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Don't Look Back

Dylan 1970-79 A Decade Of Reinvention

After exiting the 60s with one of his finest albums, Bob Dylan entered the 70s with one of his worst. Yet over the next 10 years, Dylan embarked on a reinvigorating journey through some troubled times, wearing many masks. Here, some of the key musicians who helped him make eight very different albums, talk Daniel Dylan Wray through a remarkable decade





Album #1



SELF PORTRAIT

8 JUNE 1970

CBS 66250

After the brilliance of *Nashville Skyline* ended the 60s... this. A sprawling double album that's essentially an official bootleg, it left Dylan watchers either confused or entirely nonplussed. Some suggest it's a typically contrary act of self-parody, in reality it's a collection of studio leftovers, messy cover versions and sub-par revisits of Dylan's own songs with a handful of originals thrown in. His version of *Blue Moon* is not a highlight, but the take on Alfred Frank Beddoe's *Copper Kettle* most certainly is.

DISCOGS £10

In 1969, the closing words of *Rolling Stone's* review of Bob Dylan's final album of the decade read: "In many ways, *Nashville Skyline* achieves the artistically impossible: a deep, humane, and interesting statement about being happy. It could well be what Dylan thinks it is: his best album." The opening words of the magazine's review of *Self Portrait*, his first album of the next decade, began with the words: "What is this shit?"

It marked the kind of artistic decline most artists may experience over decades, but in actuality it represented just a 12-month period in his career. However, like many things in the world of Bob Dylan, perceptions change greatly over time.

Throughout the 1960s, Dylan knocked out seminal album after seminal album, with each reaffirming his status as an icon of the era and the voice of a generation. It was a label that grated on him hugely. So much so that when he kicked off the next decade with *Self Portrait*, an album featuring a bunch of covers and a handful of originals that many deemed sub-standard, it was debated for years whether the album was a joke or an intentional misstep to shake off the shackles of pressure.

Later on, Dylan himself referred to it as more of a bootleg record – an odds and sods leftovers affair. In 2013, it got expanded and became part of Dylan's long-standing *Bootleg Series*, by which point the response had warmed

somewhat, with it taking on a new degree of affection for some fans. It also benefited from one of its tracks, *Wigwam*, being in one of the most beloved and hip films of the 2000s: Wes Anderson's *The Royal Tenenbaums*.

"People were not as critical and demanding when the recent *Bootleg Series* stuff came out," says David Bromberg, who was a key player on the album – and many of those bootleg sessions feature just him and Dylan. "The first time around, people lambasted *Self Portrait*. They were very critical because of the lack of original songs, and that's what they wanted.



David Bromberg was a key player on the maligned *Self Portrait*



Dylan in silver screen action for 1973's *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid*

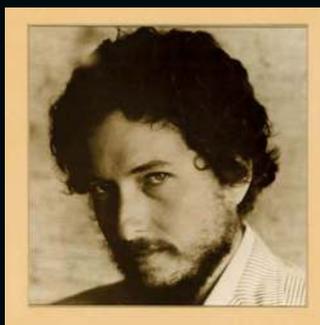
So that material now has less preconceptions around it when people approach it, and they seem to enjoy it more.” Dylan had very little to express about his intentions for the album, as Bromberg recalls: “I didn’t try to analyse if he was on a mission or not, my focus was on doing my job. I just put one foot in front of the other.” The session was so lacking in anything resembling verbal direction that Bromberg feels that’s why he was brought in; to simply follow where the music went. “He didn’t direct me very much at all,” he recalls.

