Andersen will return to the States for a month of shows on the East Coast. He's read or heard about international musicians who've supposedly had their visas revoked or have had to deal with profit-depleting tariffs when they arrive. "So far, it's full steam ahead," says Andersen, who has American and Dutch passports. "But things are evolving very rapidly. Everybody's on edge. I want to come over with my guitar and maybe they'll say, 'Well, you know,' because I'm a resident overseas. It'll be interesting." About any unlikely detainment, he jokes, "If I have one call to make, it'll be to you."