

Dylan's Early Days Recalled in 'No Direction Home': Rick Warner

(Review. Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

Sept. 23 (Bloomberg) -- When Joan Baez first met Bob Dylan in the early 1960s, she was a famous folksinger and he was an up-and-coming performer on the Greenwich Village coffeehouse circuit.

Baez gave Dylan an early boost by recording some of his songs and inviting him on stage during her concerts. But a few years later, after Dylan's fame had eclipsed hers, he declined to return the favor during a tour of England.

'I assumed that since I'd invited him on the stage in the States, he would invite me on the stage there,' Baez says in 'No Direction Home: Bob Dylan,' Martin Scorsese's riveting new documentary about the singer's early years. 'He had no intention of doing that.'

Dylan has long confounded critics, as well as friends and colleagues, who have tried to pigeonhole him or predict his behavior. As Scorsese's 3 1/2-hour film amply demonstrates, Dylan is not only arguably the most influential singer/songwriter of the rock era, but also the most mercurial.

The two-part film, just released on DVD and scheduled to be shown next week on PBS in the U.S. and BBC Two in the U.K., offers an in-depth look at Dylan's formative years -- from his small-town childhood in Minnesota to his bohemian days in Greenwich Village and, finally, his ascension to cultural icon.

'Busy Being Born'

Just as Dylan's career did, 'No Direction Home' abruptly stops in 1966, following the motorcycle accident that triggered his virtual withdrawal from public life for almost eight years.

Scorsese's decision to focus on Dylan's life and music from 1961-66 is both wise and practical. Dylan, now 64 and still performing, is simply too big a subject to condense into a breezy A&E-type biography, at least not without losing something vital in the translation. After all, he has undergone more metamorphoses than Elton John's hair, from protest singer to visionary poet to electric guitar-playing outlaw to born-again Christian to nonstop-touring troubadour. All along, Dylan has resisted -- and defied -- classification.

As Baez and others learned, as soon as you think you have Dylan figured out, he surprises you. 'He not busy being born is busy dying' isn't just a catchy phrase from 'It's Alright, Ma

(I'm Only Bleeding) ;'' for Dylan, it's a philosophy of life.

Sponge-Like Mind

Like ``The Last Waltz,'' Scorsese's celebrated documentary about The Band's last concert, ``No Direction Home'' is more than a musical bio. While Dylan always hated being called ``the voice of his generation,'' Scorsese makes it clear that he was a product of his turbulent times, in addition to being a sponge who could soak in genres like folk, blues, country and jazz and meld them into a unique musical language and sound that influenced everyone from the Beatles to Springsteen.

Before he turned 25, Dylan had already written more enduring songs than most of his contemporaries did in a lifetime. ``Blowin' in the Wind,'' ``Masters of War,'' ``A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall,'' ``Don't Think Twice, It's All Right,'' ``The Times They Are A-Changin','' ``Like a Rolling Stone,'' ``Highway 61 Revisited,'' ``Desolation Row,'' and ``Just Like a Woman'' -- they're just a sample of his prodigious production during those years.

``He was staggering,'' says Baez, who was Dylan's off-again, on-again lover for several years. ``He hit my world from a different angle.''

Seeger, Ginsberg

Baez is one of many familiar voices we hear from Dylan's early days. There are interviews with musicians Liam Clancy, Maria Muldaur, Pete Seeger, Dave Van Ronk, Peter Yarrow and Al Kooper, whose impromptu organ-playing provided the seminal opening riff of ``Like a Rolling Stone;'' poet Allen Ginsberg, a member of the Rolling Thunder Revue, the eclectic troupe that accompanied Dylan on his 1975-76 tour; former girlfriend Suze Rutolo, seen strolling down a snowy street with Dylan on the cover of ``The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan;'' and filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker, whose documentary of Dylan's 1965 British tour, ``Don't Look Back,'' is liberally excerpted.

Outtakes from ``Don't Look Back'' are also featured, along with clips from other documentaries and photos, concert footage and tape from Dylan's personal archives. Dylan also gives probably the most extensive and revealing interview of his career, segments of which are sprinkled throughout the film.

`Song-And-Dance Man'

Ginsberg recalls weeping when he first heard ``Hard Rain,'' which was widely interpreted as a metaphor for nuclear war.

Kooper remembers refusing to join Dylan in Dallas after the JFK assassination because he feared something bad would happen to the singer. And Seeger concedes that he thought about cutting the cables during Dylan's infamous performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, where he was booed for ``going electric.''

As Dylan's stature grew, so did his distaste for fame and its intrusions. He got particularly perturbed when journalists asked him about the meaning or symbolism of his songs. He half-jokingly called himself a ``song-and-dance man'' and once told a questioner intent on inquiring about protest songs that ``about 136'' of his works fit that category.

While touring with The Band in 1966, Dylan declared he was ``sick of the whole scene'' and ``ready for a break.'' Soon, he was gone from the public stage, not to fully re-emerge until 1974.

``Bob is one of the most complex human beings I've ever met,'' Baez says. ``At first I really tried to figure this guy out, but I gave up. I don't know what he thought about; all I know is what he gave us.''

``No Direction Home: Bob Dylan will air Sept. 26 and Sept. 27 on PBS in the U.S., and Sept. 26 and Oct. 1 on BBC Two in the U.K. Check local listings for times. The film was produced by Thirteen/WNET New York, Spitfire Pictures, Grey Water Park Productions, Sikelia Productions, Vulcan Productions, the BBC and NHK. To purchase the DVD or the soundtrack CD, visit <http://www.shoppbs.org>.

--Editors: Hoelterhoff, Schatz, Todd.

Story illustration: For more information on the film, visit <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/Dylan>. For more cultural news from Bloomberg, see {MUSE <GO>}.

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