If Dylan’s attempt on *Self Portrait* was self sabotage, then to some degree it worked. If he’d begun the year with an album that was soon deemed his worst, then where is there left to go but up? At least in theory. The following *New Morning*, released just months later, was an extension of some of the smoother, country-laced rock that he had wrapped up the 1960s with. The opening love song *If Not For You* possessed such an accessible pop-kissed buoyancy that Olivia Newton John would later cover it. The album was received glowingly and came loaded with sentiments such as “we’ve got Dylan back”. However, anyone thinking they had Dylan back in a mode that felt safe, comfortable and reassuring was about to buckle up for a decade-long ride across more musical styles, bands, albums, shifts and surprises than most artists go through in their entire lifetime.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCKIN’

Dylan’s foray into film grew throughout the decade, and the 1973 follow-up to *New Morning* was the soundtrack to the

Album #2



NEW MORNING

19 OCTOBER 1970

CBS 69001

After the savaging dished out to *Self Portrait*, *Rolling Stone’s* review this time declared “Bob Dylan is back with us again”. It’s wide of the mark to suggest it’s an immediate riposte from Dylan, though – as much of *New Morning* pre-dates that record. The joyful shuffling *If Not For You* is sublime, Dylan’s familiar nasal vocal back to the fore; *Sign On The Window* is even better. The sessions weren’t entirely harmonious. “When I finished that album I never wanted to speak to him again,” said Al Kooper.

DISCOGS £7

Sam Peckinpah film *Pat Garrett & Billy The Kid*. Not only did Dylan star, but he also produced a song for inclusion in the film that would go on to be a worldwide smash and one of his most enduring and beloved hits. It’s the kind of song that even people who hate Dylan, or your auntie who doesn’t really like music, will hum away gently to. *Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door* was proof of Dylan’s ability to pluck magic from the most unlikely of sources, and this trait continued as the years went on. His sole intention was seemingly making sure his moves could never be anticipated.

More changes were afoot for Dylan in the following year or so. Relations had soured and interest waned from his record label Columbia, so he found himself on Asylum in the US, and he soon announced his first tour since 1966, an activity he had given up since his severe motorcycle accident that same year.

The Bob Dylan and The Band 1974 tour coincided with the release of *Planet Waves* and it also began a new era in Dylan’s career that saw him reapproaching older material in increasingly experimental and altered ways, something Dylan is now utterly synonymous with, be it lovingly or to much chagrin.

“I didn’t try to analyse if he was on a mission or not, my focus was my job”

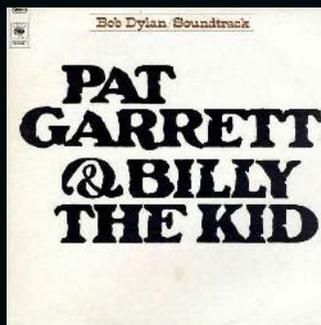
DAVID BROMBERG





Dylan onstage with The Band in 1974

Album #3



PAT GARRETT & BILLY THE KID

13 JULY 1973

CBS 69042

Dylan's first soundtrack LP, for Sam Peckinpah's film of the same name, yielded one of his biggest hits, *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*. At the time critically under-appreciated, it's a beautiful, airy, rough-hewn record that ended a three-year period of silence from Dylan. Two-minute instrumental *Bunkhouse Theme* is a beatific highlight. While an initial session took place in Mexico City, where Bob was living while filming, the bulk of the album was recorded at Burbank Studios in California.

DISCOGS £8

This was captured on the 1974 live album *Before The Flood*, a record bursting with gusto, energy and big raucous performances, with both Dylan and The Band stretching the life out of songs in performances that felt as if they were making up for lost time on stage. If Dylan had begun the era by tentatively testing the water with some leftover cover songs, by this stage he was back in full swing, bolstered by a charging sense of momentum.

For his 1975 follow-up, the majestic *Blood On The Tracks*, Dylan ditched The Band and returned to Columbia Records to release an album that remains one of the pinnacles of his career. Unsurprisingly, it centred around change and forward momentum but was also rooted in pain and leaving things behind. As Dylan's marriage was entering difficulty, he churned out an album of intense, potent and overwhelming honesty that for many remains the template for confessional singer-songwriter albums. Although of course Dylan, being Dylan, has gone on record at times to suggest it's not a personal record.

Sessions for the ensuing 1976 album *Desire* started in July 1975 and concluded in October, just as Dylan embarked on one of his most notorious tours: The Rolling Thunder Revue.

