



Cash had quit smoking and given up pills even

Buteven the off-baseness shouldn't dissuade you from seeking out this memorable portrait.



Like most great documentarians (think Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* or Leon Gast's *When We Were Kings*), Elfstrom is never seen or heard. Michael Moore is probably the only major player in the genre who has made himself an integral component of his films. As a result, some don't consider his films documentaries, but Moore is obviously gifted at what he does and comes up with compelling, entertaining films. Would that the same could be said for director Joel Gilbert. His *Bob Dylan World Tours, 1966-1974* (Highway 61 Entertainment; Music Video Distributors) starts out with the fascinating premise of its subtitle, "Through The Camera Of Barry Feinstein." A truly gifted artist in his own right, Feinstein was Dylan's official photographer on those tours (not those eight years); the notion of making a film of his still images and the stories behind them is a brilliant stroke – or might have been.

Unfortunately, Gilbert is more interested in making a movie about himself. His omnipresent narration explains that he leads a Dylan tribute band, which we then see and hear glimpses of, as Gilbert says, "In case you were wondering, that's me, not Bob." (No, we weren't.) We eventually see the director driving his rental car into Feinstein's driveway (from several angles), getting out of the car, opening the gate – all of which, of course, had to be shot several times. Couldn't those frames be better spent showing the 3,000 photos in Feinstein's archives?

An interview with Dylan fanatic A.J. Weberman (while straying "off message" a bit) is fascinating in parts, and actually reveals Weberman to have a deep understanding of the artist. Its most interesting aspect is when Gilbert accuses the "Dylanologist" of being an obsessive fan – a case that Gilbert has already unwittingly made against himself in a scene where he, believe it or not, passes himself off as Bob Dylan to a homeless person in Woodstock and then, having drawn attention to himself, takes the pointless, cruel "joke" a step further by autographing a girl's jeans.

Thankfully, someone got around to doing a proper documentary on legendary engineer/producer Tom Dowd (1925-2002), and thankfully that person was Mark Moorman. In *Tom Dowd & the Language Of Music* (Palm Pictures), Moorman (like Elfstrom) stays behind the camera, but instead of the cinema verite approach, most of Dowd's story is told via interviews, with some photo montages, film footage and staged reenactments. Dowd's associates at Atlantic Records, founder Ahmet Ertegun and producer Jerry Wexler, are interviewed, along with some of the legendary acts he worked with – Eric Clapton, the Allman Brothers Band, Ray Charles, Lynyrd Skynyrd. But the eloquent, ebullient Dowd is the most engaging presence on camera, and he brings an already fascinating story to life.

After being recruited to work on what became known as the Manhattan Project, developing the technology that would lead to the atomic bomb, Dowd combined his technological aptitude with his musical talent and began engineering records, beginning with the novelty hit "If I Knew You Were Coming I'd've Baked A Cake" in 1947. It's hard to believe, but one person engineered "Mack The Knife" by Bobby Darin, "Giant Steps" by John Coltrane, "Oye Como Va" by Tito Puente, "Respect" by Aretha Franklin, and "Layla" by Derek & the Dominos (which he also produced). Even on records that listed him only as engineer, Dowd's musical sense invariably overlapped into producing and arranging – he also engineered and/or produced Charles Mingus, Otis Redding, Dusty Springfield, Rod Stewart, Cream, Mose Allison, Ornette Coleman, the Coasters, Sam & Dave, the interviewees mentioned above, and countless others. He was in many ways the first of his kind (having the first 8-track machine of any label, essentially inventing sliding faders) and the last of a breed.

The DVD version features an extra 90 minutes of great deleted scenes and additional interview segments, illustrating what tough decisions director Moorman had to make. The one band that still seems to get short shrift, considering their importance to the label, is the Young Rascals, the first white rock band signed to Atlantic, whose huge success paved the way for future signees like Cream and the Allman Brothers. A minor quibble not even worth subtracting half a star for. This one gets the highest possible recommendation.

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June, 2005

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