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Above: Poster art from *She Gods of Shark Reef*

WEDNESDAY, JULY 29, 2009

Stuck Inside the Eighties With the Jesus Blues Again

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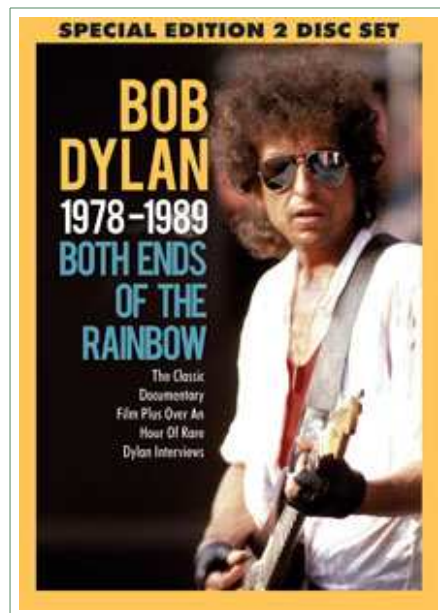
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Bob Dylan, 1978-1989: Both Ends of the Rainbow

Review by Nelhydra Paupér

- At some point in the mid-1970s I remember any time I walked through midtown New York City I'd be aggressively approached by members of all sorts of spiritual, personal and religious cults, one after another: Moonies, Hare Krishnas, Scientologists, the Sullivans, Jesus Freaks, all practically grabbing me by the throat insisting I go with them to a nice place with nice people who would no doubt grab me by the throat and do all sorts of nice things to me. There were also the cults that didn't take to the streets: the EST-holes, Primal Therapy, TM, Silva Mind Control, Guru Maharaji, Guru Rajneesh, Guru Hoodoo-Voodoo. Lordy, there were tons of 'em. (FULL DISCLOSURE: I myself was raised in a religious cult. In the 1960s-70s it was known as the Roman Catholic Church.)

Whatever else I was insecure about as a teenager (pretty much everything) I was secure in my belief that there was no "ANSWER," and that no group of desperate ex-druggies or failed-suicides were going to get their pathetic paws on my independent ass. I was generally tolerant and always cool with spirituality that was personal and gentle and seeking peace. But you can't bomb your way to peace, as Richard Nixon found out. Fire & brimstone was for losers. Most of these groups

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were comprised of basket-cases who had gladly allowed themselves to have their baskets rewoven by manipulative, power-hungry, Tiny-Town terrors. This would not happen to me. I was gonna go it solo. As one of my heroes wrote, "Don't follow leaders."

So imagine the horror (the *horror*) when in late 1979 that hero, Bob Dylan, announced in no uncertain terms that he had found Jesus, that he was born again, that Christ was the only way. And not only had he gone all Jesus on me in his private life but he put out an album of songs about his newfound beliefs that were filled with... *fire & brimstone*. I was left muttering the '70s version of "I mean, like, WTF?"

It was a real jolt at the time. It did not compute. As a Dylan lover I had to either find a way to endure this mindfuck (my cross to bear, if you will) or abandon someone who had provided me with more meat and drink than nearly any other artist I could name at that time. Despite fleeting thoughts that I might have been fooled all along I knew those meals were real and substantial. So I shrugged and shook my head and accepted that while this was someone I might no longer run out to see whenever he came to town, and I might not follow as passionately as I once did, I would continue to listen and always try to find the good. Let us pray.

The irony is that Dylan's Jesus period would come to almost seem like a Renaissance compared to much of what followed in the 1980s. When the proselytizing phase passed after a couple of years there were a string of albums that were all uneven, frequently unmemorable and sometimes unlistenable. Poor Bob wandered through the desert for a lot more than forty days and forty nights. Seemed like forty years (to paraphrase a terrible line in his terrible 1981 song "Lenny Bruce"). While every album had a song or two that stood up as great songwriting, the majority of songs seemed like potentially interesting ideas that were just thoughtlessly ground up and made into flabby, over-stuffed sausages. That is, they sounded like that if you could get past the horrible productions and arrangements the poor, damned songs were often given. Cringing became a common part of listening.

