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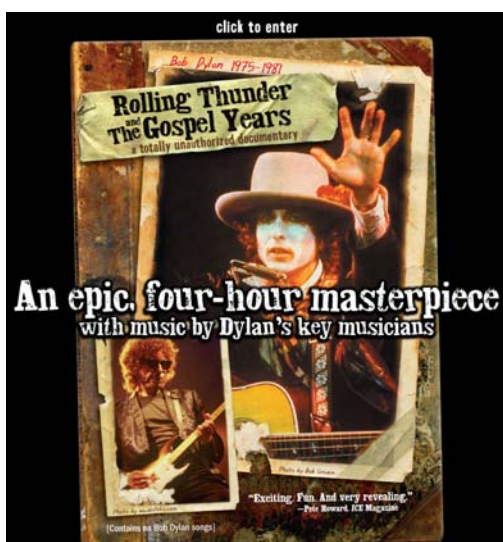
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# music spectrum

REVIEWING MUSIC ACCORDING TO A SPECTRUM OF STYLES  
AND DISCUSSING THE CONNECTION TO THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

wednesday, april 12, 2006

## American Folk: *Rolling Thunder and the Gospel Years: Bob Dylan 1975-1981, a Totally Unauthorized Documentary* DVD



I love Dylan's *Desire* album. And as a Christian, I've always been intrigued by Dylan's Gospel period that came soon after the *Desire* years. So I was definitely excited to see the release of *Rolling Thunder and the Gospel Years: Bob Dylan 1975-1981, a Totally Unauthorized Documentary* DVD.

And I was completely disappointed.

Director and producer Joel Gilbert is also the lead singer of Highway 61 Revisited, billed as the "world's only Bob Dylan tribute band," has turned in his third

documentary about his hero. The four-hour film begins with no overarching narrative, feels like a high school thesis that has no topic sentence and no limit on how much information was included. Plus, there's no Bob Dylan songs due to copyright (and other legal) reasons, meaning that there's just teases of seeing Gilbert's band perform songs like "Hurricane."

Actually, before watching the DVD, I listened to the soundtrack which also could not contain any Dylan songs, but the collection is outstandingly strong. Film score sections like "Ode to Rolling Thunder" (four parts) capture the spirit, energy, and sound of *Desire*, especially due to the fact that Dylan's violinist, Scarlet Rivera, joins Gilbert and company.

The CD also includes other great originals, especially those from *Desire* bassist Rob Stoner. Elsewhere, the Gospel years come alive through the spirituals and Gospel songs that harken back to the Christian faith that Dylan revealed through the albums at the



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end of the 70's. These songs are especially rich due to the soulful singing of Regina McCrary and the McCrary Sisters who were part of Dylan's touring group during those years.

Based on the soundtrack, I was excited about the film. Within one minute of the film, though, I realized that all of this great music from the soundtrack is extremely poorly used. In between interview clips, the soundtrack is podded up and podded down faster than you can blink as Gilbert's clip art images flash on the screen. It's startling, unnerving, and makes you want to yell, "Let me hear a little of that music! Stop cutting it off so fast!" However, it never gets any better through four hours of film, so my recommendation is just get the soundtrack.

And indeed, Gilbert has assembled interviews with some of the key figures in the Dylan scene from 1975-1981—Reuben "Hurricane" Carter, Rivera, Stoner, McCrary, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, and Jerry Wexler, plus journalists like Joel Selvin. There are some enlightening stories here, but there's also just a lot. . . a lot of talking.

Then to add frustration, the DVD bills itself as having bonus materials like "Journey to Hibbing," with Gilbert and Highway 61 Revisited going to Dylan's Minnesota hometown to play a concert. However, it's all just talking, watching Gilbert walk around town. There's no concert footage—even of Gilbert's original film score work or the public domain Gospel songs. After hours of talking heads, I was ready for music, sweet music. The only option was to turn off the DVD and grab the soundtrack which is unencumbered by editing, blah-blah-blahing, and bad sound levels.

One way in which this DVD may be helpful as a resource is in Bible studies. "The Gospel Years" chapters actually explore the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, the pastor, and others who were influential in Dylan's conversion to Christianity. There's discussion about Jews for Jesus, how Dylan's faith shaped his career moves, what the concert tours were like, and more. You could easily use these sections in a group setting to discuss issues surrounding Messianic Jews, public figures as Christians, the reaction of culture against Christ, and how conversion happens.

Regina McCrary tells the story of how it came to be that the Gospel tour shows opened with her telling the "Old Woman on the Train" story (found as complete on the soundtrack). It's an amazing story to see how much Dylan's faith really did shape what he wanted people to experience from those concerts. He definitely had a missionary zeal, designing certain aspects of the concerts as if they were worship services or revivals. To think that the band—including Dylan—always gathered for prayer before the show started makes you realize how cutting edge Dylan was. He was doing Christian Contemporary Music before that had gained strength as its own genre and industry.

On that note, this documentary is at least sending me to other sources and back to Dylan's music itself to see how his Christian faith may or may not still be apparent. While he backed off from such an overt witness, there's plenty of speculation that Dylan's faith may still be intact. That is certainly something worth studying—but for such a study, we need more music, more Dylan, and less talking.

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