



Bob Dylan

1978-1989 [DVD]

[Both Ends of the Rainbow]

(Chrome Dreams) Rated: N/A
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by [Tom Useted](#)

"An Independent review and critique," reads the tiny text below the subtitle of this DVD, which calls itself a "documentary film covering Dylan's most controversial decade." I suppose this is technically a documentary, but it's not a very riveting one, even if you've spent the bulk of your summer listening to the music from the period covered during the two-hour program. Actually, it's dull *especially* if you've been listening to what were essentially Dylan's lost years, as I have been, because you just *know* someone, somewhere could make a fantastic film about this period.

This, naturally, is not that film. Not by a long shot. Presumably there's some sort of profit to be had in the critical review DVD industry, because companies like Chrome Dreams keep making the awful things. They're like VH1's *Behind the Music*, without the scandal and lurid anecdotes, in that they're absolutely predictable. Every DVD like this is a series of talking heads guiding the viewer—presumably a fan, since no one else would buy something like this—through the subject matter in chronological order. Any occasional insight one of the chatterboxes has to offer—and it's fair to point out that this happens more often than you might expect, but much less often than it should—is automatically canceled out ten-fold by the artless presentation of the material. Simply put, these "documentaries" are barely worth the time.

With these many caveats out of the way, we can go back to lamenting the lack of any decent documentary to help us better understand this, which may be the most confusing period of Dylan's career. (The "most controversial" bit may be true for fans, but for the culture at large, the '60s win hands down. By the '80s, Dylan was no longer in the forefront of anything.) He started by embracing Christianity (*Slow Train Coming*, *Saved*), moved on to a state of theological confusion (*Shot of Love*, *Infidels*), attempted to be contemporary (*Empire Burlesque*), sort of realized his strength lies in more traditional sounds (*Knocked Out Loaded*, *Down in the Groove*), and eventually made a genuinely good record (*Oh Mercy*). Along the way were pit stops with the Grateful Dead and the Traveling Wilburys, which were at such extremes of quality that it was hard to believe the same Bob Dylan was involved in both projects. And the less said about Live Aid and "We Are the World", the better.

That's the condensed version of the story, and *Both Ends of the Rainbow* traces the arc of the decade via interviews with critics and a few folks who were involved in the making of the records. The critics get in a few good lines, especially Andrew Mueller, who is always a saving grace on these DVDs. Of *Empire Burlesque*, he says, "Short of getting Molly Ringwald to sing backing vocals, he could not have made a more '80s-sounding record." Clinton Heylin (whose biography *Behind the Shades* covers this period brilliantly) opines that the gospel-based live shows of 1979 and 1980 were Dylan's best ever, and that Dylan's you're-saved-or-you're-damned attitude was basically a revisitation of his '60s electric shows, where the audience was either hip or it wasn't. And Robert Christgau accurately notes that what was missing from Dylan's Christian records was a sense of spontaneity, of which the artist usually has plenty to spare.

It's the record-makers, though, who give any sense of what working with

Dylan during the '80s was actually like. For example, Chuck Plotkin, who produced *Shot of Love*, recalls a relaxed atmosphere in the studio, the result of his having advised Dylan to not think about the fact that they were making a record. Things were casual enough, and spontaneous enough, that when Dylan sat down at the piano and started playing, Plotkin had to rush in and hold a microphone in front of him in case he started singing. He did, and without Plotkin, we'd have missed out on "Every Grain of Sand" as it appears on the record.

But as is always the case with this sort of DVD, the artist himself is often hidden. True, there are song clips and pictures, excerpts from radio interviews (expanded somewhat in the extra features) and some pretty hilarious footage from the recording of "We Are the World." But that's about it. Heylin's claim about the Christian concerts would be bolstered by some live footage, which does exist, but Chrome Dreams probably couldn't get the rights to it. It's a shame, but what's more of a shame is that none of Dylan's people (whomever they may be) and no one from Columbia has bothered to treat this period with much archival respect. They can cannibalize the '60s as much as they want, but the '80s may as well have not happened.

It's too bad, because even if it was Dylan's worst decade, the man has never been less than interesting, and anyone that can produce tracks like "Brownsville Girl", "Every Grain of Sand", "The Groom's Still Waiting At the Altar", "Jokerman", or "Blind Willie McTell" during a fallow period must be doing something right. *Both Ends of the Rainbow* doesn't come close to doing him justice. Perhaps someone else will step up for the challenge.

RATING: 

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