

No Direction Home: Bob Dylan A Martin Scorsese Picture

Review by Alexandra Lander

After listening to all the roots-folk music he could get his hands on, a fire was lit in Bob Dylan that to this day has not gone out. After watching Martin Scorsese's documentary *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, I can see very clearly how the American legend didn't just set out to be some political spokesperson for his generation, nor did he strive to be the pioneer of a new movement in American music. He just wanted to play. He wanted to ride the wave of passion for producing a captivating tune that could accommodate the endless poetry that flowed through him—inspired by the radically changing times in which he lived. The Muses were generous to the man as he diligently explored increasingly better rhythms and melodies and ways to make an old style sound something all his own. He succeeded more, I believe, than he'd ever bargained.

This documentary features Dylan's early years, beginning with his normal, suburban upbringing in Hibbing, Minnesota. While still in his teens, he ventured to New York City where he first became a student, astutely observing the style of the Beat poets and musical styles of other folk artists. The majority of interviews in this film are the recollections of other musicians and artists who worked with Dylan during the 1960s, many of whom he met during those early days. Joan Baez seemed the most prominent artist with whom he shared a close personal and artistic bond.

In viewing *No Direction Home*, I felt as though I'd taken a college course on the history of folk rock in America. Scorsese artistically enhances Dylan's progressing career with footage from the folk singers who inspired him, as well as excerpts from famous political events. It is astounding how young he was when he exploded onto the scene, so very confident in himself and his unique expression. Even through the constant booing and catcalling of his UK audience (who were never quite pleased with anything he ever did, yet filled every concert hall whenever he came to town), he was able to keep a sense of humor, glance into the backstage camera, and laugh at them.

Scorsese illustrates the impact Bob Dylan's music had on the youth of America during that time, who desperately needed an outlet through which to channel their discontent and anger with the political state of the country. Music was the only way Dylan wanted to participate. In one segment, Baez explains that he rarely attended sit-ins or protests.

The film reminds us how Dylan inspired other singers and musicians as well as his ever-growing fan base. Many groups, such as The Byrds and The Turtles made hits out of his original songs. It's not like there weren't plenty of his songs to go around. The man was prolific, even to the point of forgetting what he wrote. Joan Baez laughingly reports that when she recorded Dylan's "Love Is Just a Four Letter Word," he remarked to her enthusiastically, "You know, that's a really great song! Where did you get it?"

By the mid-60s, Bob Dylan had reached legendary proportions, and the media was all over it. Unfortunately, they seemed to send their worst reporters. We see a few clips that show just how embarrassingly silly their line of questioning could be. In the first, he maintains a sense of humor and tosses playful replies back at them. In the second clip (a press conference in France) he is noticeably wearing out and smoking more profusely. In the final clip (a week later in Los Angeles) he looks exhausted and disgusted with the whole scene. I can't say I blame him.

Shortly after, Dylan survived a motorcycle accident and did not tour again for the next eight years.

No Direction Home does a fantastic job of showing not only how Bob Dylan got his start and transformed folk music, but it gives new insight into his often (media perceived) quirky personality. This is done expertly with behind-the-scenes footage, recollections from himself shot in current times, and moving close-ups of the way he emoted as he sung. If you missed the PBS American Masters presentation, the two-part documentary is now available on DVD. Even if you are not a Dylan fan, the viewing will be well worth your time.