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Rolling Thunder and The Gospel Years (R0 America)

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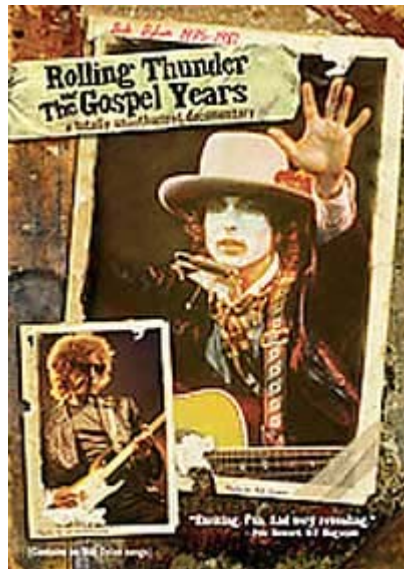
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Rolling Thunder and The Gospel Years AKA Bob Dylan 1975-1981: Rolling Thunder and The Gospel Years (1982)

R0 America

MVD (Music Video Distributors)



The Film:

When I received this DVD to review I did not quite know what to expect. I quite like Bob Dylan's music, and was intrigued to hear about the story behind the so called 'Gospel Years' and their evident result on his music, such as the subsequent album "Slow Train Coming". With such a rich history to the subject of the documentary itself, including the "Night of the Hurricane" benefit at

Madison Square Garden, I could picture in my mind a detailed documentary with a wide range of materials to work with; an excess for any one program to cover.

A few things began to eat away at this dream documentary before I'd even opened the case of the DVD. The first was the caption on the front cover '[Contains no Bob Dylan songs]' - a bit of a disappointment, as his music was one of the key parts of the documentary I had pictured, but not all good documentaries have to include such material. The second was the caption 'a totally unauthorized documentary' - this one brought out my prejudices against such unaffiliated material, but I let it slip. Finally, after reading the synopsis on the back I noticed the running time - '240 minutes' - which, to my shock, I thought could only be a mistake. How wrong I was.

Clocking in at an obscenely long 241 minutes and 18 seconds (or 4 hours, 1 minute and 18 seconds) this documentary started averagely and didn't improve.

Starting off with a title sequence of hit-and-miss celebrity links (if you are an ardent Dylan fan you may recognise all the connections straight away; I only recognised the odd name or two) the opening title sequence leaves much to be desired. And no, for the record, canted angles are **always** a bad mistake. After this a few clips of Highway 61 in tribute-form provide us with a tenuous (at best) link to [Rubin "Hurricane" Carter](#), who begins to tell his life story. Judging by the length, he got most of it told. After 20 minutes elapse we finally hear *mention* of Dylan himself, but really only in passing before we continue telling Carter's story. His story is actually quite an interesting one, and it becomes clear how putting his story across would provide a good solid basis for a documentary on Dylan - putting into context the Madison Square Garden event. Unfortunately no such payoff is delivered, but the most infuriating thing amidst this - which has the misfortune of spreading itself out throughout the rest of the documentary also - is the editing, and the patronisation.

I don't know who was the editor on this documentary, and quite frankly I don't want to. With any luck I won't have to see any of their work again. Like a spotty teenage film-geek who's discovered the multiple features of the latest movie-editing program, with all the bells and whistles it can offer (I should know, I've been there), this editor has obviously never really understood the purpose of editing. The purpose of editing is to link material together so that - crucially - it flows well; working best when the changes are not noticeable. As if this wasn't enough, lack of care has been done in insulting and patronising the viewer, with pictorial representations of a high percentage of metaphors. When Carter says that 'Hurricane' Jackson "couldn't break an egg if he had a sledgehammer" the last thing I want to see is a cartoon egg almost being hit with a cartoon sledgehammer. I almost couldn't believe what I was seeing.

Once the move has been made to 'The Gospel Years' some new freshness of material is added - this section represents over the last 2hours of the documentary and, sadly, like the first section before it, suffers from editing, music (or lack thereof) and editing once more. As with the former part the stories told are - given their due - reasonably interesting; it's a shame no-one thought to tighten them down to the key points available, which would have given way to a much more succinct and rich end result.

