

Ceasing to be the voice of a generation

By Paul Bond
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Bob Dylan: No Direction Home, *directed by Martin Scorsese*

Amidst great fanfare, veteran director Martin Scorsese's two-part documentary on the early career of Bob Dylan recently screened on PBS in the US and the BBC in Britain. In a largely chronological fashion, the documentary covers Dylan's formative years in small-town Minnesota and his move to New York City and the folk scene in Greenwich Village. It ends with the controversy surrounding his "electric" tour of 1966.

At the end of that tour, Dylan was involved in a serious motorcycle accident that curtailed his work for a period. He was practically a recluse for several years. Although acknowledging that Dylan did continue to work, Scorsese focuses on what he considers the singer's artistic zenith, the album *Highway 61 Revisited*, and his development away from the "protest" song movement of the folk scene. Running consistently through the film are performances of "Like A Rolling Stone" (the lyrics of which gave the film its title) and, particularly, footage from the British leg of the tour.

The tour was controversial. Dylan was accused of betraying the folk scene, and fans were bitterly divided on the band. The defining moment in Scorsese's portrayal, and one of the most iconic from that tour, came at the Manchester Free Trade Hall. When Dylan plugged in his electric guitar for the second set, a fan shouted "Judas!" Dylan snarled, "I don't believe you," before turning to the band and urging them to "play it fucking loud!" That exchange, and the raw intensity of the ensuing performance of "Like A Rolling Stone," provided Scorsese with the frame for his film.

One reason for the attention paid to this documentary was the contribution not just of those around Dylan at that time (Joan Baez, Liam Clancy, Pete Seeger, Dave Van Ronk and Allen Ginsberg were among those interviewed), but also of Dylan himself. Scorsese did not interview him, but he had access to some 10 hours of interview footage made by Dylan's manager. In many ways, it makes for the most candid exploration of Dylan's early artistic development to date; however, it still does not feel like the whole story.

Scorsese brilliantly evokes Dylan's hometown of Hibbing, Minnesota, in the early 1950s. Unemployment was rising as the mining industry declined, with a resulting drop in living conditions; paranoia about impending nuclear attack was fuelled by the political tensions of the height of the Cold War. This found its cultural reflection in the creatively stifling atmosphere of a town where "nobody liked rock 'n' roll, blues or country" and where "you couldn't be a rebel—it was too cold."

The young Dylan's horizons were broadened by music on the radio: "Listening to the radio, I got bored being there," he said. In a moment Scorsese clearly hopes will resonate with viewers of the 1966 tour, it is recalled how the principal at Dylan's school closed the curtain on his rock-and-roll band. Dylan, according to one witness, was playing the piano as if attempting to destroy it.

Dylan (born in 1941) was listening to all sorts of music—country, the blues of Muddy Waters, and, eventually, folk. The latter, which had grown in part out of ethnomusicological researches into traditional songs as "music of the people," had been promoted by the Stalinist Communist Party and other left circles as a means of tackling contemporary issues

and espousing a broadly progressive political outlook in popular song. In contrast to the banality of such contemporary songs as "How Much Is That Doggy In The Window," Dylan found the radical songwriting of Woody Guthrie something from which "you could learn how to live."

At the same time, the American folk scene offered a wide range of performance models, accepting the high-art theatricality of a John Jacob Niles alongside the more "home-spun" performances of Guthrie. (One of the treats of the documentary was brilliant footage of Niles and the singer Odetta.) In the American scene, there was not the same emphasis on formal "authenticity" as there was to be in the English folk revival. Alongside the content of the music, therefore ("Folk music delivered something I felt about life, people, institutions and ideology"), Dylan was also receptive to its forms, describing it as "traditional music that sounded new."

Scorsese shows well Dylan's responsiveness to new stimuli and his constant search for new influences. The scholar Paul Nelson describes Dylan's enthusiastic scouring and plundering of friends' record collections. He was soaking up new influences constantly, and learning and playing new songs all the time. Long before he wrote his first song, he was already demonstrating formidable musical skills. As Dave Van Ronk told the WSWs in 1998, Dylan had won admirers amongst his fellow musicians before he started writing. Dylan was sifting through what was around him and, he said, learning "not to give away too easily anything that was dear to me."

Late in 1961, he made the trip to New York. Dylan has, over the years, told many stories about his past, and, as Van Ronk said, "He never seemed to be able to get them straight." At one point, he had claimed that he had only come to New York to "make it." This documentary, though, supports Van Ronk's argument that that was not the case. As artist Bobby Neuwirth says in the film, "In those days artistic success was not dollar-driven, it was about having something to say." (Dylan did, though, show a certain careerist ruthlessness: Van Ronk described having to drop "House of the Rising Sun" from his set because Dylan, having learned it from him, had recorded it on his first album.)

