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Bob Dylan 1975-1981: Rolling Thunder and the Gospel Years

(Directed by Joel Gilbert)

By Rob Carson

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Joel Gilbert fronts a Bob Dylan tribute band and recently he has been moonlighting as a filmmaker as well, making a series of fan documentaries about his hero. He should probably stick to his day job, although, for what it's worth, the guy can pull off an eerie imitation of Dylan. Or, if he insists on making more vanity films of this sort, he should at least hire an editor capable of turning raw interview footage into a compelling story. Clocking in at a full four hours, this film will put all but the most ardent Dylan fans to sleep a couple of times over. This is a shame, because there really is a worthwhile hour-long film waiting to be culled from this footage. Gilbert gathered excellent material in his interviews with Ramblin' Jack Elliott, Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, Scarlet Rivera, Rob Stoner, Jerry Wexler, Spooner Oldham, Pastor Bill Dwyer and others, casting a revealing light on a period of Dylan's career that warrants more attention. However, instead of editing these conversations into coherent form, Gilbert lets them run on interminably, treating them to ham-fisted, low budget effects and inter-cutting them with embarrassing clip art graphics. It's also unnerving that Gilbert conducts most of these interviews wearing his "Bob Dylan" stage costume and frequently cuts back to shots of himself interacting with his subjects. The bonus feature of Gilbert visiting Dylan's hometown of Hibbing is particularly cringe-worthy in this respect. (Highway 61)

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