



Laramie Movie Scope: Bob Dylan -- 1976-1981: Rolling Thunder & the Gospel Years

A slick, comprehensive unauthorized biography



by **Robert Roten**, Film Critic



February 3, 2006 -- “Bob Dylan -- 1976-1981: Rolling Thunder & the Gospel Years” is a long-winded title for a solid, long-winded unauthorized documentary focusing on five years in the life of one of the giants of 20th Century music, Bob Dylan. The film is surprisingly good, given the fact it includes almost no footage of Dylan speaking, and none of his songs are on the film's soundtrack, or on the soundtrack CD.

Instead, the songs on the soundtrack are performed by Highway 61 Revisited, the Dylan “tribute band.” The band's lead singer, Joel Gilbert, also conducted the interviews and produced and directed the film. The film and the soundtrack CD are cleverly woven together. Several musicians interviewed for the film just happen to have solo performances on the soundtrack CD. Several interviews are conducted in Hibbing, Minn., Dylan's birthplace, on the same day Highway 61 Revisited is playing a date there. The Hibbing segment is one of the bonus features on the DVD.

Given the massive copyright restrictions involved in doing an unauthorized biographical film, Gilbert has come up with the next best thing to interviews with Dylan himself, some good stills, some good Dylan concert footage, along several very knowledgeable, articulate, intelligent people who happen to be good storytellers. There are also a few very short video segments culled from archive footage of Dylan talking about his music. Gilbert asks the right questions and the editing of the talking head interview footage, by Paul Belanger and Gilbert is excellent. The result is an informative, interesting look at a controversial period in Dylan's amazing music career. It is also very long, clocking in at just over four hours, not counting the extras. However, this film is not really padded (except for a segment with Gilbert and Ramblin' Jack Elliot endlessly strumming their guitars). It is dense enough to warrant repeated viewings. Some of the film's graphics, illustrating the talking points, are pretty entertaining, like a cockroach fitted with boxing gloves and a illustration of “retarded suits” (Beavis and Butthead dressed in suits).

Among the best interviews in the film are with musician Robert Stoner and journalist Joel Selvin. These guys are very unusual. How often do you hear a musician use a lot of multisyllabic words, and get the meanings right? How often do you hear a quotable journalist? A real coup is the interview with legendary record producer Jerry Wexler, who produced Dylan's “Slow Train Coming” at Muscle Shoals Sound Studio (the film includes a visit to the studio, as well as a visit to Rundown Studios).

To give you an idea how quotable Selvin is, here are some of my favorites: Speaking of a 1979 Dylan concert in San Francisco in which the singer, recently converted to Christianity, proselytizes from the stage, “It stands out as a moment of integrity on his part ... He's had a career that's been dotted with these

moments of integrity, whereas most of the people in popular music are full of shit and don't have anything to say. His willingness to use music as a platform for personal expression is exactly what makes him important to us and what makes him a force in our culture. What makes Dylan Dylan is that he wants to make these kind of statements. Neil Diamond doesn't ... That's why we care about Dylan, and Neil Diamond doesn't matter."

Another interesting visit during the film is to the Vinyard Church in Los Angeles, where Dylan converted to Christianity (before converting back to Judaism). Pete Howard of Ice Magazine notes in the movie that Dylan's Christian period was about the same in terms of numbers of songs as his folk-rock period, his blues period and his country period. Howard also noted that Dylan's Christian period was "The most radical of Dylan's reinventions and it also falls into the narrowest niche." Some in the film claim that Dylan was cynically exploiting the Christian market. Others argue there was very little Christian music market at the time, so his switch to Christian music made no commercial sense at all. The visit to the Vinyard Church includes a good interview with Pastor Bill Dwyer. Dylan attended Dwyer's Bible study classes at the church, and got straight A's.

The film includes a lengthy discussion of how Dylan's Christianity and his Jewish heritage coexisted. There is also a discussion of the "Jews for Jesus" group (who call themselves Messianic Jews). There is also an interview with a "Dylanologist," who seriously says after a Dylan observation, "it's not an interpretation, it is a translation!" Yeah, right. Whatever you say. This film does not give a brief, condescending view of Dylan's conversion to Christianity. It gives the subject a rich, full examination. As usual, Selvin is not shy about saying what he believes. He is a non-Christian. "You can take that Christian message and take it down the street. I don't care to hear it at all." Selvin wrote a critical review of Dylan's 1979 religious concert at the Warfield Theatre in San Francisco. He wrote for the Chronicle at the time. He later re-evaluated his original assessment of the concert.

The film also devotes quite a bit of time to Dylan's famous song, "Hurricane." The film includes a lengthy interview of Reuben "Hurricane" Carter, twice convicted of murder before finally being vindicated with the help of his own autobiography, and Dylan's song. It doesn't cover the whole Reuben Carter saga, which went on for years. The film also covers the odd, small venue "Rolling Thunder Revue" tour which borrowed its theme from a French film, "Les Enfants Du Paradis." There is also a discussion of the experimental film "Renaldo and Clara," Directed by Dylan, which was filmed during the Rolling Thunder tour.

This documentary film tries delve into Dylan's work both as a poet and songwriter. Interestingly, Jerry Wexler thinks Dylan's lyrics work equally well as poetry, but he was far more interested in Dylan's music. It is Dylan's music, and his singing voice, that is most underappreciated, Wexler said, and he argues it is the music that will live on long after the lyrics are forgotten. That assessment of Dylan's words is hard to believe. It is hard to believe that those words, which spoke for a generation of people growing up in the 1960s and 1970s will someday pass into obscurity. They certainly haven't yet. This film rates a B.

The DVD is presented in a wide screen format. The soundtrack is 5.1 surround. Extras include a segment on Hibbing, Minn. and an interview with Ramblin' Jack Elliot about his early days and his friendship with Woody Guthrie, Dylan and others. There is also a photo gallery. The DVD does not have subtitles or closed-captioning, but does have some nice animated menus. The soundtrack CD has some songs that sound like Dylan and a few by other artists, including Rob Stoner, Regina McCrary and the McCrary Sisters (also featured in the film) and some violin solos by Scarlet Rivera (also featured in the film). The soundtrack CD has a lot of gospel music, with some rock numbers. Some cuts have more of a country flavor. On some songs, the instrumental solos are not pushed to the foreground as much as they should be.

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