After watching this mammoth documentary I felt a bit sorry for Joel Gilbert, who has evidently put a lot of work into this - researching a guy he admires and wishes to pay tribute to. Had he been given the right editor, money to cover the music fees, and someone to keep his humour in check, he

could well have made a documentary as skilled as Scorsese's "No Direction Home". Unfortunately, this one doesn't miss the mark a fair bit.

The DVD:

I would just like to point out that the main feature has 26 chapter stops. For a film of such magnitude such a number is far too small. Also the music accompanying the main menu - besides becoming quickly irritating - is looped at a rather unfortunate time, resulting in yet more frustration.

Video:

Cramming a 4hour documentary onto a single DVD-9 was never going to do any favours for the image quality, and whilst the picture is at times quite good, there is noticeable compression done to it - something I'd personally not notice so much in other DVDs in which compression techniques have been used. The other problem apparent upon watching this disc is that it is 1.85:1 but not anamorphically enhanced. Although this was less of a disappointment compared to the actual documentary.

Audio:

Sound is presented in Dolby Digital 2.0 Stereo - which is overall fairly adequate; dialogue is clear (for the most part) and I could not distinguish much (if any) unwanted noise. The only reason I can think of for having a better audio mix would be to show Bob Dylan's songs in surround sound. Given that there aren't any in this documentary, the 2.0 track is all that is needed.

Extras:

There are four separate features...

The first is "**Journey to Hibbing**" featurette which runs 11 minutes and 18 seconds. There are a number of worrying things with this. The first is that they've employed the same editor as the main feature - the key giveaways are pretty much every single transition present. Not content with direct cutting between colour and black-and-white filming, they made use of the 'fade' feature to further distract the viewer. Once you've got past that you may find even more annoyance in the clips of Joel Gilbert apparently miming; that's right, no Bob Dylan music allowed here either. It wouldn't even be so bad if a) it wasn't repeatedly shown and b) the alternate music used wasn't as badly pieced together - albeit only in some places - as the rest of the editing. Gilbert is quite watchable, until he tries to make some jokes, and ends up being embarrassing. Some of the music used on the main menu/the main feature appears to creep in at various intervals but doesn't quite make it (thankfully). With quite an abrupt end to this, it felt like 11 minutes of footage from the main feature had been excised. If only they'd taken out more.

Next up we have "**Ramblin' Jack's Early Days**" featurette which runs a bit longer at 13 minutes and 29 seconds. Same editor here too; someone should teach them how to edit things smoothly without simply running through the same shots again, and again, and again. Some patience wouldn't go amiss either. Things perked up (if you can call it that) when I heard Ramblin' Jack - a very apt name I may add - mention some woman sleeping in a bed with a gorilla, before he eventually came close to something Dylan-related. Another abrupt ending made me feel this also had been cut from the main feature, and understandably so. Not much more to say here.

The third feature is **Photo Gallery - 1975-1981** which is actually quite good. I enjoyed this feature quite a bit! There are 116 photos, the first 99 are shown on a reel running 11 minutes and 33 seconds, whilst the remaining 17 are shown on one lasting 1 minute and 59 seconds. A very worthwhile feature. Some, if not all, are taken from the main feature.

The final feature on the DVD is **Soundtrack** which consists of three clips from the soundtrack to the documentary:

- 1) "The Water is Wide"
- 2) "Hallelujah, I'm Ready"
- 3) "Do Lord, Remember Me"

Each appears to be roughly 30 seconds long (no timecodes are used) and each one cuts off too quickly and none of which were particularly enjoyable. I like gospel music a fair bit, but I didn't like these. The instant end to each didn't aid this either. However, the soundtrack may appeal to some, who can get a good taster of what they're in for here.

OVERALL:

If you would like to see some interesting Bob Dylan clips, with his music contained within, alongside a smart and concise documentary about the period of his life between 1975 and 1981, then don't buy this DVD. If, however, your criteria are not that high, then you may find some value in this DVD - especially in the Photo Gallery.

Film – D+
 Picture – C
 Sound – C
 Extras – E
 Overall – D+/C-

View the comparison for this film [here!](#)

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