



**BOB DYLAN: ROLLING THUNDER AND THE GOSPEL YEARS: A TOTALLY UNAUTHORIZED DOCUMENTARY**  
MRA

A note on the cover proclaims that this DVD 'contains no Bob Dylan songs' and, as one of our readers pointed out, this caveat was missing from the recent ad that appeared in this magazine. Given the fact that there is a large photo of Bob on the cover as well, you should not be lured into thinking that there are either performances or interviews with Bob.

The American company that has produced this film appears to specialise in Dylan documentaries under the Highway 61 Entertainment banner - none of which feature the man himself being interviewed. But he does at least make an appearance at times.

At first it is difficult to work out what is going on here. The host of the documentary is Joel Gilbert, whose only qualification seems to be that he looks like a slightly overweight version of Bob and plays in a Dylan tribute band. I can think of many better choices but whether any of them would have put their name to it is another question.

The first part of the film consists of a series of longish interviews with people such as Rubin 'Hurricane' Carter, Claudia Levy (wife of Jacques), Rob Stoner, Ramblin' Jack Elliott and Scarlet Rivera which manage to tell the story of the ill-fated Rolling Thunder Revue and the making of *Renaldo & Clara*.

At times the production is risible. Elliott talks about how Bob Neuwirth yelled lyrics into his ear and we are treated to a diagram of the inner ear! There are quite a few such amateurish devices along the way, which could easily have been dispensed with.

There appears to be no connection between the Rolling Thunder section of the documentary and the second part, which covers the Gospel Years and features some fairly interesting interviews with Jerry Wexler, Joel Selvin and others. However, it does make the whole film about four hours long and you could hardly complain about not getting your money's worth.

The footage of Wexler is to me the most interesting because the producer pulls no punches about his work with Bob. 'How high do I have to jump?' said the legendary producer when he was asked to work with Dylan and then had the nerve to tell him that he was crazy to make a 'Christian' album. Still, you know Bob.

Despite the vilification that Dylan received for recording these albums (including the incredibly prophetic *Slow Train Coming*) they always contained at least a few worthy songs to add to the catalogue and certainly Wexler and the musicians have nothing to be ashamed about with *Slow Train* or *Saved*. (Maybe *Shot Of Love* is not so great).

I am sure that hardcore Dylan-fans will need to have this DVD, and those who have an interest in the period but only a cursory knowledge, will find it interesting. But if you are not a Dylan fan you might find it heavy going.

Extra features include some concert video clips, a journey to Hibbing, a photo gallery and an extensive interview with Ramblin' Jack Elliott about his early days.

Brian Wise



**TOWNES VAN ZANDT BE HERE TO LOVE ME: A FILM BY MARGARET BROWN**  
RAKEFILMS/PALM PICTURES

If you want to know why many people consider Townes Van Zandt one of the greatest songwriters of all time then this film is essential viewing.

As someone who came to admire Townes' work after taking notice of everyone else - from fellow writers and broadcasters to musicians such as Steve Earle - raving about his work I found this to be one of the most arresting and moving music documentaries that I have ever seen. In fact, its power surprised me and had I not been a fan of the man beforehand, I certainly would have been afterwards.

For someone who was so under-appreciated during his lifetime, Van Zandt's music was exceptionally influential to a huge range of singer/songwriters - certainly as much as a

band like the Velvet Underground had been on a generation of rockers.

Some say he was the best songwriter in American history - a wild claim indeed. I do know that I cannot hear 'Pancho And Lefty' without a tear coming to my eye. I am not sure why the song is so emotive to me but I have to put that down to the power of Townes' writing and his ability to capture vivid images in just a few words. Many of his songs, while ostensibly about his own life or other people, seem to me to be profound comments on life itself.

There was a dark side to Townes and while Margaret Brown's film exposes that to some degree, it does not dwell on it.

Born in 1944, Townes' problems seemed to stem from the treatment he received in a mental home after he had fallen off a fourth floor balcony and was placed in care. If this is what caused his erratic behaviour, it is yet another indictment of shock treatment administered in the name of health care.

I suppose a filmmaker has to make a decision as to whether a portrayal of someone's demons will overshadow their musical creations. In this case I think Brown has managed to tread a fine line; however, towards the end it is difficult for me to believe that Townes was in such a state as that described by his friends and wives. I suppose I do not want to see him at his worst - it would be too much like seeing a car wreck - but not long before his death in 1997 he certainly looked healthy enough to have lived a lot longer.

Maybe the best hint to the demons that afflicted him and affected his relationships comes when his young wife is asked what it is like living with him. The tentative reply 'OK' is hardly a ringing endorsement.

The footage of Townes in interview and in performance is absolutely compelling. In another life he might have been a movie star such were his striking good looks which became only more so as he aged.

There are also interviews with Willie Nelson, Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle, Nanci Griffith, as well as a very humorous one with Guy Clark (who seems to have indulged especially for the occasion) and his wife Susannah. Earle's story about Townes playing Russian roulette seems to sum up his strange and erratic behaviour. His family also, of course, tells a less flattering story.

The frequent footage of Townes in performance seems to continually underscore the man's talents. Just as you start to wonder about his behaviour, another magical song appears to bring you back to his musical genius.

Not only essential viewing for Townes Van Zandt fans but essential for any music fan.

Brian Wise

**Be Here To Love Me will be released locally through the AV Channel in September.**