

GenEc DVD Review

Tuesday, May 24, 2011

"Bob Dylan Revealed" (MVD)/"Dont Look Back" (Docurama Blu-Ray)

There has been a spate of new and re-issued books, DVD's, and CD's released of late in conjunction with Bob Dylan's 70th birthday, which should come as no surprise. After all, few artists in any field of music have been as carefully documented, analyzed, theorized, interpreted, gossiped about, adored, reviled, you name it, as has been Bob Dylan. Any anniversary or milestone is bound to lead to even newer and - one hopes- fresher interpretations as they come along. But as for now, here are two contributions to this year's Bob Dylan hagiography.

"Bob Dylan Revealed" is the latest offering from Dylan tribute artist and film documentarian Joel Gilbert, his fourth Dylan film to date. As with many unauthorized biographically-oriented DVD's, it has some film footage and a lot of interviews with various people of interest, but no music by the subject of the film himself. This is sometimes a problem, but in this case, we already know the music, so it's really not needed. When I classify it as "biographically-oriented", I don't intend to imply that it is a straightforward, year-by-year recounting of every significant thing that happened in Dylan's life. Rather, it focuses on a few events which Gilbert finds particularly illuminating in his quest to further understand Dylan, his music, and his career.

The film opens in 1962, as photographer Barry Feinstein (who took the cover shots of a number of Dylan albums, as well as other well-known images) recalls seeing Dylan in Greenwich Village. He recalls that it was hard to make out the lyrics, but he already felt this early that he was "in the company of somebody very important." Later in the film, he talks about the 1974 tour, focusing on the circumstances under which certain pictures were taken.

We then switch to drummer Mickey Jones' reminiscences of playing with The Band as Dylan's backup band. Jones bristles at the suggestion that Dylan turned electric "for the money" (a common accusation at the time), pointing that out that the switch in musical style actually cost him quite a lot of money. When an interviewer asks if he was trying to deliver a message in his songs or was simply entertaining, Dylan replies that he was just entertaining. Jones says Dylan rarely did straight interviews, that he liked to play games. But the clips suggest that the interviewers took him

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seriously, even when it was obvious that he was joking. There is a great deal more evidence of this in "Don't Look Back", but it's interesting to hear this from someone who was there. Jones also offers rare candid home-movie footage from international tours. He says the electric material was not well received anywhere in the world. He also discusses the infamous "Judas!" shout, and says it was not Dylan himself who gave the instruction to "play f***ing loud" at the Manchester concert, both of which have become part of Dylan lore.

Scarlet Rivera, the violinist who was so much beloved by Dylan fans of the 1970's, and bassist Rob Stoner talk about recording the "Desire" LP, as well as the Rolling Thunder Revue. Claudia Levy identifies a particular French film as the inspiration for the makeup during that tour, while Ramblin' Jack Elliott chimes in on the tour also.

One of the pleasant surprises (to me) is the amount of space devoted to a jovial Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, who freely discusses the circumstances of his arrest and the role of Bob Dylan's song and benefit concerts in his subsequent release. He also offer a suggestion as to why Joni Mitchell was booed at a prison concert.

Rob Stoner and Joel Selvin talk about the 1978 World Tour, which featured updated arrangements (concocted by members of the band, rather than Dylan himself) of the old hits Dylan preferred not to sing anymore, at the behest of a Japanese promoter. It was this tour by "the big band" with its Vegas-style arrangements, that caused Dylan to be saddled with a reputation as a slick, show-biz entertainer, modeled at least in part on Neil Diamond's performing style.

Perhaps the most cryptic, still controversial turn in Dylan's career came when he was "born again" under the aegis of Pastor Bill Dwyer of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship Church. Director Gilbert wisely allows Dwyer to give his side of the story without interference, though I doubt it will satisfy many viewers. Dwyer says Dylan first approached him (many have assumed it was the other way around) in a period of crisis. Famed producer Jerry Wexler (who passed away in 2008) relates how he happily agreed to produce "Slow Train Coming" without knowing the lyric content of the album. He also claims to have contributed the oft-derided "Zimmy" line to "Gotta Serve Somebody". Selvin discusses the strong negative reaction to Dylan's Christian concert in San Francisco, intercut with angry comments from fans as they walked out. Selvin believed the music itself was solid, but that Dylan's preaching from the stage (some of it heard here) and the single-focus on gospel lyrics turned people off.

Long-time self-styled "Dylanologist" A. J. Weberman believes Dylan

returned to Judaism because he felt "used" by the Christian movement. We get to see an unexpected glimpse of Dylan at a Chassidic telethon, wearing a yarmulke, playing a recorder in back of a couple Jewish folksingers, and soliciting donations. Must be seen to be believed. (As I think of it, this may be the only musical performance by Dylan in the film.)

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In 1992, Dylan launched the Never Ending Tour, which is recalled by drummer Winston Watson, who is dumbfounded that Dylan gave him no indication of what he wanted him to play. He also shares a few observations about Dylan's performing style and fan reaction.

The film runs 1 hour, 52 minutes. There are no extras, but none are necessary. The disc will probably appeal more to hard-core fans and pop-culture historians rather than to casual fans. You know who you are.

