

REVIEW**DVD Review: Bob Dylan - *Rolling Thunder and The Gospel Years 1975-1981***

April 29, 2006

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So let's talk about Mr. Bob Dylan for a minute.

I have always found Dylan's "Jesus Years" - the period from 1979 to 1981 when he did his so-called "Born Again" album trilogy - to be one of the most fascinating of his career. And I could never figure out just exactly why it upset so many people at the time.

Well, at least apart from the obvious, anyway.

Dylan was (and of course still is) Jewish. His audience was largely made up of hippies and other counterculture types who had come up with Dylan through the sixties as pretty much the poster boy for everything "anti-establishment" during those turbulent years. These were folks who weren't necessarily ready for a new "700 Club" model Bob Dylan...particularly at a time coinciding with the dawn of the Reagan era.

Fine. I can accept that.

But what always bothered me about that was that Dylan at the time was simply doing what Dylan as an artist had always done. He was speaking what he saw to be the truth at the time, and doing so in a particularly forceful fashion.

Once you get past the actual subject matter, how different - at least in terms of the delivery - is something like, say, "When You Gonna Wake Up?" from *Slow Train Coming*, from something like "Idiot Wind" from *Blood On The Tracks* or "Ballad of a Thin Man" from *Highway 61 Revisited*?

How different was "The Gospel Show" Dylan toured in 1979 from the way he horrified the folkie purists at Newport in 1965 by strapping on an electric guitar?

The answer is it wasn't any different at all.

Dylan was simply doing what he always has done. Dylan was simply following his heart through his art. He was being consistent. And, bottom line, he was being Dylan — which meant, once again, pretty much putting his career on the line at the time. Despite the suspicions and generally prevailing anti-Christian biases (and lets call a spade a spade here) of the day, Dylan chose to put his personal and artistic integrity first, at considerable risk.

That, at least to me, is one of the things that makes Bob Dylan such a special artist. It is what makes Dylan — well, Dylan. And personally, I find those so-called "Jesus Years" to be one of the most fascinating periods of his career.

And there is now finally a DVD out which chronicles this most fascinating period, along with the equally interesting "Rolling Thunder" period which immediately preceded it.

So lets get the flaws out of the way first. *Bob Dylan: Rolling Thunder and the Gospel Years*, clocking in at some four hours in length, is just way too long to hold the interest of anyone but the most ardent, hardcore Dylanologist.

Being an unauthorized documentary which includes absolutely no Dylan music doesn't help matters either. It does however offer fascinating new insights into this most fascinating

phase of Dylan's career.

The filmmaker is a guy named Joel Gilbert who, in his day job, fronts a Dylan tribute band called Highway 61 Revisited. The guy is an obvious fan, which makes for some borderline humorous moments as he goes from Dylan's hometown in Hibbing, Minnesota, to Muscle Shoals, to New York and California dressed and coiffed as pretty much a late-seventies Dylan clone to get his interviews with the people who were actually there.

But the interviews themselves are quite revealing. Rubin "Hurricane" Carter talks about his prison visits with Dylan and the legendary song Dylan recorded on the *Desire* album which eventually helped him earn his freedom from a bogus murder conviction.

Pastor Bill Dwyer from the Vineyard Christian Church in California speaks candidly for the first time about Dylan's Christian conversion. Legendary record producer Jerry Wexler talks about the recording sessions for both the *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved* albums.

And San Francisco critic Joel Selvin talks openly about the "God Awful Gospel" review he gave Dylan's shows at The Warfield Theatre on the infamous "Gospel Tour" ("I gave him short shrift," he now admits in retrospect).

For the hardcore Dylan fan, much is revealed here. Rambling Jack Elliott talks about the "carnival atmosphere" of the Rolling Thunder Tour, and later reveals his hurt at not being asked out again for the tour's second leg. Violinist Scarlett Rivera talks about her chance meeting with Dylan on a New York Street and how it led to her being invited to be on the sessions for *Desire*, and eventually to be part of his touring band for "Rolling Thunder".

And then there's the clips from that "Born Again" tour. When a fan yells, "Rock and roll," Dylan replies, "If you want rock and roll you can go see Kiss, and let them carry you down into the pit."

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Priceless.

In retrospect, Dylan's so-called Gospel period produced one classic album, *Slow Train Coming*. It's followup, *Saved*, which was basically a recording of the fire and brimstone material he had been doing on the "Slow Train" tour, is, sadly, a largely forgotten album that still has at least one side of great songs. *Shot of Love*, the final album of the "Gospel Trilogy" is remembered mainly for one great song — the lovely "Every Grain Of Sand".

This DVD is not for everybody. But for the hardcore Dylan fan looking to gain new insights into one of the strangest periods of his career, it answers a ton of questions.

You'll find Glen Boyd sharing his Thoughtmares about everything from music to politics to professional wrestling at his blog [The World Wide Glen: Welcome To My Thoughtmare](#)

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- » Published on April 29, 2006
- » Type: [Review](#)
- » Filed under: [Music](#), [Video: Music](#), [Video: Documentary](#), [Music: Rock](#), [Music: Folk](#).

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