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## 'Bob Dylan Revealed' & 'Bob Dylan 1990-2006 The Never Ending Narrative'

By [Guy Crucianelli](#) 12 May 2011

### After Bob, the Dyluge

I feel like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather 3*: Just when I think I'm out of Bob Dylan, he draws me right back in! And apparently I'm not the only one, as a slew of new Dylan product—critical, popular, musical or devotional—gets released at an overwhelmingly steady pace. Some releases are made to cash in, some to catch hold, but everyone wants a piece of the Dylan action.

In many ways this deluge of material is a monumental attempt to piece Dylan together, to document, grasp, deal or contend with such a monumental artist. Because, let's face it, Dylan is *the* monumental artist of the late 20th century, onward. The trajectory of his career is so sophisticatedly varied that he's become an artist of eras: the Foundational Folk Era, the Motorcycle Accident Era, the Rolling Thunder Era, etc. Part of this is simply historical expediency, a manner of critical shorthand that makes assessment easier. But such categorization attests also to the vast scope of Dylan's career.

Like Picasso's periods (Blue, Rose, Cubist, Neo-classical, etc.), Dylan's eras cover a lot of ground and are never dull; whether one likes them or not is beside the point, there's always something there to chew on, mine over, or attend to. Think of the inscrutability of a song like "Changing of the Guards" from 1978's mostly neglected *Street-Legal*, or further back to the in-your-face curveball of *Self Portrait*, or forward to the "mainstream" *MTV Unplugged* record with its unrecognizable and largely plugged-in takes on bedrock songs, the singing never wavering from, at the most, two notes.

Personally, my favorite Dylan era is his Born Again phase, mainly because in a career full of Fuck You's, this has to be the



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### Bob Dylan Revealed

(US DVD: 1 May 2011)

### Bob Dylan 1990-2006 The Never Ending Narrative

(US DVD: 19 Apr 2011)

greatest of them all. The cover of *Saved* alone, like the work of some over-earnest Christian college art student, coming from *Bob Dylan* at that point in his career, was ten times more hardcore than any of the punk rock that was going on at the same time. Plus, his voice was strong and his phrasing risky.

But really, though everyone has a favorite Dylan, it is the Man as a whole that is so captivating. Despite the EKG-pattern career, there is an undeniable through-line of wiliness and wisdom that never fails to hook in some way. Hence, the Dyluge.

These are just two of the latest DVD releases about Bob Dylan, the first anecdotal, the second critical:

*Bob Dylan Revealed* is, alas, an unrevealing or at the most mildly revealing mishmash of interviews, stills, snippets of live and backstage footage and some really low-tech effects. The product of director Joel Gilbert, who plays Dylan in the tribute band Highway 61, this is a kind of companion to his earlier film *Bob Dylan Never Ending Tour Diaries: Drummer Winston Watson's Incredible Journey*, which focused, obviously, on Dylan's 1992-era drummer.

Watson, I believe, also plays in Highway 61, and some of the footage from the earlier film shows up here; and there are other decent interviews as well, but it's all strung together in a slightly goofy, amateur way as a loose overview of a few Dylan landmarks: the 1966 "Dylan Goes Electric" tour, the Motorcycle Accident/Drug Rehab stint, the 1974 comeback, and on like that into the '70s and '80s. Much of the material is familiar to Dylan fans and, in the way presented here, not much good for anyone else.

Drummer Mickey Jones, who played with Dylan on the blistering 1966 tour, is the most entertaining. Lest anyone think Dylan was too bothered by the notoriously contentious audience responses at the time, Jones says, "The more they booed, the heavier my right foot got, the more Bob Dylan laughed." Jones also has a unique take on the "Play fucking loud" remark from the Manchester Free Trade Hall show, immortalized on the *Bootleg Series Vol. 4: Bob Dylan Live 1966: "The Royal Albert Hall Concert"*. It's not who you think it is.

Ramblin' Jack Elliott, violinist Scarlet Rivera and bassist/musical director Rob Stoner, all members of the Rolling Thunder Revue, give personal takes on that tour: Rivera dosed with hallucinogens before one show, Joni Mitchell getting booed at a prison gig, Stoner trying to keep all the loose-limbed elements of this raggedy-ass circus together. At the same time there is a pretty grueling episode with Rubin "Hurricane" Carter pleading his case again.

Pastor Bill Dwyer attempts to explicate Dylan's Christian experience, and provides a nice glimpse of Dylan the Bible Student, diligently learning his lessons. Conversely representing the vitriol this period engendered is critic Joel Selvin who, having written a sale-damaging review of one of Dylan's gospel shows, subsequently had his critical license to review Dylan revoked—by Dylan himself, which even Selvin concedes is pretty goddamn cool.

Yet despite these sometime enjoyable reminiscences, this release is strictly peripheral—for Dylan freaks that already know and have everything by and about Bob Dylan, but still must have anything that comes out by or about Bob Dylan. No extras.

Where *Bob Dylan Revealed* ends, the far more revealing *Bob Dylan 1990-2006 The Never Ending Narrative* begins. Another in a series (others include *Bob Dylan After The Crash 1966-1978* and *Bob Dylan Both Ends Of The Rainbow 1978-1989*), this documentary focuses less on insider's anecdotes than on in-depth critical assessment of Dylan's so-called comeback years, from the critically-acclaimed and at least relatively popular *Oh Mercy*, to the third of his resurgent "trilogy" *Modern Times*.

