

Bob Dylan as a psychological pastiche: I'm Not There

James Brewer
28 December 2007

I'm Not There, for better or worse, is a film not so much about singer-songwriter Bob Dylan as about the idea of Bob Dylan. More precisely, it is about several different such ideas. It was directed and co-written by Todd Haynes (*Safe*, *Velvet Goldmine*, *Far from Heaven*). Six actors play six characters, each with a different name, who represent different facets or incarnations of Dylan.

This fragmented approach contains certain possibilities, but it also carries with it certain risks: above all, the elevation of impressions over genuine artistic or historical exploration. When asked about the technique in an interview on NPR's "Fresh Air," Haynes replied, "Questions about identity are part of all my films ... this idea of Dylan is somebody as a kind of shape-shifter—somebody for whom change is the only constant."

By the time most of his fans discovered him in the mid-1960s through tunes like "Positively Fourth Street" and "Like A Rolling Stone," which hit the pop charts, Dylan (born 1941) had transformed himself and his music from his origins in the Greenwich Village, New York City-based folk music scene. He had already alienated many of his early admirers by supposedly embracing the commercialism of rock 'n' roll over the "purity" of acoustic folk music.

The 1967 documentary directed by D.A. Pennebaker, *Don't Look Back*, attempted to capture that period, as did the more recent *No Direction Home*, by Martin Scorsese. Both films focused on Dylan at the height of his popularity, generally recognized to have ended with his motorcycle accident in the summer of 1966. *I'm Not There* attempts to broaden the understanding of Dylan's career by both extending the time period and taking a psychological rather than a chronological approach, with distinctly mixed results.

Again, Haynes from the "Fresh Air" interview: "The funny thing about Dylan is that he completely enters each of these phases, these psychic modes that he explores ... I think of him as a consummate performer who lives and dies in the moment he is singing ... just in that same way when it's over its dead. It's utterly finished and he moves on ... it's utterly an American process."

Haynes may be on to something, about Americans' 'changeability,' but, unhappily, the idea is never pursued in any depth.

Woody

In one of the filmmaker's quirkier choices, a young black television actor, Marcus Carl Franklin, plays a character presented as a youthful Dylan. An 11-year-old runaway with a proclivity for hopping freight trains, which evokes the Depression era, he goes by the name 'Woody.' Suggested here is the young Bob Zimmerman (Dylan's real name) before he arrives on the folk scene in New York City. Early in his life, Dylan became infatuated with the music and lifestyle of the folk troubadour, Woody Guthrie.

Dylan was so influenced by Guthrie that he adopted the latter's manner of speech and tried to emulate his singing. The younger singer became known for fabricating details of his early life modeled after Guthrie's romantic hobo lifestyle.

Robbie

Robbie Clark is Dylan's public/private psyche played by Heath Ledger. A film actor, Robbie's persona is informed and shaped by the rumors that circulated in the press about Dylan's private life.

Always surrounded by adoring fans, Robbie becomes increasingly self-centered. He begins a relationship with and eventually marries a painter named Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg). Her character is loosely based on Sara Lownds, Dylan's first wife and their relationship is personified in the film's title, *I'm Not There*. Robbie is constantly 'elsewhere' and never faithful.

The film's title comes from a little-known Dylan song off the 1966-67 home recording sessions known as the "Basement Tapes." The song has only been available previously in various bootlegs that were circulated over the years. It is an otherwise unremarkable number about Dylan's relationship with Lownds.

The scenes of the Robbie-Claire relationship attempt to provide some historical orientation through the use of television news coverage of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. Claire is very attentive. We don't know about Robbie. As the film unfolds, he becomes increasingly unpleasant to those close to him. Their divorce is bitter though neither stops caring for the other.

This segment is given disproportionate weight. Although it may not have been intentional, this chronicle becomes the center of the film. Haynes claims not to have produced a biographical work in the traditional sense, but Robbie's story (Dylan's personal life) tends to fill the vacuum created by the lack of historical or social insight.

Jack

Perhaps the least interesting of the six personae is Jack Rollins, played by Christian Bale. He represents the protest singer and later the born-again Christian. In deconstructing the idea of Dylan, Haynes arbitrarily isolates the committed proselytizer, whether of protest politics or religion, from the cynical iconoclast. The scenes of Dylan singing in the film are mostly of Jack. There is a certain flatness here. He sings "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" at a civil rights rally, but it just doesn't have the feeling of the original. There is a sense that Jack is just going through the motions.

Several characters are interviewed about Jack, including Alice Fabian, played by Julianne Moore. She suggests a mature Joan Baez as interviewed in Scorsese's *No Direction Home*. Despite Moore's convincing portrayal of Baez, recreating the Scorsese footage in this manner is an ambiguous undertaking, which serves to remove the narrative one step farther from reality and also seeks to present the interview as authoritative background.

Jude

Surprisingly, the most recognizable of the Dylan surrogates is Jude Quinn, played by Cate Blanchett. This is the iconoclastic, electrified and dandified Dylan as seen in Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*. The Jude scenes are filmed in black and white, intended to recreate the feel of that

film's footage.

