

My Favourite Things

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Dylan And The Life

The format of *Bob Dylan World Tours 1966-1974* and the way it is structured is interesting: the only tools are pictures, lots of them, and interviews with people who were close to Dylan during that period. In a work that is based around music, you're used to expecting the visuals that illustrate it to be a little more kinetic. I was immediately reminded of how many times I've thought that there are some brilliant pictures of Bob Dylan I've seen in magazines and websites, right from the early part of his career, and many of them pictures of him in off-stage, performance-hat-off situations – I think the word of choice is 'candid'. All the pictures in this film are shown to us by Barry Feinstein*, Dylan's official photographer and the eye behind many of those great great Dylan pictures we've seen in magazines and on album covers, of a Dylan who is cocky, geeky, boyish. Many of those pictures always managed, at least in the way I remember them, to catch that glint in his eyes and that's always been the best part about them.

The film's title is also the name of a Dylan tribute band, and its frontman Joel Gilbert (who fancies he resembles Dylan much more than he actually does) is the director and protagonist of this film. His principal interviewee, Feinstein, lives in Woodstock, which is where Dylan lived and spent much of his mid- and late-sixties. Woodstock as a place is not just mythologized, it also exists in isolation in the kind of images it evokes; you'd be forgiven for thinking that the place existed only for those few months building up to and for the three days during the Festival. Knowing that it has a music 'history', if only because one of its vanguards lived there during his most creative period, somehow makes Woodstock a little less... contrived, in my head. Not to say that I think the Three Days Of Peace And Love was contrived, but it's been portrayed as (and really, all we have living halfway around the world and forty years later is how people have chosen to portray it) too much of a coming together, too much people reaching a 'higher' plane, it's almost as if somebody only has to mention Woodstock and you're supposed to have these exalted, genuflect-inducing images in your head. (And you only have to watch the movie to realize that the music, while entertaining and even throwing up some career performances, was hardly of a uniformly high quality, I felt distinctly underwhelmed after several of the twenty-odd performances that populate the official Woodstock film.)

Back to the pictures: Often, Dylan isn't looking into the camera, or in its direction. Sometimes, it doesn't seem like he even knows the camera is in the room (Feinstein tells us he much prefers shooting pictures of day-in-the-life Dylan than performance Dylan). He wasn't the "look at me" attention-grabber that somebody like Mick Jagger was; in fact, I'm pretty

sure he kept away from the spotlight. Yet he allowed himself to be photographed pretty much anywhere -- There are pictures of him sitting by himself in an empty concert hall, with kids running behind him as he walks by on a street in Liverpool, just so many everyday situations. (Gilbert to Feinstein: "Was anything off-limits to take pictures of?" "Nothing"). I wondered if this could suggest a strange kind of narcissism in Dylan. A more private kind, perhaps?

What excited me about this film as a music fan is that there are always these tidbits that are thrown up at you, curious anecdotes about the music life.

Some that will leave you a little chilled by its immediacy: Like when Feinstein tells you about how he flew to San Francisco to do an assignment for a band called Pearl, one of whose members was Janis Joplin.

"She was very professional. I took the pictures and went to show them to her the next day. And she had died."

And some like this, when he's on his way to Al Aronowitz's house (who he calls the 'Godfather of Rock Journalism'), in what is one of my favourite bits in the movie:

".. to visit with Al Aronowitz, the godfather of rock journalism. Al Aronowitz had written an important article in the Saturday Evening Post in 1968 about Bob Dylan's life in Woodstock. More importantly, he was very close to Bob Dylan in the mid-sixties and also close to the Beatles and he helped arrange the first meeting between the two. I couldn't wait to get the details."

Especially in the way he said that last sentence, his schoolboy giddiness is almost visceral, and you can't help sharing in the excitement.

Aronowitz is almost startling in his honesty; he says about Dylan: "I consider him immortal. *I sort of hoped that some of his talent would rub off on me.*" (emphasis mine). It was so heart-felt, and it also beautifully conveys the effect a musician and his music can have on people's lives and how it can give people strength and joy and comfort. These feelings are extremely personal, and oftentimes, musicians don't understand this, rather, they just don't know how much their music can mean to somebody. I wish more of them did know exactly how much their music has *added* to the lives of people who listen to it, because they deserve to.

And then Aronowitz goes on, exuberantly, in response to a question about the Beatles: "The Beatles were sensational, they were so talented and their music was so great... they brought this great feeling to the world." There is an unmatched authenticity in watching a white-bearded 75-year old man who has known and been part of the scene for so long, and yet the familiarity hasn't translated to

detachedness or lack of enthusiasm about how he felt about it and his experiences in being a part of it.

He goes on, juicily, to describe an evening he and Dylan spent in the company of the Beatles:

"The lobby is crowded, full of cops, and there's some overflow too, from the suite next door. There's TV personalities, and all kinds of people waiting to meet the Beatles. There was a bed along the wall of one room, and there was John and the other Beatles and their manager Brian Epstein at the head of the bed. We (Dylan and I) were sitting on the bed. And Bob rolled a joint and I handed the joint to John, and he smiles and gives it to Ringo and says "Just so it's taste-tested." John was the ring-leader. Ringo held the joint and, you know, he didn't know anything about the etiquette of smoking grass, that you pass the joint, because it's rare, you don't want to lose any of the smoke..."

"Ringo was the first to get high, he starts laughing, he starts giggling... its infectious laughter! The rest of us are lookin' at him laughing, and we're high too. And the rest of us start laughing. And John is laughing so hard, that we start laughing at him laughing."

Something I noticed strongly in all of these interviews is that you never know when somebody's saying something completely matter-of-factly and when somebody's descending into romantic hyperbole. The blurred juxtaposition probably indicates how surreal it was to be surrounded by all of this. Aronowitz, in this instance, was asked "Did the Beatles continue smoking pot?" to which he says "They didn't stop. They infected the whole world with their... psychedelia."

Gilbert's excitement is more subtle. As a questioner, he is staccato and direct. But in between, as he, literally, cuts from one scene to another as he visits and talks to the people he's chosen to illustrate this perspective of Dylan's life, you see how much of a big fan of Dylan he is. He talks about a 1967 movie featuring Dylan called *Don't Look Back*, telling us in voice-over that "His haunting performance of *The Lonesome Death Of Hattie Carroll* is what really turned me on to Dylan".

There's also much fun to be had during the voice-overs accompanying the introduction of pictures on screen: There's one of Dylan with a scarf wrapped around his head and neck and wearing sunglasses. Feinstein describes it inimitably, political correctness and tiptoeing-around-references-to-religion be damned: "He looks more like a Sheikh than Bob Dylan the Saviour."

And when he's illustrating a picture of Dylan with Jimmy Carter, then a governor, in his Governor's Mansion. "There was what they call a presidential suite at the Mansion. We went in there and got high. And Carter, governor, future president, says to us 'You boys don't get in any

trouble now', and he shut the door behind him."

The movie is nothing that will make you walk out of your living room at the end of the picture feeling boggled at how much you more enlightened you are. But once in a while, it tells you something that startles you in how it somehow seems to capture the zeitgeist of the place and the time and the people. Or a tiny part of the zeitgeist that tells you just a little bit about how it was and what it was like, You'll probably walk out happy that you found these tiny little nuggets, treasures really, that you found, maybe in an anecdote, maybe just the way Feinstein said something, or maybe just the grin on the face of the kid standing next to Dylan in that street picture.

* Some would be interested to note that Feinstein was the cameraman for the movie *Easy Rider*.

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