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Bob Dylan 1975-1981 – Rolling Thunder and The Gospel Years (2006)

Must-have documentary for any Dylan fan, though no Dylan songs are featured

Studio: Highway 61 Entertainment

Video: 1.85:1 Widescreen

Audio: DD 2.0

Extras: Journey to Hibbing (11 min); Ramblin' Jack's Early Days (13 min); Photo Gallery 1975-1981; Soundtrack (3 samples)

Length: 240 minutes

Rating: ***1/2

Because this documentary is unauthorized, and although it covers Bob Dylan's life from 1975-1981, it contains no Bob Dylan tunes. What it does have is a wide range of interviews and locations--Alabama, California, New York, Minnesota. Joel Gilbert is a huge fan (there is a previous review of his work on our website), serves as writer and producer of this film, and he's always looking for information about Dylan. The DVD is broken up into segments starting with Rubin "Hurricane" Carter. His story begins with his difficulty talking and forming words which led to humiliation and aggression. This led to fighting and ultimately boxing. He's an eloquent speaker and it's quite an interesting history lesson. While he tells the story, Bob Dylan's lyrics (from "Hurricane") appear as titles with a film-style background and melody plays in the background.

The next story is told by Scarlet Rivera who ran into Dylan on the street and he asked her about her violin. She was on her way to another rehearsal, but fate stepped in and the two went to the East side--to his loft. Later she came with him to play with Muddy Waters and Dylan introduced Rivera as his violinist.

Claudia Levy tells of Jacques Levy and the creation of "Isis" for the album Desire. She also comments on Joey Gallo and the song "Joey." Bassist Rob Stoner of "The Bitter End" comments on Desire as well. Between the interviewees, an interesting story is revealed. Others interviewed include: Pete Howard, producer Jerry Wexler, songwriter Al Kasha, folk singer Ramblin' Jack Elliott, John Atkins, rock reporter Joel Selvin, Pastor Bill Dwyer (Dylan's Bible class teacher), Mitch Glaser, reporter AJ Weberman, background singer Regina McCrary, keyboardist Spooner Oldham, and Izzy Young. The material goes off in every direction and includes interviews, old video and audio clips, long sections on religion, visiting churches, recording studios, and historical venues, but eventually all weaves back into Dylan's life or song.

Audio and video quality are very good and production value is fine. There is so much background information that it would be hard to watch it all in one sitting, but for the Dylan fan this DVD contains relevant material never-before-seen.

-- Brian Bloom