



Bob Dylan: Never Ending Tour Diaries DVD review by [Matt Anderson](#)

At first blush, making a documentary about a drummer who performed with Bob Dylan for four years during the mid-1990s sounds like an extreme example of niche filmmaking. As it turns out, *Never Ending Tour Diaries* is a unique piece of work that holds broad appeal for those who seek it out.

The Incredible Journey



How to form a band
around a solo act?
Elementary, my dear
Watson

There's a reason why this is called *Never Ending Tour Diaries*. Bob Dylan has been in perpetual tour mode for ages. The man seems to make more appearances in Denver than even Colorado's own, homegrown talents.

In a bit of foreshadowing, Winston Watson starts out by recalling when he went to see Dylan at a show at Pantages. A drummer with roots in biker bar cover bands, Watson was nonplussed by what he saw. Nobody seemed happy and he chided his friend that he couldn't be paid to join that band. That was May 1992.

Four months later, Watson joined Dylan. Come on, now. The reality of the matter is this: You don't say "no" when an opportunity like performing with one of the greatest living legends in rock presents itself. Watson can laugh about it now, but that first performance was nerve-racking. Under the confused circumstances of that first night, Watson didn't even meet Dylan until after the performance and he didn't have a chance to call his wife (at the time); he had no idea where he was going or when he'd be back.

That's totally rock 'n' roll.

From there, Watson goes on to regale Dylan fans, music fans and travel mavens with a lot of interesting stories about life on the road and the stellar cast of personalities that moved in and out of the band's path.

Complacency Kills

On the musical front, Watson divulges some really interesting stories about working with Dylan. At the core of Dylan's music is a solo artist, but he needs a band to support him on the road. The question is: How do you hire a bunch of strangers and expect them to perform like they've been together forever (like U2)? Well, in the case of Dylan the answer is to pay performers the big bucks and then expect things to gel.

That's great in theory, but not necessarily great in reality. "There's a sound I'm looking for and I'm not getting it," Watson recalls Dylan saying during rehearsal. Watson, the "frickin' new guy" in the band, begins to wilt and says, "I can't do this. What the hell am I doing here?"

Well, that's when Dylan steps in and tells the other band members Winston has a certain vibe, a vibe he wants but he's not getting from the band. He's getting complacency instead. After that chat, things did begin to gel, although Watson was then labeled as "teacher's pet."

Traveling around, artists including Santana, Neil Young, George Harrison, Tom Petty, Bono, Edge, Steve Winwood, Elvis Costello, Kris Kristofferson, Don Rickles and Raquel Welch — to name only a few — interact with the band or at least show up for performances here

or there.

Some of them offer cool comments, as when Watson recalls Kristofferson's description of Dylan — the man has so many sides to him he's round.

But one name proves troublesome for Watson. Van Morrison. For whatever reason, he recommended to Dylan that he fire the drummer. And a second encounter with Morrison didn't go any better. That's something like a payoff in documentary terms: The unhappiness factor at the Pantages had crept into Watson's own experience.

It's that bare-all aspect of *Never Ending Tour Diaries* that helps the production transcend mere fandom and enter the world of harsh rock reality. Watson becomes homesick and headed for divorce before ultimately having to part ways with Dylan and the band. Even so, he fully acknowledges that experience provided an education no amount of money could buy.

Like a Rolling Stone

The documentary is buoyed by a colorful, lively presentation of the subject matter and Watson's own agreeable personality makes the journey a pleasant one. It's hard to argue with a guy who's so self-effacing that he's willing to say he was "standing around like a piece of broccoli" with his oversized afro.

And he's also ready to take the glam out of rock star gatherings. They're no different than mechanics gatherings, he says. Instead of transmissions, everybody stands around talking about their lawyers. (And it's also worth pointing out, even though Watson's played with other high-profile talent like Warren Zevon, Alice Cooper and Lenny Kravitz, his backup gig is working as an electrician.)

As with director Joel Gilbert's other Dylan documentaries, the man himself did not actively participate in the production other than appearing in vintage footage and photographs. And, thanks to rights issues, there's no Dylan music in the movie. But Gilbert has learned how to bridge the gap and make the absence of Dylan and his music a virtual non-factor.

His first foray centered around Mickey Jones and his home movies from 1966. That one was a bit of a disappointment, narrowly focused and with limited appeal. Each successive release has been more revealing and more satisfying. *Rolling Thunder and the Gospel Years*, for example, was a highly informative look at another epoch in Dylan's career that really expanded the scope of Gilbert's documentary skills by interviewing quite an interesting collection of characters from Dylan's life history.

Here, while the scope scales back to a one-on-one interview with Watson, who has also performed with Gilbert's Highway 61 Revisited tribute band, the storytelling and the presentation quality hit their mark.

DVD Extras

The highlight of the supplements is a collection of 21 MP3s from the documentary's soundtrack, accounting for a whopping 82 minutes (or so) of music by Highway 61 Revisited. For fans of the band, this alone makes the DVD a no-brainer. Considering the limitations of making Bob Dylan documentaries without the participation of Dylan himself, this is a really great way to broaden the reach of the tribute band's music and add a considerable amount of extra value to the package. Kudos are in order for this bit of cross-promotion.

On a technical note, it's not 100% intuitively obvious how to access the MP3s. When played in a standard DVD player, a message appears indicating the disc should be placed in a computer in order to download the tracks. Well, when the disc is placed in a computer's DVD-ROM drive, the same message appears. The trick is to go in (at least on a PC) to My Computer and right-click on the DVD drive then select "Explore" to access the MP3 folder. By no means a big deal, but it's a maneuver that's sure to soar over a head or two out there.

The other supplements are photo galleries. One, a five-minute presentation set against music by Highway 61 Revisited, is a collection of professional, candid and artistic photos from early to contemporary Dylan, incorporating some photos previously seen in the documentary.

The other gallery is a collection of tour laminates, which figure into the graphical elements of the documentary. It's a 4-minute presentation of all-access and backstage passes, including some for tours with Santana and Alice Cooper.

Picture and Sound

Credit must be given where credit is due. For an independent production, the presentation quality here is outstanding. The picture (16:9 widescreen) is top notch, at least in the main interview segments between Winston Watson and Joel Gilbert, creatively presented with a lot of graphic panache. Naturally, given it's a documentary, there's a lot of vintage footage of varying image quality, but that's the nature of the beast and in many ways it's a joy in itself to watch old, grainy footage that hasn't been polished to digitally air-brushed perfection.

The same can be said of the Dolby Digital sound. It's not the fine-tuned masterwork of a Hollywood production, but it certainly serves the production well.

How to Use This DVD

Enjoy the ride as Winston Watson shares his tour diaries then shuffle over to a computer and drill down to the MP3s for some music that's great Dylan-less music.

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Movie info

Director: Joel Gilbert

Subject: Winston Watson

Bob Dylan

Runtime: 100 min.

DVD scorecard

Picture: ★★★★★

Sound: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

Overall: ★★★

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“Americans don't want to make shoes”

— Phil Knight, *The Big One*