It's a period caught recently in Martin Scorsese's non-documentary documentary *Rolling Thunder Revue: A Bob Dylan Story*, that wilfully merges fiction and non-fiction along with tour footage in which Dylan had decided to play smaller venues and with a ragtag collective including everyone from Allen Ginsberg to Joan Baez featuring along



Scarlet Rivera was an important figure during the *Desire* sessions



Why I Love...

PAT GARRETT & BILLY THE KID

"Seen as a slight upon its release, the music fits the Sam Peckinpah film of the same name to perfection, a cycle of simple, dusty, looping, down-home borderland tunes, tracking the story of a man who doesn't want to run being pursued by his old friend who doesn't want to catch him. Highlight: the classic *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*."

LEE RANALDO, SONIC YOUTH



Dylan plays Kezar Stadium
in San Francisco, 1975

Album #5



BLOOD ON THE TRACKS

17 JANUARY 1975

CBS 69097

A strong contender for the best album Dylan has made and almost certainly the best break-up album of all time, *Blood On The Tracks*' remorseful self examination doesn't let up from the opening acoustic guitar chord of *Tangled Up In Blue*. Originally recorded in just four days, the album was pulled from the release schedule by Dylan and re-recorded in Minneapolis in the first days of 1975. It was released a fortnight later, taking its place alongside 60s masterpieces *Blonde On Blonde* and *Highway 61 Revisited*. *Simple Twist Of Fate* is a song of jaw-dropping romantic reflection, while *You're A Big Girl Now* and the vengeful *Idiot Wind* are potent reminders of Dylan's ability to both deliver devotional tributes of heart-splitting fondness and rain down righteous fury, often in the space of the same couplet. *You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go*, too, is "right on target, so direct" an affectionate farewell shot through with painful regret. *If You See Her Say Hello* bursts with the pain of pining for a loved one departed for foreign shores, while closing pair *Shelter From The Storm* and *Buckets Of Rain* are simplistic perfection.

DISCOGS £25 (ORANGE LABEL)

Album #4



PLANET WAVES

17 JANUARY 1974

ISLAND ILPS 9261

Newly signed to Asylum Records in the US and Island in the UK, Dylan's 14th studio LP was characterised by the return of The Band. Dylan so agonised over the arrangement for *Forever Young* that it's included twice – the slow version is wonderful. Recorded hastily, it's a strong set, although few predicted the sheer brilliance that was to follow over the next two years as Dylan unleashed first *Blood On The Tracks* then *Desire*. The moral of the story: don't try to second guess Bob Dylan.

DISCOGS £15 (PINK RIM)

the way. "I was just a kid as he was leading this whole wild circus," remembers David Mansfield, who Dylan had brought into his band when he was just 18.

GYPSY MUSIC

It marked a period in which Dylan seemed to be plucking new people to work with almost out of thin air. Violinist Scarlet Rivera was one such person. "One summer day, I was walking down 13th St on the Lower East Side of New York City with my violin case when an ordinary car pulled up alongside me," she recalls. "The man driving was very curious about me as a musician and asked if I could play that thing. I said, 'Yes, I can play'. He went on to talk about how he liked gypsy music that he heard when traveling. I told him I liked gypsy music, too. I was going to a rehearsal across the street, but he said to forget that because he had to hear me play."

Soon enough, Rivera was in a studio with Dylan, following his lead on a bunch of songs. "After playing for about an hour, he moved to the piano and tried a few more songs," she remembers. "He never said a word about my playing the entire time, but I observed a small smile before he shut the lid and said, 'I have to go see a friend of mine play, do you want to come along? Back in the car, we went to see the

"I was going to a rehearsal across the street, but he said to forget that because he had to hear me play" SCARLET RIVERA





The Rolling Thunder Revue saw Dylan cutting loose live on stage with his hand-picked band

Album #6



DESIRE

5 JANUARY 1976

CBS 86003

Sandwiched between two Rolling Thunder Revues, *Desire* features many of the musicians from that touring circus. Despite the huge cast and chaotic recording sessions, it's a worthy follow-up to *Blood On The Tracks* that sees Dylan continue his rebirth. The sprawling character stories – *Hurricane*, inspired by the murder case against boxer Rubin Carter, and *Joey*, about gangster Joey Gallo, are majestic – while Rivera's sweeping violin work is an evocative counterpart.

