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DVD review: Bob Dylan Never Ending Tour Diaries

Bob Dylan Never Ending Tour Diaries: Winston Watson's Incredible Journey Produced and directed by Joel Gilbert. Featuring Winston Watson. 100 minutes. 2009 release.
Reviewed by Nelhydra Paupér

Back in my day - let's call it My Back Ages - **Dylanology** was synonymous with **Garbology**. That is, the fascination with Bob Dylan and his writing led to a sort of cultish enthusiasm that could cause one **A.J. Webberman** to literally pick through Bob Dylan's family trashcan on the curb outside his Greenwich Village apartment, searching for some clues to the Big Questions. Most Dylan followers found this whole exercise repugnant and beneath contempt - yet we still wanted to know what Webberman discovered! What does Bob eat for breakfast anyway? and were there any scrapped song lyrics that turned up amidst the used Kleenex?

But things have changed. Today Dylanology is a cottage industry. There are, it seems, enough people - like myself - who still want to know what the guy eats and, better yet, what he's like to work with, to produce a steady stream of books and DVD releases about his life, his work and even his employees. I've known musicians who've worked with him - and know musicians who know musicians who've worked with him - and everyone seems to agree that, well, he's a bit odd (*NO! You DON'T say!*). But they generally liked him. By most accounts he isn't overly palsy-walsy - but he isn't the reclusive, abusive, egomaniacal weirdo many would imagine. When all is said and done the greatest songwriter since Homer is really a hard-working musician who tours almost constantly - despite no apparent financial need to do so - and prefers to play with musicians who are hardly stars on their own. In fact, compared to the bands that guys like Eric Clapton or Rod Stewart assemble - that is, slick, top flight, big-name studio guys - Dylan's folks are often one step up from bar band musicians. And often that step up came courtesy of Dylan himself. He may be a bigger name than Clapton or Rod the Mod, but he is, musically at least, more salt of the earth. __

Watson Winston, er, Winston Watson - the thoroughly charming star of **Highway 61 Entertainment's** new DVD, *Bob Dylan Never Ending Tour Diaries: Winston Watson's Incredible Journey* - is exactly that sort of musician. He was Dylan's drummer for several years in the early-mid

1990s. But before that he had only played with local big-hair bands in his home state of Arizona. When the call came to try out for Dylan it was through a friend who'd been drumming for Dylan and wanted out. So the recommendation came from one no-name drummer for another no-name drummer. And purely based on the guy's say-so Winston suddenly found himself on stage in Kansas City playing with BOB DYLAN in front of 80,000 people. One night after the call came. Without any rehearsal. Or set list. Or anything._

Winston did well enough that Bob kept him on for the next few years. Watson, a heavy metal guy of African-American and Native American descent, had relatively little knowledge of Dylan's work. So he had a LOT to learn... (*awww, you've got a lot to leeeearnnnš*) __But I digress. During his tenure on the Never Ending Tour ('**The Never Ending Tour**' is the nickname fans gave Dylan's restless, seemingly perpetual tour schedule that's been going on since the 1980s) Watson was present for the **30th Anniversary Bobfest** at Madison Square Garden; the 1992 Olympics; the Frank Sinatra tribute TV special; the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame kickoff concert; plus tours with Santana, the Grateful Dead, Patti Smith and the Rolling Stones. He says Dylan paid well, has an excellent touring staff, never uses a teleprompter to help with the words and gets lots of celebrities like Don Rickles and Raquel Welch turning up at his shows. __

Winston reports that while Dylan was not exactly palling around with the guys on the tour bus - he had his own, separate bus - he was not unapproachable or ever less than nice. He describes his first impromptu breakfast with The Bob, as well as a number of later conversations, nearly all of which were friendly, with Dylan being a supportive and encouraging boss. The one negative encounter was after Watson failed to perform well at a show, resulting in being called to the principal's office for a dressing down. Which, from Watson's description, was brief, professional and perfectly reasonable. (You should hear the stories about James Brown).

In other words, Winnie Watson provides absolutely no dirt on Bob Dylan. He genuinely *likes* Dylan, respects him and only speaks highly of him. But he'd gladly take a shit on the head of Van Morrison. _Now, I should say that, in addition to being a huge Dylan fan for, well I mean like forever, I'm also a huge Van Morrison fan. And while I've heard plenty of people say nice things about Dylan though the decades, in the 35+ years I've been following Van the Man I have never heard or read one single person say anything nice about him ever. Not once. He is, by all accounts, a difficult, miserable, mean,

grouchy, moody, nasty sumbitch-I-tell-you-what. If kindness were petals on a daisy, Van Morrison would be one completely plucked flower. __

Watson's career with Dylan, by his account anyway, was ended by Morrison. After a gig in Norway that Morrison shared with Dylan, everyone sat down for a big dinner and, as Dylan talked with Van about his band, Van suggested - LOUDLY - that he should get rid of his drummer because the guy couldn't play. __ (Author's note: I once saw Van Morrison storm off stage at the Palladium mid-set and never return because - well, fucked if I know why. But he never returned. I also saw him start to lose it at the Beacon Theatre mid-song because the drummer couldn't find the groove he wanted. He kept turning back looking at the drummer, *glaring* at him like death was imminent. David Hayes, the bass player, frantically led the poor drummer into the groove Morrison wanted. Having played with Van for years he knew full well what was about to happen if they didn't get it together fast. So even my limited experience tells me Winston's version is probably accurate) __

But I digress. _ Watson, who seems like a genuinely sweet guy, describes his total horror and nausea that night. And he sees it as the moment he was finished. After the tour ended another tour followed later on but he was done. A touching coda follows when Watson attends a Dylan show a year later. Dylan is friendly to him but blows Watson away when he thanks him for his letters. Watson, it turns out, had sent Dylan a few letters after he'd left the band, thanking Dylan, saying what a pleasure it all had been. In their last meeting Dylan tells him no one who worked for him had ever written to him. The rich, famous, endlessly working star/employer is more touched by a simple, genuine personal gesture than by all the adulation he receives each stop of each tour. Charles Dickens, where the fuck are you? _ Watson went on to tour with Alice Cooper and others. But his story trails off before we find out why he's now working as an electrician and playing in a Dylan cover band. With Scarlett Rivera. Huh? __

That band, Highway 61 Revisited, is fronted by [Joel Gilbert](#), the director and interviewer of this DVD.

Gilbert also made the other Dylan DVDs available from [Highway 61 Entertainment](#). They're all good, entertaining, engrossing and always surprisingly well made. I say surprisingly because the average History Channel documentary isn't as well put together as these small-budget but creatively and intelligently presented documents.

So here's the money shot: *Bob Dylan Never Ending Tour Diaries* is a blast. Winston Watson is charming, smart and goofy in a way that is totally endearing. It's no wonder Dylan wanted him around on his tours - Winnie has a vibe that is always sweet and upbeat. Joel Gilbert has put together another of his fun and informative romps through the fascinating landscape of Americana owned and operated by Bob Dylan. Dylanologists everywhere will agree - it's much better than garbage.