

# DVD REVIEWS

## BOB DYLAN AND THE BAND – Down in the Flood (Sexy Intellectual)

Bob Dylan's first album appeared a half-century ago, debuting on March 19, 1962, at a time when Aker Bilk and Connie Francis were high on the radio charts alongside Pat Boone and actors-turned-singers Walter Brennan and Richard Chamberlain. Ray Charles and Dion were there too, so it wasn't an absolutely abysmal period. But three years later, when Dylan released *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*, the music had changed, with the Beatles, the Byrds, the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds just some of the artists getting heavy airplay. Such Dylan songs as "Like a Rolling Stone" and "Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues" were arguably the most revolutionary, exceeding the limits of the three-minute single and pulsing with amped electricity, the latter so infuriating to his early folk followers.

*Down in the Flood* examines the decade during which Dylan hooked up with The Band, when they were still the Hawks, and took them on his first electric tour (the one where an infuriated fan famously called him "Judas"), followed by their joint retreat to Woodstock, Dylan's motorcycle accident, the jam sessions that became the Basement Tapes, Dylan's sudden relocation to Nashville for John Wesley Hardin while The Band put together *Music from Big Pink*, their reconnection for Dylan's return to touring, the subsequent recording of the underrated *Planet Waves* and their final go-around for *The Last Waltz* film.

The well-chosen performance footage in *Down in the Flood* will be familiar to many. The real strength is from the gallery of talking heads who narrate and interpret these events. The roster includes Ronnie Hawkins, drummer Mickey Jones who replaced Levon Helm on the first electric tour, Garth Hudson of The Band, Nashville session man Charlie McCoy, Band producer John Simon, Band biographer Barney Hoskyns, musician/author Sid Griffin, *Rolling Stone* magazine's Anthony DeCurtis and Derek Barker of *Isis*.

While the material on Dylan has been covered previously, the material on The Band is likely to be revelatory. *Down in the Flood* provides background on how the members came together. Arkansas native Helm was just 17 when he joined Hawkins in 1958, and the other four, all Canadians, were equally young. Robbie Robertson in fact just 15. Hawkins talks about how he drilled them day after day, first to get them in shape and then to improve his own chops to keep up with them. By 1964, Barney Hoskyns believes, they had become one of the greatest R&B bands in all of North America.

Keyboardist Garth Hudson, who can be a difficult interview, is surprisingly open about how he and his former bandmates worked together and with Dylan, and producer Simon explains how their they came to create what is now called the Americana genre with *Music from Big Pink* and their self-titled follow-

up, *The Band*. From Dylan they gained name-recognition, and from them he learned how to actually play with others. In effect, they taught him the beat. Their time together, one critic says, is arguably the greatest "pop wedding of all time." Certainly some of the best music of the last 50 years resulted. (Bill Wasserzieher)

## GRATEFUL DEAD – Dawn of the Dead: The Grateful Dead & the Rise of the San Francisco Underground (Sexy Intellectual)

I must say, as a long-time fan of first-light Frisco rock, I approached *Dawn of the Dead* with real anticipation. Not only is the era widely misunderstood, often unfairly maligned and ill-documented, but its color and crazy synchronicity are something that I, and presumably others, still marvel at. So the chance to see it addressed in a full-length doc, from the same fine folks who've given us plenty of solid historical re-digs, was welcome to say the least.

And *Dawn of the Dead* delivers, as an informed primer on the whole '65-'68 scene, replete with period footage, vintage and fresh interviews, some of which are especially illuminating (namely those with Dead manager Rock Scully, Dead keyboardist Tom Constanten, Mike Wilhelm, and Big Brother founder Peter Albin). Its principal story, the genesis of the Dead, is well told, warts and wrong directions intact; at one point it's revealed that, around the time of *Anthem of the Sun*, Garcia, Lesh and Constanten held a band meeting to announce that Weir's and Pigpen's services were no longer needed, as they'd be an impediment to the group's intended electro-jazz course. Plus the Acid Tests, Longshoremen's Hall dances, the Bill Graham-vs-Family Dog skirmishes, etc., are all faithfully recounted.