DISCOGS £15

Muddy Waters Band. He got up to thunderous applause and at the end of the first song with Muddy, he went to the mic and announced, 'Now I want to bring up my violinist to play.'

It's an emblematic story of where Dylan was at during this time: wide open, following instinct, intuition and spontaneity. Rob Stoner would be in his band for three years from 1975-1978 and became something of a right-hand man. "It was a surreal time but a real thrill," he says. He recalls what on the surface appeared to be a harmless jam session as Dylan eyeing him up. "I've come to realise that what he was doing was auditioning me for future reference. He was trying to build up a dossier of

potential sidemen. When he hung out with me jamming, I later realised he was testing me."

Musical gut instinct is what Dylan was looking for in players around this time. "I'm a jazz player, and in the jazz scene we never verbalise stuff, we just go ahead and play," says Stoner. "Usually, you can let the music do the talking and Dylan was a guy who expected that level of simpatico. Anybody who would ask a lot of questions would not be on his list. He would just do things and expect you to follow." He remembers bandmate Howie Wyeth initially not catching this. "Howie asked a perfectly reasonable question during one of the first sessions about how we were



Dylan and Joan Baez share a mic during the Night Of The Hurricane show at Madison Square Garden



Album #7



STREET-LEGAL

15 JUNE 1978

CBS 86067

Following *Blood On The Tracks* and *Desire* while dealing with the fallout from a divorce and the Rolling Thunder Revue was always going to be a tough ask, and *Street-Legal* is a record that divides opinion. Hampered by stodgy production, it never catches light, but it still possesses some fine songs, such as opener *Changing Of The Guards* (listen out for the *Animal Hospital* theme tune in the solo). Despite the mixed reaction from critics, it remains one of Dylan's biggest-selling albums in the UK.

DISCOGS £15

going to end a song and Bob just gave him the most fucking evil eye and I knew right away the way to play it was to keep your mouth shut. I took him aside and told him he was going to blow the gig and to shut the fuck up.”

This led to very few people ever really getting a sense of Dylan as a person, the man behind the myth and persona. Stoner would often act as intermediary, relaying messages and the like. However, he felt this slightly distanced approach was conducive to getting the best out of the band when playing together. “Follow him and you can’t go wrong,” Stoner says. “You shouldn’t have to verbalise anything. He was always looking for reinvention. You have to be ready for anything, any kind of curveball. That’s part of the test. You never really stop

“Follow him and you can’t go wrong. He was always looking for reinvention. You have to be ready for anything” **ROB STONER**

auditioning with him. I like it when somebody does that, though, because it keeps the band on their toes. If you just do the same thing over and over again, you just get a thousand-yard stare after a while.”

With nobody ever knowing what was coming next, both musically and personally, it captured a thrilling and potent time. “It would take a couple of chapters to fully express my inner and outer experiences during the Rolling

Thunder Revue tour,” says Rivera. “To this day, I meet people who saw the show and say it was one of the most unforgettable shows they have ever seen.” It’s all come rushing back to the surface via the Scorsese film, too. “The concert footage was brilliant and riveting, and I was very moved to see from the audience perspective the electric fiery chemistry that was evident onstage between Bob and myself.”

However, the casualness towards truth in the film has brought up a few issues for band members. “I was more than a little surprised when it was revealed that I was dating the leader of the band Kiss,” says Rivera. “There were several other spicy things said about me that I suppose added some intrigue or illusion that also were not true. I did carry a dagger, but no, I didn’t carry live snakes on tour.”

Why I Love...

STREET-LEGAL

“*Street-Legal* is the 70s Dylan for me. Bob spewing at the top of his singing and writing powers. Almost as good as Mark E Smith. The big production could have sounded overdone, but it is perfect. It doesn’t have other 70s hits, like *Hurricane* or *Tangled Up In Blue*, but it’s a more solid album.”