Besides two studio engineers—Malcolm Burns and Mark Howard—the interviewees are all noted writers and Dylanologists: Johnny Rogan, Nigel Williamson, Andrew Mueller, Clinton Heylin, Patrick Humphries, Derek Barker, Anthony DeCurtis and Robert Christgau (The extras include full contributor's bios). This critical heft is bolstered and balanced out by live footage, still images and other clips, so the film moves at a good, clean pace between keen criticism and solid example.

Part of what's fun about Bob Dylan is the contradictory responses he generates: one person hates what another loves, and each can give good reasons for feeling the way they do.

Thus, author Patrick Humphries finds the follow-up to *Oh Mercy*, the superstar-studded *under the red sky* (with appearances by George Harrison, Elton John and, yes, Slash) a "flimsy valley" compared to the "mountain" of the previous release, while Robert Christgau hears a "delightful" record with nary a bad song—though admits he doesn't know anyone else who likes it. Immediately, we get Johnny Rogan exclaiming *his* appreciation. Rogan, who I found the most incisive of those interviewed, illuminates the album's edgy nursery rhyme aspect, and links it to Dylan's "Shake Rattle & Roll" roots. Who would think that a song called "Wiggle Wiggle" could

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engender such learned discussion?

Yet critical giving tree or not, in the early '90s Dylan played some notoriously "diabolical" shows, as Clinton Heylin notes, perhaps none perceived more so than his performance of "Masters of War" at the 1991 Grammy Awards. While Heylin and DeCurtis see this as the "nadir" of Dylan's career, I tend to side with Andrew Mueller, who recognizes the sort of sly backhand to the music business the performance might have been; though he admits it was "self-indulgent, contemptuous of his audience and his band", it was also, in the context of such "corporate mediocrity", pretty radical to come out there and "dump five minutes of atonal excruciating din" on such a fashionably clueless audience. So, a musical mess or just one more Fuck You from Bob Dylan?

Whichever, Dylan decided, wisely, to woodshed. In short breaks from the now in-full-swing Never Ending Tour, he recorded the two acoustic cover albums, *Good As I Been To You* and *World Gone Wrong*—spare, loose works, permeated with an aura of historical immersion, personal rejuvenation and musical re-education—that are commonly credited for re-starting his stalled engines. This new inspiration led to the flood of original material that is sometimes referred to as Dylan's late trilogy, *Time Out Of Mind*, "Love And Theft" and *Modern Times*, a designation pretty much all the critics here dismiss, insisting on each album's autonomy.

For Johnny Rogan, Dylan's Oscar-winning song "Things Have Changed", rather than the gloomily meditative *Time Out Of Mind*, was segue to the more humorous subject matter on "Love And Theft", an album he views as a "musical concordance of the 20th century" or the 19th or even earlier. Derek Barker thinks *Time Out Of Mind* suffers from the slick-murk production of Daniel Lanois, preferring both "Love And Theft" and *Modern Times*, while DeCurtis finds the latter "flawed" and "phlegmy". Every masterpiece has its detractors.

By far, and by consensus, Dylan's greatest, or at least newest, masterpiece is *Chronicles: Volume One*, the first in a contracted series of extra-autobiographical works. I say "extra" because the book is so uncanny a presentation of a life, with oddball recollections and philosophical ruminations coming side-by-side from many temporal directions at once. Nigel Williamson calls it "the best written book about music...ever", and I'd have to agree. Here's Dylan describing a reawakening of musical inspiration:

"Prior to this, things had changed, and not in an abstract way. A few months earlier something out of the ordinary had occurred and I became aware of a certain set of dynamic principles by which my performances could be transformed. By combining certain elements of technique which ignite each other I could shift the levels of perception, time-frame structures and systems of rhythm which would give my songs a brighter countenance, call them up from the grave—stretch out the stiffness in their bodies and straighten them out. It was like parts of my psyche were being communicated to by angels."

And that's just one paragraph. All throughout the book, Dylan moves with this kind of fluid motility from the exoteric to the esoteric. Even Christgau concedes the book's genius, though he's not quite ready to admit Dylan *planned* its relaxed form.

For me that paragraph encapsulates the whole so-called Comeback Era covered very well by this documentary. As the narrator here puts it, Dylan has finally "freed himself from the pressures of keeping pace with prevailing musical trends." The wise old man's got nothing to prove. Or, better, as Nigel Williamson says, quoting *King Lear*: "Ripeness is all."

Besides the contributor's bios, extras include an extensive audio clip from Dylan's 2001 "Love & Theft" press conference in Rome. Some samples:

On hardcore fans: "I don't feel I have any hardcore fans."

On agrarianism: "I'm partial to the land."

On the Internet: "I'm afraid some pervert's gonna lure me somewhere."

On whether or not he reads the Bible: "Of course, who doesn't?"

On his own work as Bible: "That goes without saying."

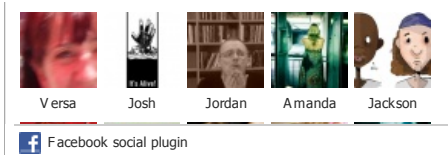
Bob Dylan Revealed

**Rating:**

Bob Dylan 1990-2006 The Never Ending Narrative

**Rating:**

**Extras rating:**



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#### RATINGS

- 10 - The Best of the Best
- 9 - Very Nearly Perfect
- 8 - Excellent
- 7 - Damn Good
- 6 - Good
- 5 - Average
- 4 - Unexceptional
- 3 - Weak
- 2 - Seriously Flawed
- 1 - Terrible



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