What drove Dylan was a striving for an artistic representation of the world he had grown up in and that he saw around him. He describes seeing the intensity of Irish ballad-singers and feeling he "wanted to be that kind of performer." In New York, he continued soaking up experiences and influences, describing himself as a "musical expeditionary." He also made regular trips to the state hospital where Woody Guthrie was terminally ill with Huntington's Chorea. He would sit with Guthrie and play him songs.

From this came Dylan's first song. In part he was seeking to entertain his idol, in part to win his approval. He was also using this as an outlet for the expression of the influences and experiences built up inside him. "I wrote the songs to perform the songs, and I needed to sing them in that language, which is a language I hadn't heard before," he said. From this point, he wrote prolifically. The documentary offers a clear outline of his trajectory up to this point. Dylan was finding a voice not just to express what he had seen up to that point, however, but also what he saw around him at the time.

The folk music scene was regaining ground with the decline of McCarthyism, and was seen largely as a product of “the Left.” The idea of a music that was able to articulate social and progressive concerns brought many broadly “leftist” artists to folk. Many of the guiding lights of the folk movement, like Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and the editorial circles of such influential magazines as *Sing Out!* and *Broadside*, had some affiliation with the Stalinist Communist Party of the USA. The Stalinists took a somewhat proprietorial attitude to the folk scene, but it attracted around it many songwriters trying to tackle serious social and political subjects in song. They were motivated, as the opening editorial in *Broadside* (which published many of Dylan’s songs) put it, by the idea that “a good song can only do good.”

What is truly remarkable about the documentary is how Dylan now seeks to dissociate himself from any political content to his work at all. Just because he wrote about the poor and the disadvantaged, he says, that does not mean he was writing political songs.

This does not bear scrutiny. Dylan, along with Joan Baez, sang at the massive civil rights rally in August 1963 in Washington where Martin Luther King delivered his “I have a dream” speech. A substantial part of his early work deals with social injustice (as, for example, “Pawn in the Game,” about the racist murder of Medgar Evers, or “Masters of War,” about arms manufacturers). There is also a current of aspiration for some better future in his work (for example, “Chimes of Freedom”).

This broadly political concern, though, remained unarticulated in a coherent way. Van Ronk, although describing Dylan as generally “a man of the Left,” said he was basically “apolitical” and politically naïve. (Van Ronk was for some years associated with the Workers League, the forerunner of the SEP.) This seems partly to have been an attempt by Dylan to distance himself from any political affiliation. His claim, for example, that he did not know of Pete Seeger’s politics (“I didn’t realise he was a Communist. I didn’t know what a Communist was, and if I did it wouldn’t have mattered to me”) is scarcely credible. Seeger had appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and restrictions on his television appearances continued to be an issue within the folk world throughout the 1960s.

At best, this could be seen as an expression of a naïve political idealism. As Dylan told the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, “There’s no black and white, left and right to me anymore; there’s only up and down, and down is very close to the ground. And I’m trying to go up without thinking! about anything trivial such as politics.”

Yet this was a period of intense and sharp political conflict, with a growing radicalisation that was to reach its high point in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Speaking of his decision not to accompany Dylan on tour, keyboardist Al Kooper explained that the band was scheduled to play Dallas, where John Kennedy had recently been assassinated. If that was the way they had treated the president, Kooper said, how would they treat Dylan?

This is the crux of the documentary, and its fundamental weakness.

The three “electric” albums (*Bringing It All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde On Blonde*) constitute an extraordinary artistic achievement, one that largely still stands up today. The songs on them are attempts to deal with a changed world. The arrangements reflect this sense of the new: these albums mark a move away from an earlier way of engaging with the world artistically, which had proved inadequate in the face of reality.

However, any serious assessment of this move must take into account not just the artistic achievement of these albums, but their place within Dylan’s overall trajectory. The development of a more complicated way of responding to the world around him necessitated some kind of critical dealing with the folk world that had been his home hitherto. However, Dylan’s rejection of what was weakest in the folk scene, which stood in the way of a more complicated way of representing the world, took place

under conditions of intensifying political crisis in the United States. He seems to have used the weaknesses of the folk milieu as part of a general move away from tackling social concerns altogether. (Although he has continued to write topical songs since that period, they have not engaged with the major political and social questions of the time as had his earlier work).