In regard to his choice of a woman to play one of his Dylans, Haynes told the *Boston Globe* that he wanted to find a method of getting at the "shock" of the electric Dylan, "the newness" of it. "It's why I wanted to cast a woman to play him in 1966, because at that moment, physically, the music he was producing, is one of the most famous Dylans. But the shock value of that, the strangeness of it, the weirdness of that body and [those] hand gestures and hair and the way he talked, is something that we've lost."

Quinn/Blanchett/Dylan walks onto the stage at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival with a backup band, and they proceed to blast the audience with machine guns before breaking into a loud electric version of "Maggie's Farm." Someone meant to suggest folksinger Pete Seeger is so upset by the music that he attempts to cut the power cables with a fire axe and is wrestled to the ground by Dylan's manager.

In subsequent appearances, the booing continues. During a London concert before performing "Like a Rolling Stone," an audience member shouts, "Judas!" Dylan replies, "I don't believe you," and tells the band to "play it f—ing loud." Haynes derives the character's name from this episode.

Haynes' presentation is uncritical of popular mythology to the point of slavishness. Dylan breaking of his ties with the "folk scene" was contradictory, to say the least. On the one hand, the atmosphere that the "purists" such as Seeger and Alan Lomax sought to preserve was artistically stultifying. Some of Dylan's most evocative material was produced in this period. On the other hand, in throwing the baby out with the bathwater, i.e., turning his back entirely on social life, including the Vietnam War, Dylan ultimately marginalized himself. Along with his newfound fame came the inevitable trappings—the self-indulgent, abandoned lifestyle of a super star.

The "Jude" phase ends with Dylan's infamous motorcycle accident. Jude rides ominously off-screen and we hear the sound of a crash, then silence.

Billy

These scenes are the film's most bizarre. Richard Gere plays Billy [the Kid] as he might have been had he survived to middle age. He is known as Mr. B. in his rural pioneer town of Halloween, where everyone is in costume. Billy represents the older Dylan. Time has changed and his youthful ideals have been defeated and been made irrelevant by corporate power. There is no apparent logic to the random, Felliniesque symbolism in these scenes, just an overarching sense of doom. This theme is suggested by Dylan's minor film role in a 1973 Western directed by Sam Peckinpah, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. It speaks to Dylan's (and perhaps Haynes') romanticized vision of America.

Arthur

Scenes of Arthur Rimbaud, the 19th-century French poet, played by Ben Whishaw, are scattered randomly throughout the film. "Arthur" sits behind a table as though being interviewed, declaring himself to be against beauty and nature. It is intentionally unclear whether the character portrays Rimbaud or Dylan.

Of his film as a whole, Haynes says, "It's an unusual movie, there's no question about it, but you have to kind of go with it, you can't fight it and worry about understanding every single reference in the film. And I think that's true for any great Dylan song."

Haynes is not unintelligent and *I'm Not There* is carefully crafted. But his uncritical attitude toward Dylan's evolution and body of work informs, or disinforms, if you will, the production. He wants to have it both ways. *I'm Not There* is full of references to Dylan's life and music, but they are not there to help an audience make sense of the singer's career and times, but merely as part of an experience, like "any great Dylan song."

Dylan's reinventions of himself are treated by Haynes largely as an

internal psychological process. However, the height of the singer's influence and some of his sharpest changes took place in the period 1963-68, among the most explosive years in postwar American history, which witnessed three major assassinations and the reshaping of official political life, US imperialism's plunging into full-scale colonial war in Southeast Asia, uprisings in major American cities and the emergence of a mass protest movement. Might not these phenomena, and the psychic reverberations they set off, have had something to do with Dylan's evolution?

One could make such a study. For example, was it a coincidence that songs like "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "My Back Pages," which expressed distance from or demoralization with social protest, and heralded a major shift in Dylan's artistic direction, were written just months after the assassination of John F. Kennedy?

Haynes doesn't choose to raise many critical questions, much less attempt to answer them. Why did Dylan's music find such a powerful response? Why did he abandon his social criticism on the eve of the mass anti-Vietnam protests? Did this abandonment have an impact on the depth and substance of his later music?

At its best Dylan's music expressed a sensitivity that could be poetic, touching and often angry. This is why much of it is still recorded by many different artists. At its worst, the music could be self-indulgent, muddy and tedious.

Haynes wants to make something other than a traditional biopic, he wants the spectator "To be thrust into the '60s and to be thrust into the inside of what that artist was actually doing." Fair enough, but for that, an ambitious enterprise, a historical frame of reference is vital. To make sense of Dylan's complex and contradictory career would require a deeper grasp of the processes that were pitching people about, not only Dylan.

It has to be said that as the social conflicts grew sharper in the late 1960s, Dylan's music became tamer and less evocative. Opposition to the existing order is one of the characteristics that he cast off. His music of the late 1960s and early 1970s became more and more religious and self-absorbed. Haynes doesn't seem to notice. Or else he chooses not to draw attention for his own reasons.

The idea of the multi-psycho-dimensional Bob Dylan is an interesting one, but in the end, it doesn't succeed in either adequately entertaining or enlightening. We leave the theater, more or less, with the opinions and feelings we had when we entered it—about Dylan's music, about Dylan the artist, about Dylan the human being.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact