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RIFFS: Another side of Bob Dylan

By Ron Wynn, rwynn@nashvillecitypaper.com

The new two-disc soundtrack *Music From The Motion Picture I'm Not There* (Columbia/Sony Music Soundtrack) frames and illuminates the many sides of Bob Dylan in a manner that doesn't require as much understanding of his past as Todd Haynes' exceptional film.

While all the actors portraying the sides of Dylan do a magnificent job, those unaware of personal and cultural specificity within his career may be mystified at what they see. But the music provides the answers by offering examples of Dylan as social prophet, religious commentator, blues narrator, reflective philosopher, and sometimes reluctant participant.

The lengthy performers list blends the venerable (Richie Havens, Willie Nelson, Ramblin' Jack Elliott) with the contemporary (Cat Power, Sonic Youth, Jeff Tweedy, Jack Johnson) and also includes several group outings (Los Lobos, Calexico) along with specially assembled collaborations (Eddie Vedder, Tom Verlaine and Stephen Malkmus working with The Million Dollar Bashers, Roger McGuinn and Nelson teaming with Calexico).

Dylan makes only one appearance on either CD, joined by the Band on the set finale of the title track, an evocative number that's ideal to both wrap the project and also reaffirm the contemplative and historic mood of the date. Outside of an occasional glaring omission (Jimi Hendrix did the definitive version of "All Along The Watchtower" for example) this set not only gives the current film musical context, but frankly is something that will have broader appeal as well.

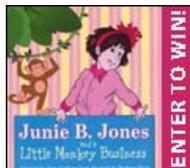
More soundtracks

American Gangster — *Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Def Jam) blends exuberant classic Memphis soul (Sam & Dave, The Staples) with monster '70s hits (Bobby Womack), older blues (John Lee Hooker, Lowell Fulson) and even 21st century urban fare (Anthony Hamilton), while also adding bits of hip-hop (Public Enemy) and instrumental funk and R&B (Hank Shocklee). The results are just as invigorating, jumbled and varied as the film, though anyone who hasn't seen the Denzel Washington/Russell Crowe effort still won't get the full musical message.

There's less variety on *Music from and inspired by the Motion Picture Tyler Perry's Why Did I Get Married* (Atlantic), though many performances are equal parts elegance and soul. Musiq Soulchild, Beyonce, Tyrese and Tamika Scott of X-Scape deliver the youthful punch, while Babyface, Kelly Price, Anita Baker and Jennifer Holiday add the more traditional gospel-tinged and/or jazz-fueled approach. Michael Buble presents a swinging adaptation of "L-O-V-E" and Gerald Levert with Jaheim and Keith Sweat along with Keyshia Cole demonstrate duet flexibility on "DJ Don't Remix" and "Love U Better" respectively.

Then Soundtrack from the Film The Song Remains The Same (Atlantic/Swan Song) contains some strong new cuts, among them "Misty Mountain Hop," "Black Dog," "Heartbreaker," and "Since I've Been Loving You," while also doing stirring versions of group staples like "Dazed and Confused," "Whole Lotta Love," "Stairway To Heaven" and "Rock and Roll." This represents Led Zeppelin in peak musical form, from Robert Plant's pliable, exploding screams to Page's repeated guitar bursts, etc. It's the second in a new series of Zeppelin reissues, and the remastered sound makes it the best sounding version that's come along.

While going into virtual exile in Alaska doesn't strike me as especially inviting, *Music for the Motion Picture Into The Wild* (J) proves a surprising showcase for Eddie Vedder, who wrote and produced most of the tracks. His vocals are formidable, diverse and expressive, the settings just as expansive and wide-open as the spaces depicted in the film, and such songs as "Long Nights," "Society" (written by Jerry Haman) and "Far Behind" fortify a film that was memorable, if at times quite strange.



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When *The Road Bends- Music In and Inspired By The Film Gypsy Caravan* (World Village) celebrates the current and vintage music of the Gypsies, with magnificent performances from 11-member brass band Fanfare Ciocarlia, the 12-member dance and swing orchestra Taraf de Haidouks, and especially the charismatic, vibrant vocalist Esma Redzepova, the "Queen of the Gypsies." The spotlight groups and vocalists mix influences from the past with things now in vogue, and the colorful underlying culture also gets plenty of attention. Fortunately they even manage to insert a cameo from longtime fan and supporter Johnny Depp without letting it or him divert attention from the incredible heritage being exhibited throughout the film, and reaffirmed on this fabulous CD.

Reggae/worldbeat

A new four-disc set *African Dub — Chapters 1-4* (All on 17 North Parade) puts back into public circulation a tremendous set of '70s dub sessions produced by Joe Gibbs and mixed/engineered by Errol Thompson. Taking classic vocal cuts and stripping away the singers, Gibbs enlisted some of Jamaica's best brass, reed and rhythm players, then over the span of the productions also gradually changed the style of dub from essentially just recutting melodies to reconfiguring them. Increasingly he'd insert synthesized fragments, percussive elements and beats, while also experimenting more with multi-tracking to make the sound more layered. The discs include extravagant and delightful reworkings of huge hits from Dennis Brown, Horace Andy, The Paragons, Heptones and many others, fueled by solid music contributions from Tommy McCook, Dean Fraser, and numerous others. These are must purchases not only for dub fans, but those who enjoy electronica, dance music, and even subgenres like house and bass music. Producers in all these styles have liberally borrowed from what Gibbs and Thompson started back in the '70s.

The energetic and lyrically fierce trio known as The Abyssians made some of reggae's most resolute and unyielding music in their prime. Perhaps their finest release was *Satta Massagana* (Heartbeat/Rounder), which has just been reissued. With the bombastic Bernard Collins taking the leads and doing the low end on the harmony scale, complimented by Donald and Lynford Manning on the high end (they also sometimes alternated leads within the songs), the Abyssians sang very stark, militant and uncompromising tunes that didn't have an ounce of moderation in either their statements or approach. Such songs as "Declaration of Rights," "Black Man's Strain" and "African Race" sound as mighty and determined in 2007 as they did in the early '70s.

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