Joan Baez (who has always been extremely loyal to Dylan) talks about his refusal to get involved in anti-Vietnam rallies, for example. She says that she eventually became quite frustrated with people asking her if Dylan would be attending, thinking that they should have realised he did not go on rallies and demonstrations. In part, though, this underscores the shift within his writing.

It might perhaps be a better question to ask how those three albums are as good as they are, given a subsequent trajectory that landed him in religious obscurantism. For one thing, despite the criticisms of the folk music “left” to the contrary, they are a genuine attempt to cognise life. Dylan was criticised for moving away from the social towards the individual (for example, “How does it feel To be on your own?” in “Like A Rolling Stone”), but the songs on these albums deal rather with a general and political alienation and disorientation (“Something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is”). What makes them so compelling even today is not just their musical sophistication, but their expression of an intense and confused reading of a hostile world (“The riot squad they’re restless / They need somewhere to go / As Lady and I look out tonight / From Desolation Row”).

For the “lefts,” though, the offence was moving beyond the earlier topical song forms in itself. Manager and promoter Harold Leventhal attacks Dylan’s abandonment of “topical material” because it meant “he was going away from a political consciousness *that we thought we all had*” (my emphasis). He was, in other words, attempting to find something new artistically which took him away from where Leventhal assumed him to be.

What Leventhal and other critics of the electric turn, like Irwin Silber of *Sing Out!*, refused to recognise was any continuity between the earlier and later material. Even in his more straightforwardly topical songs, Dylan had often expressed himself in a poetic and heightened way (in 1964’s “A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall,” for example: “I saw a new born baby with wild wolves all around it, I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it”). However politically confused, idealistic and impressionistic such lyrics may be, artistically they convey a response to a world threatening the destruction of everyone in it, and in Dylan’s performance they have a resonant power. What makes the 1965 albums so striking is Dylan’s ability to bring this poetic quality into play with a new reading of the world around him.

If Leventhal and Silber, though, treat these albums as the finished product of Dylan’s betrayal, Scorsese takes an opposite but equally wrong-headed and uncritical view. He seems to be suggesting that Dylan needed to move away from a more realistic topical songwriting style to be able to reach the artistic heights of *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*. This not only plays down the quality of Dylan’s earlier songwriting, making it simply a stepping stone on the way to 1965, but it also fails to take into account his subsequent development as a songwriter.

Scorsese seems not much interested in examining the relationship of art and artists to questions of social liberation. His attitude, as it emerges here, seems to be that Dylan became greater as he moved away from any close relationship with this cause.

His fudging of this issue was most apparent over the question of the heckling. There is extraordinary footage of British fans arguing the merits of the concerts. Some said explicitly that they had come to see a folk singer not a pop group: others pointed to the quality of the material and asked where there were other groups like that. It has been suggested that

some fans were heckling because the sound quality was so bad and they could not hear the words (which is difficult to know, given the beautiful sound quality of the film). Some have suggested it was because of the sheer volume, but again, that is difficult to ascertain when hecklers were clearly audible, and other touring bands (like Muddy Waters') had raised questions of volume before.

Perhaps the strangest moment came at the Newport Folk Festival in July 1965, when Pete Seeger was apparently so angry at the electric band that he threatened to cut the power supply with an axe. Because Scorsese cannot explore the political questions involved, he can only contribute to the mythologising around the event. We hear, for example, that Seeger was supposed to have been upset that the volume would disturb his father, who wore a hearing aid. This is not particularly plausible. Leventhal described the move to the band material generally as smacking of a commercialism that did not sit well with the folk scene. Such political hostility and its contradictions, because of Scorsese's limitations, are not explored further.

The problem is that this failure to take a position prevents any serious assessment being made of either Dylan's songs or his subsequent unhappy fate. For Scorsese, the qualities of the 1965 albums seem not to require comment; for people like Leventhal, the same is true of the earlier material. What is clear from the documentary, though, is Dylan's striving to explore new ground, not to be tied down. Without consideration of the impact of 1966 on his later work, too, it is impossible to assess the extent to which any introspection can be traced within his earlier material. Scorsese certainly provides clues: footage of Dylan facing increasingly asinine press questions and hostile audiences gives some hints of the pressures on him through 1966.

Scorsese is to be praised for the lavish detail he has provided of Dylan's early career, and for the impressive array of archive material that he has assembled. Dave Van Ronk said that, after "Blowin' in the Wind," "if there is an American collective unconscious [Dylan]...somehow tapped into that." The failing of the documentary is that it cannot explain how that developed any farther, nor how Dylan, in the process of moving away from the socially concerned songwriting that had marked his previous work, managed to produce three such striking and brilliant albums.

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