

'Bob Dylan 1990-2006: The Never Ending Narrative' DVD

April 5, 2011 release sheds new light on Dylan's latter-day career

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[Bob Dylan](#)² is a survivor. When he released *Oh Mercy* in 1989, the album was praised far and wide as his long-awaited return to form. The one-time "Voice of a Generation" had once again begun to restore his vitality. In the two decades that have passed since then, Dylan has produced some of his most consummate work, rivaling many of his songs from the mid-'60s. How did he do it? What constitutes this new vitality? And does his importance today amount to mere icon worship? These are important questions, and the forthcoming DVD documentary, *Bob Dylan, 1990-2006: The Never Ending Narrative*, answers them.

Who's in the Film?

The Never Ending Narrative is basically a primer for new or old fans that want to understand Dylan in his later years. It's "Post-1990s Bob Dylan 101," chockful of commentary by some of the world's leading Dylanologists and music journalists. There's Clinton Heylin, who's written a half-dozen books about Dylan over the years, most notably *Behind the Shades Revisited*. Derek Barker, publisher of the Bob Dylan fanzine *Isis* is on board.

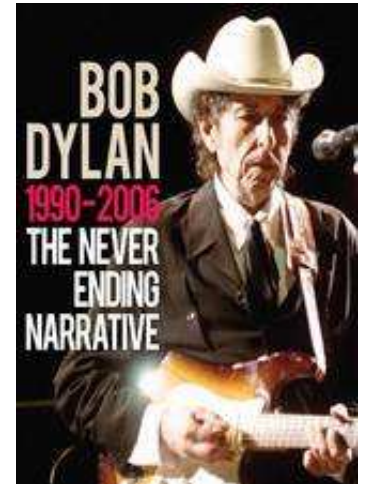
Meanwhile, *Rolling Stone* magazine's Robert Christgau has been following Dylan for the past few decades and is well-known for his sober, no-holds barred criticism. On the recording end, Mark Howard was the engineer during the *Oh Mercy* sessions. And then, a few other names are thrown in for color.

This is one of those documentaries that uses the trusty format where the interviewee sits in a chair talking to the camera, and then the screen cuts to a still photograph which the camera pans over as the voice-over continues. Then an unseen narrator introduces a new year or event, which begins with yet another interview with a different expert, which cuts away to another pan on a still photo as the interview continues in a voice-over, etcetera, etcetera.

The film opens in 1989 with the release of *Oh Mercy*, as viewers get the full run-down of the tense dynamic between Dylan and producer Daniel Lanois, which resulted in Dylan's first critically acclaimed album since *Desire* in 1976. It was the beginning of what would become a major comeback that would stretch over the next eight years as Dylan reestablished himself as America's premiere singer-songwriter.

The 1990s

To portray his frustration with his career, the documentary zeroes in on Dylan's performance at the 1991 Grammys. There to accept a Lifetime Achievement Award, he also performed, doing a horribly unintelligible live version of "Masters of War," which Andrew Mueller, a music writer at *The Guardian* called "self-indulgent" and "utterly contemptuous of the audience." True enough, but then he goes on to praise the performance as guerrilla theater. It was actually, he says, a "cool thing to do, to go in front of an audience of idiots in suits at a ludicrous carnival of corporate mediocrity... and dump five minutes of absolutely atonal din on them."



Chrome Dreams

Bitter about his career, and experiencing a love/hate relationship with his audience, Dylan finally let it all go, embracing his age and releasing *Good as I Been to You* (1992) and *World Gone Wrong* (1993), which represented a return to his roots, and himself. Rather than toil with the frustration of trying to remain vital, he merely did what he felt like doing, and in doing so ironically restored his vitality. The 1994 release of *MTV Unplugged* was the icing on the cake, collaring a whole new fan base of substance-hungry Gen-Xers.

And then, whammo! The 1997 album *Time Out of Mind* threw Dylan back on the top of the heap as America's most important singer-songwriter, a situation that few thought possible. The album scored him a few Grammys, laying a solid foundation to build upon for the coming decade.

The New Millennium

The first batch of all original music since 1991, *Time Out of Mind* was once again produced by Daniel Lanois. In a hilarious commentary, Clinton Heylin takes a swipe at the idiosyncratic producer, who by 1997 "had totally bought into his own publicity. He thought he was the artist. He thought people were buying the albums because he was the producer. He really, really way overestimated his importance."

As for the album, Heylin continues, "Commercially, it was a huge hit... It gave him another shot in the arm. If *Time Out of Mind* hadn't been a success, I don't know if he'd still be out there." It was massive, and if Dylan learned one thing from Lanois, it was that he worked better without a record producer, and he proceeded to self-produce his ensuing albums, "*Love and Theft*" and *Modern Times*, using the pen name Jack Frost.

Touching briefly on the release of Dylan's film *Masked and Anonymous* and his Victoria's Secret commercial, the film dissects the 2004 release of Dylan's memoir, *Chronicles*, and the 2005 Martin Scorsese documentary, *No Direction Home*. With deft analysis, longtime *Rolling Stone* critic Robert Christgau unloads, explaining that Dylan exercised control over the how the film portrayed him, despite his denials. "It was just as much an autobiography as *Chronicles*," he grouses, pointing out that Dylan's own manager was the person conducting the 40 hours of interview footage. "In both of these works this is Dylan opening up and telling the truth?" Christgau asks. "It's not. It's just one more mirror in the hall of mirrors that has been his entire public life."

Understanding Dylan, Then and Now

Why is this documentary necessary? Simple. Over the past two decades, or what Dylanphiles like to call his "later period," Bob Dylan has produced some of the finest songs of his career. And as far as lyrical depth and sonic stratigraphy, a lot of his recent work puts much of his early stuff to shame. But if you ask somebody why or how, you'll typically be met with a blank stare or vague response. Sure, people will tell you the new music is fantastic, but don't ask for an explanation.

These days, in the age of the Mp3, people are isolated on remote musical islands. They don't discuss the finer implications of popular music anymore, Dylan's or anyone else's, for that matter. This is partly because most popular music no longer has literary qualities. That was a doorway that Dylan singularly flung open in 1965, which his contemporaries soon followed him through. But literary pop music has since fallen out of fashion and become obsolete.

In the "information age," the only people really thinking about the meaning and literary quality of Dylan's new music are the academics, the Dylanologists, and old school music critics, whose main concern has always been finding a song's substance, or lack of it, and pointing it out to listener/readers. The latest addition to Chrome Dreams' Bob Dylan DVD library, *The Never Ending Narrative* does just that, putting Dylan's post-'90s career into perspective and giving fans a firm foundation from which to dig even deeper.

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