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Dylan's Jesus years

Documentary chronicles the superstar's religious period

By DAVID YONKE
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Bob Dylan means a lot of different things to a lot of different people.

Every aspect of the 67-year-old artist's storied career has been analyzed in detail by scholars, critics, modern historians, and fans alike, but there is one period in his 46-year recording career that is often overlooked: 1978-81.

Those were Dylan's Jesus years, a time where his music was exclusively devoted to Jesus Christ and Christianity.

The intensity and single-mindedness of his art during this era stunned and mystified some of Dylan's most devoted fans, whose feelings were captured in a 1978 headline from a San Francisco Chronicle concert review: "Dylan's God-Awful Gospel."

Many loyal followers who had stuck with Dylan through radical



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transitions from ragtag folk singer (PAUL TILL PHOTO)
to electrified rock and roller suddenly found themselves balking at the idea of their hero as a gospel star. [Zoom](#) | [Photo Reprints](#)

Filmmaker Joel Gilbert decided to delve into this widely ignored Dylan era and recently released a documentary on DVD, *Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years: Busy Being Born ... Again!*

He previously had produced two films on Dylan's career, *Bob Dylan World Tour 1966* and *Bob Dylan World Tours, 1966-1974: Through the Camera of Barry Feinstein*.

"Chronologically, Dylan's Jesus years just seemed like the next good period to do," Gilbert said in an interview. "And it's so fascinating and has so many unique aspects to it. I felt there was quite a lot of room for revelatory explanation."

In the film, which is a bit lengthy at two hours, Gilbert interviews a number of people who played important roles in Dylan's Jesus years, both personally and professionally.

Among them are Jerry Wexler, a crusty old record-industry legend who produced Dylan's first two Christian albums, the Grammy Award-winning "Slow Train Coming" (1979) and "Saved" (1980), and the Rev. Bill Dwyer, a pastor at Vineyard Christian Fellowship Church in Los Angeles where Dylan attended Bible studies.

Other interviewees include musician and Dylan pal Ramblin' Jack Elliott, critic Joel Selvin, band member Spooner Oldham, singer Regina McCrary, and leading Dylanologist A.J. Weberman.

Gilbert said the Dwyer interview was the first on-camera session with a Vineyard pastor talking about Dylan's spirituality.

Dwyer said Dylan had called the church office in 1978 and asked to talk to a pastor. Some of the ministers went to Dylan's home and talked to him about the Bible and Jesus Christ.

"It was very relational," Dwyer said. "It was not coercive. Bob's a very sophisticated person. He's no dummy."

Wexler, who died in August at age 91, said Dylan tried to preach to him one time and he waved him off, warning the singer he was "a 62-year-old card-carrying Jewish atheist. He didn't try working on me anymore."

He said he didn't care what Dylan's lyrics were, all he cared about was the music. Dylan could have sung the phone book, Wexler said.

When Dylan first performed his Jesus music in public in late 1979, first on Saturday Night Live and then in concert, many longtime fans were shocked.

Gilbert found some long-lost footage from Pittsburgh TV station KDKA showing fans walking out of a Dylan concert in disgust.

"He stinks. He's the worst. He's bad. It's a waste," one angry fan tells the TV crew.

Selvin said the new material was a shock for the old hippies and folk fans who had been following Dylan for so long, many of whom had a strong anti-religion streak. He admitted he personally was not prepared for Dylan's Jesus music and in retrospect should have been more gracious in his S.F. Chronicle reviews.

Pete Howard, editor of *Ice* magazine, said the thing that scared Dylan fans the most was the thought that their idol might never again play any of his beloved non-Christian songs.

That fear was short-lived, however, because promoter Bill Graham booked Dylan to play a series of concerts at the Warfield Theatre in San Francisco in 1980 with



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a promise that he would play some old favorites.

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Dylan obediently played the old tunes but his heart was not in it, observers said.

Selvin said Dylan wasn't thrilled with his review and called his home one day. Selvin's wife answered and Dylan left this message: "Tell him he's lost his license to review," Selvin said.

It wasn't long after the release of Dylan's third Christian album, "Shot of Love," in 1981 that the singer started moving on to new areas and beliefs.

His next album was suitably titled "Infidels," and included lyrics critical of religious hypocrisy and exploitation.

Gilbert said the music legend soon became involved in the Jewish Lubavitch movement in Los Angeles, and wore a yarmulke while playing benefit concerts to support them.

Despite the spiritual changes, Dylan continues to play songs from his Jesus period on every concert tour, especially "Gotta Serve Somebody" and "In the Garden," Gilbert said.

"He always incorporates the songs," he said. "He has not abandoned that period."

Information on "Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years: Busy Being Born ... Again!" is available online at www.bobdylanjesus.com.

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