Dylan writes about this miserable period in his excellent 2004 memoir, *Chronicles*, an intellectual autobiography in the true sense of the term as it's less interested in events or anecdotes than a writing pilgrim's progress. The book is laid out into three sections which detail three stages of his life as a songwriter. The book follows a revised version of the old Hollywood romantic comedy format. Instead of "Boy meets girl/Boy loses girl/Boy gets girl," Dylan's book is "Boy meets songwriting/Boy loses songwriting/Boy gets songwriting." The 1980s were Bob's "Boy loses songwriting" phase.

The new Chrome Dreams video, **Bob Dylan, 1978-1989: Both Ends of the Rainbow**, spends two hours and seven minutes probing this most difficult and frustrating period of Dylan's life and work. As part of their excellent ongoing series of documentaries covering Dylan's entire career, this one should be the clunker of the group. Yet the intelligence and insight found within make it always fascinating. Thus far, Chrome Dreams has produced no clunkers.

As with the earlier videos in the series, this one gives an album-by-album, tour-by-tour history and analysis of where Dylan was at in a set period. The interviews include writers who have given Dylan's work Deep Thought throughout the decades. The viewpoints are usually solid, sometimes astute, occasionally irritating, but always knowledgeable. (Though I can't resist giving the professional pedant Robert Christgau a C+.) It is a relief to not have to endure the useless comments of some trendy *Entertainment Weekly* hack whose main awareness of Dylan began with that **Victoria's Secret commercial** a few years back. The guys interviewed (and, alas, it is *all* guys) know their onions, yet despite being fans they can be brutal in their assessments of the work.

The best interviews, however, are those with producers, engineers and musicians who worked with Dylan during this period. These guys (again, all guys) give good talking-head and reaffirm all the stories of Dylan's quirky recording methods, where songs are barely learned by the players as the tape begins to roll, nothing is recorded in more than one or two takes and a botched chance may be a chance lost forever because Dylan will simply move on to another song, never to

return. *Shot of Love* producer Chuck Plotkin describes how one of Dylan's greatest songs, "Every Grain of Sand", was recorded with no forewarning and no vocal microphone until a quick-thinking Plotkin grabbed a mic, knelt beside the piano and held it with arm outstretched in front of Dylan for the entire six-plus minutes of the song. Dylan had never played it for the musicians before and no second take would have been attempted. One take, one chance (bless you, Chuck). It's impossible not to wonder what songs may have been left behind because of Dylan's restless methodology.

The frustration of the '80s albums, with their occasionally great songs like "Jokerman" or "Brownsville Girl" surrounded by throw-aways or half-worked nice-tries, becomes the main focus of the story and grows a little wearying, just as the '80s themselves did. But the insight into the good songs, and the genuine relief when the good, outright fun of the Traveling Willburys arrives, keep things from turning into a watered-down love.

The decade ended with *Oh, Mercy*, the album which began Dylan's return to consistent quality. Though not a favorite of this writer (Daniel Lanois's showy production noises are too often distracting and irritating), it is given it's proper due here as the point at which Dylan re-emerges from the dead. (In fact, *Oh, Mercy* is the focus of the boy-gets-songwriting-back-again final chapter of *Chronicles*.) So the 1980s, which began with Dylan & Jesus, ended with Dylan as Lazarus. How nifty!

The next chapter in this saga should be a good one, with the excellent albums *World Gone Wrong*, *Time Out of Mind* and, his finest in thirty years, "Love and Theft" all just around the bend. Chrome Dreams is, without question, the best video chronicler of Dylan's life and work thus far. If they can make Dylan's '80s consistently entertaining, they can truly walk on water.

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