It's not the familiarity of the story that leads me to give a less-than-ringing endorsement of *Dawn of the Dead* (if the subject interests you, I do recommend it). Rather it's the familiarity of the format. Which means little, if any, "new" (i.e. recently exhumed) performance footage (true, there probably isn't any more to exhume), and a dependency on snippets from secondary sources: a CBS TV doc on the hippies, *Monterey Pop*, Kesey bus-trip adventures, the *Fillmore* movie. Plus there is what has become Sexy Intellectual's gallery of go-to talking heads; Richie Unterberger comes off fine, but Anthony DeCurtis flubs what for this fan should be an easy-to-pass acid test, wrongly including "I Know You Rider" on the Dead's first LP. Then there's Robert Christgau, who, bless him, staunchly defends that same album for its energy and primitivism, but thereafter can't resist expostulating on leftie politics, misplaced spiritualism and "the counterculture" (can we get a Constitutional amendment barring the use of this phrase and maybe "baby boomers" too?).

What's worth the price of admission: Albin's and Wilhelm's observations about how fragile and serendipitously assembled the whole Frisco scene was; Wilhelm's revelatory remark about the lick Garcia borrowed from the Charlatans guitarist (he plays it, and Deadheads will recognize it); Rock Scully's straightforward accounts of the business aspects of keeping the young band alive and about Altamont; Merry Prankster Ken Babbs on the creative license of the Acid Tests. There are also interviews, virtually all well selected, with Garcia, Lesh and Weir, though the more recent session with Constanten packs the most punch. In sum, a keeper for those keen on knowing more about the time and the place, but also

a reminder that Sexy Intellectual's approach could probably do with a little remake/remodel. (Gene Sculatti)

## JIMI HENDRIX: Jimi Plays Berkeley DVD / Live At Berkeley CD (Sony Legacy)

Nobody knew Jimi Hendrix only had 25 more performances left in him when he took the stage with drummer Mitch Mitchell and bassist Billy Cox for two performances at the Berkeley Community Theatre on May 30, 1970. Since his death September 18, 1970, the demand for fresh Hendrix product has ensured that as long as there is a buck to be made from the material in the vault somebody will be happy to exploit it (Hendrix's back catalog still shifts a dependable 500,000 units annually), and 42 years on it continues to be business as usual. Having moved distribution from Universal to Sony in 2009, the Experience Hendrix team is updating the back catalog, which means new reissues of the *Jimi Plays Berkeley* film on DVD, with the complete audio of the second set available for the first time in a 5.1 remix by Eddie Kramer. The second set is also available as a stand-alone compact disc.

As a listening experience, *Live At Berkeley* bristles with energy, as listeners are treated to works-in-progress versions of "Straight Ahead" and "New Rising Sun" before the one-two punch of "Lover Man" and "Stone Free." "Hey Joe" and "I Don't Live Today" are both focused and taut, and then the trio launches into an amazing version of "Machine Gun" even more electrifying than the version on the *Band Of Gypsies* LP. "Foxy Lady" lightens the mood and sets up the "Star Spangled Banner" ("The American anthem the way it really is in the air that you breathe every day...oh, our flag was still there—big deal!") before "Purple Haze" and a 10-minute version of "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)" that is as great as any other live Hendrix performance out there. He pulls out all the stops, demonstrating his inventive use of feedback and signal distortion, falling to his knees, playing between his legs and soloing with his teeth, masterfully twisting and braiding the tonal clusters and scales to be found in every form of the blues. A shaman with an electric guitar, his performance is simply riveting. With no overdubs or edits, mind you, just three guys in a room doing it live. It's a pity that technical problems prevent us from hearing the complete first set as well.

You can, however, see some of the performances from that first set in the film *Jimi Plays Berkeley*, an essential document to appreciate the full breadth of Hendrix's career. As a disheveled cinematic object, there is much to criticize, but the historical significance cannot be over-emphasized. Three weeks before the Berkeley concerts the shooting at Kent State occurred, mirroring the tensions that had been escalating in Berkeley since the police killed a People's Park protester the year before. With countercultural political vibes revving to an all-time high, Hendrix manager Michael Jeffrey thought it a good idea that his client be captured on film among the Berkeley radicals, to capitalize on the high profile Hendrix coming off his performances in *Monterey Pop* and *Woodstock*. At the time of the Berkeley concerts, Hendrix was also in the middle of creating his fourth studio offering, ostensibly titled *First Rays Of The New Rising Sun*, a record that he would not live to complete. The footage shot by cameraman Peter Pilafin's team sat dormant until Hendrix's death virtually guaranteed a return on the investment, and Jeffrey enlisted Pilafin to create a composite out of

