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GenEc DVD Review

Sunday, November 30, 2008

Bob Dylan/Cat Stevens

Bob Dylan 1978-1989: Both Ends of the Rainbow

Cat Stevens – A Classic Concert: Tea For The Tillerman Live

Something needs to be admitted right off. Bob Dylan was one of my heroes in the early 60's, and even from the middle to late 60's. I began to become disaffected around the time of "Nashville Skyline," but I still supported each new release as it came out. Until his so-called "Jesus Period", that is. He lost me at that time, and has only fairly recently won me back.

The reasons he lost me in the late 1970's should be fairly obvious to anyone after watching the first sections of this film, a British television documentary released in the US by MVD. It wasn't simply that his subject matter had changed. After all, his subject matter had changed before, and not always to what may have been fashionable or to what people may have expected of him. The bigger problem was that the preachy style of his Christian songwriting seemed too simplistic, assuming that the listener would readily accept his conversion without bothering to ask for the explanations we felt would have been forthcoming a decade earlier. What's more, the arrangements were simply too busy and in too hackneyed a gospel vein to suit his vocal style. This, of course, says as much about his listeners (myself included) as it does about Dylan.

But the overall theme of this DVD is not Bob Dylan's relationship with Christianity (I've heard tell that there's another, newer release that does indeed concentrate on this topic, though I have not seen it). Rather, it looks at the many changes in Dylan's messages and music during a turbulent decade in his career, tracing his descent into critical purgatory and his long road back into critical favor. The visual emphasis is on the talking heads of critics rather than performance, but when the critics are authoritative and have interesting things to say, as is the case here, that's hardly a bad thing. There are short video clips of Dylan performances of this period interspersed among the interview segments. Less compelling visually is a telephone interview with Dylan - the screen shows a tape recorder rolling.

The DVD includes a discussion of Dylan's role in "We Are The World", including a classic clip of Stevie Wonder trying to teach a seemingly clueless Dylan his part. Even more embarrassing is Dylan's appearance at Live Aid. It's as if Dylan craved desperately to fit in at these big events, to be seen and heard alongside the

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