One film that should be seen by everyone - though hard-core fans and historians already have it in their collections on DVD, no doubt - is the Blu-Ray reissue of D. A. Pennebaker's film "Dont Look Back" (sic; no apostrophe in the first word). Indeed, it has been so highly regarded for so long that one is tempted to believe it doesn't even need a review, that it will pretty much sell itself. But if there's anything that teaching popular music history courses on the University level has taught me, it's that younger generations' knowledge of what we old-timers consider to be classics is spotty at best. One cannot automatically assume that everyone out there is familiar with classic 1960's-era Dylan, much less Pennebaker's film on the subject. Thus, a review is in order.

Even if you haven't seen the complete film, you may well be familiar with the opening sequence, as it has been referenced in many other documentaries and websites (including, of course, Youtube). While "Subterranean Homesick Blues" is playing on the soundtrack, Dylan displays, then discards one by one, cue cards of significant words in the song, eventually reaching the point where the cards and the lyrics don't fully synch up. This is a playful Dylan, having fun with words and their meaning, an image very much unlike the dour, ultra-serious-protest Dylan the media liked to portray. That side of Dylan is much in evidence throughout this documentary filmed during Dylan's 1965 English tour. But the playful Dylan is perhaps even more in evidence when the people he's interacting with aren't in on the joke. Thus, we see interviewers trying to hang on to his every word, as if he were giving them straight and significant answers, even when it should have been obvious that he wasn't. We might, however, question his playfulness of intent when we see Dylan angrily stalking other

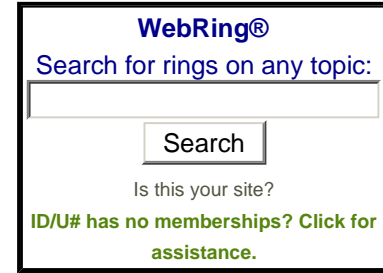
interviewers, browbeating one prospective young interviewer who tries to out-argue him. Likewise, Dylan virtually attacks a "Time Magazine" journalist, insisting that what "Time" prints is facts, but not "the truth", so why should he tell this reporter anything? He also tells the "Time" man that he's as good a singer as Caruso. Whether Dylan believes what he's telling these two fellows is less important in the long run than their reactions to him, which are better seen than described.

In all, this is a candid portrait of Dylan at a crucial juncture in his career, just as he was becoming famous enough to attract young teen girls in the streets below his hotel room, shouting up to him as if he were already a "rock star". Nevertheless, his performances during this tour were strictly solo-acoustic, which would very shortly change. We see footage of significant concert performances (including a memorable rendering of "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll"). But we also see Dylan backstage and in vehicles, interacting with musicians such as Alan Price, the other Animals, Joan Baez, John Mayall (briefly), a very young and naive Donovan, and classic old folkie Derroll Adams (an American performer who settled in England, and has subsequently been largely forgotten in his homeland). These interactions are sometimes informal musical duets/jams, at other times simply conversational. Even so, they open Dylan up to the scrutiny of the world, removing much of the mysticism that surrounded his image during this period. In other words, we meet a human Bob Dylan, not a near-deity.

We also get insight into Albert Grossman, Dylan's fabled and often controversial manager. We see the prickly, profane side of Albert Grossman, to be sure, but we also witness Grossman the shrewd negotiator, who clearly has his client's best interests at heart, and has a finagler's way of achieving his goals. Dylan's faithful road manager, Bob Neuwirth, comes off as an almost-constant presence as well, a stabilizing influence in a pressure-filled life. But even he has a difficult time holding Dylan back when the singer has a confrontation with a guest in his hotel room over a glass thrown on the street, a scene I find oddly discomfiting to watch.

The picture quality of "Dont Look Back" is grainy black-and-white, certainly a far cry from the Hi-Def we've come to associate with Blu-Ray discs. Nonetheless, the quality is probably as good as you can hope for until the next technological breakthrough comes along. Four-and-a-half decades later, "Dont Look Back" holds up amazingly well as one of the finest, most intimate, most forthright glimpses into the life of any major creative figure. It has served as the model for countless films, PBS specials, and VH1 portraits to follow. But the original cinema verite music documentary is still the classic of the genre.

There is a veritable plethora of extras. There are five audio-only



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bonus performances recorded on the tour; an insightful conversation between Pennebaker (who no longer sports his once-famed top hat) and Greil Marcus about specific aspects of the film; an alternate take of the cue-card segment, in which Ginsberg is more visible in the background; and a trailer for the film which is, in essence, merely the cue-card segment once again. I was unable to access the commentary track with Grossman and Neuwirth, despite numerous attempts.

The most substantial extra, however, is an hour-plus DVD (not Blu-Ray) of the companion film to "Dont Look Back", entitled "65 Revisited", which Pennebaker fashioned from outtakes of the original film. In some cases, this is material which seemed less important in 1967 (when "Dont Look Back" was first released) than it does in retrospect. But there are also some excellent performances which are well worth disseminating, and more insights into the participants (which include Nico this time around), as well as more shots of Dylan composing at the piano. Particularly welcome are an energetic concert clip of "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and a fine performance of "She Belongs To Me". The film ends with a rather awkward version of the cue-card sequence on a windy rooftop, with producer Tom Wilson replacing Ginsberg. This bonus disc also has its own commentary track - which I'm happy to say I was able to access - in which Pennebaker and Neuwirth discuss how individual scenes were filmed, etc. "65 Revisited" never reaches the lofty heights of "Dont Look Back", but it's well worth viewing. And it's certainly appropriate to have the two films in one package.

Posted by Tom Bingham at 4:11 PM
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