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D.A. Pennebaker Looks Back at "Don't Look Back"

Dylan documentarian discusses new DVD



A subterranean look at Dylan

"Documentaries always seem to feel that it's their duty to tell you how something works," says veteran filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker. "But you should be thinking more of what [Henrik] Ibsen would think if he were there writing a play like Master Builder, and Dylan's gonna be the central character. You're just like a playwright. I mean, you're just writing a play only instead of doing it from a script and directing actors you're doing it from real life."

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Over three decades ago, following singer/songwriter Bob Dylan for three weeks through England on his final acoustic tour, Pennebaker (whose credits include Monterey Pop, Depeche Mode 101) presented a rare look at the rising artist during what would prove to be a pivotal point in his career. Through scenes depicting everything from hanging out in hotels and behind-the-scenes negotiations to soundchecks and onstage performance, the film revealed everything Dylan was willing to show (and sometimes more), as he toyed with journalists, sang/played with friends Joan Baez, Donovan and Alan Price, and composed new material. Never before had a film captured a musical icon in this way, though Pennebaker hesitates to accept his crown as the first king of rock films.

"I don't see myself in any such role," he says. "I did a film at a time when not many were making films like that. So that was maybe the first of a certain kind of film. Somebody always does something first and then people come along and do it better. There have been films since that...although I think that there haven't been a lot of people like Dylan." Working his way through a Byron comparison, he adds, "There are some unique persons that come along and everybody remembers them for a long time. When you get a person as charismatic as Dylan, who has that kind of incredible spiritual hold on his generation, I think that he creates a new kind of order or what Heizenberg called 'the new harmony.'"

Now, celebrating that brief but historic tour's thirty-fifth anniversary, the recent release of a DVD *Don't Look Back* collector's edition shows that, with the right technology, a classic can still be cutting edge. Which isn't to say that the man who redefined filmmaking with the portable synch-sound camera has, himself, gone digital. "My son said, 'Dad, you guys should be using DVD.' And I said, 'What's DVD?'" Pennebaker admits. Determined, his son spent his allowance on the equipment to prove his point. Pennebaker says that once he was introduced to the technology, he knew it was the right way to go. "DVD is kinda like a magazine. You've got the possibility of stuff around the film. Like when I read a book, I'm interested in all sorts of references from that book to find out about things that the book isn't going into. I think film is the same way."

With a clean digital transfer, the collector's edition offers options that make watching the movie a unique experience. The original theater trailer, staff and cast bios and a Dylan discography are among the peripheral references. A never-before-seen alternate take of the infamous "Subterranean Homesick Blues" cue-card opening shows the scene set in a garden instead of an alley. For major Dylan buffs, the gem is probably the five additional audio tracks recorded during the tour, including "To Ramona," "Love Minus Zero/No Limit," "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue," "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," and a previously unheard version of "It Ain't Me, Babe." Dylan himself chose the tracks from a larger list of potential tunes.

A commentary option offers a running Voice-of-God narration recorded *Mystery Science Theater 3000*-style by Pennebaker and Bob Neuwirth, Dylan's friend and then-road tour manager. Here we find out that one scene with less-than-stellar lighting was a result of the camera's low battery, and that the Science Student, one of the many "victims" of Dylan's wit and verbal banter, later founded Chrysalis Records. Moreover, where academics have long read Dylan's persona as somewhat belligerent or anti-media, the DVD commentary suggests otherwise. "He wasn't really going all out to promote the tour," Pennebaker says. "But initially everybody expected that he had to do that. So he kinda went along with it. I mean, he isn't totally truculent. He could be, but he isn't."

Still, far be it from Pennebaker to suggest that his film tells anyone what to think. Interpretation, as always, is left very much up to the viewer. "I don't think there's one way to take it. And I think that many people who start off thinking Dylan's an asshole are totally confirmed in that when they see the film, because you kinda see what you expect to see. People who just revel in anything he does, he can't do any wrong. Neither side is seeing what really happened, because they only see what they think they see happen."

When you've seen everything in every frame, there's still plenty to keep an audience occupied. But perhaps not as much as there could be. "We're just starting and working our way into it," Pennebaker explains, "I can see lots of things that we could have done now that maybe we should have done." Putting lyrics and sheet music on the screen while the songs play, for instance. And he plans to add new features to this DVD format, as early even as next year. Depending on which way you're looking, it seems that once again this Pennebaker/Dylan deal is only the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

ROBIN A. ROTHMAN
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