JEFFREY LEWIS



“We got a lot of nasty press during the Street-Legal tour that the arrangements were too polished” **DAVID MANSFIELD**

For Stoner, Dylan’s approach to having his band work around him and ready to shift direction at any point was also mirrored in the studio for *Desire*. “It was a total extension of our jam sessions,” he says. “His studio approach was way more of a snapshot than a workmanlike and detailed approach. Bob’s studio approach goes back to pre-multitrack era, before people did loads of overdubbing and layering and meticulous craft. A lot of people who end up recording Bob’s albums just think they are doing demos because the amount of time he spends recording in the studio is nothing but an immortalisation of how he felt about the tune on the day he was recording. If he gets a recording that doesn’t have any major technical flaws, then that’s the take and that’s what goes on the record because he’s interested in spontaneity and he’s a very mercurial individual. That’s part of the charm of his recordings, they are so off-the-cuff.”

Initially, the album-making process was a studio stuffed full of people, including Eric Clapton. It wasn’t until a much more stripped-

down band was brought in that things were “clicking” according to Stoner. “They were getting nowhere with all these musicians there. It was too hectic and chaotic.” Rivera remembers the shift, too: “I returned and was shocked that the bustling room was quiet. I knew something extraordinary had happened, but it would take quite some time to process the fact that I replaced Eric Clapton as the lead soloist. Bob allowed me complete freedom to follow my intuition without restraints. *One More Cup Of Coffee* was recorded in one take. He listened carefully but didn’t try to control what I might come up with. Looking back, if I failed and he wasn’t impressed with my playing, he already had Eric Clapton’s lines recorded and I could have been replaced. But my contribution prevailed and was featured on every song on the album.”

A SLICKER RECORD

More touring and another live album, *Hard Rain*, was released. By 1977, Dylan was in the studio again to make what would be

1978’s *Street-Legal*, and had once again plucked out a new band to work with. Mansfield was retained, however, and remembers the difference between the Rolling Thunder Revue era and this period as being “black and white”. It marked a tough time for Dylan, slap bang in the middle of a divorce, but Mansfield remembers him being in good form.

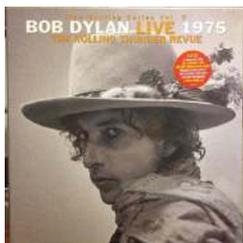
“During the *Street-Legal* tour I felt I got a better sense of him. He was chatty and affable and would hang with the band in the bar after the show. He seemed to be feeling great despite personal problems. I’m projecting here, but maybe with the divorce going as far as it did... performing just lifted his spirits.”

The folksy swing of *Desire* was replaced by a more polished, slicker record. Something people reacted to negatively at the time. “We got a lot of nasty press during that tour that the arrangements were too polished,” recalls Mansfield. “Although he never fell into a black mood over things like press. I’d seen him get into those kind of moods on the second Rolling Thunder tour, so I know what that looks like.”

There’s a playfulness apparent with Dylan here once again. Just when the hardcore fans and press had him where they wanted him, *Desire* was a success and the Rolling Thunder tour was deemed an electrifying spectacle to begin with, he switched things up and sent people falling.

I Shall Be Released...

5 BOOTLEG SERIES HIGHLIGHTS THAT CHART BOB’S JOURNEY THROUGH THE 70s



THE BOOTLEG SERIES VOL. 5: BOB DYLAN LIVE 1975, THE ROLLING THUNDER REVUE

A live album taken from the first stretch of Dylan’s ragtag collective 1975 tour (the second half of said tour was originally released on the live album *Hard Rain*). It captures Dylan relatively fresh from a near decade-long live absence.

DISCOGS £60



THE BOOTLEG SERIES VOL. 10: ANOTHER SELF PORTRAIT (1969–1971)

Loathed, lambasted and derided at the time of release, 1970’s *Self Portrait* grew on many over the years and this expanded edition goes deeper into some of the sessions and versions from the album that many saw as Dylan’s disastrous start to the 1970s.

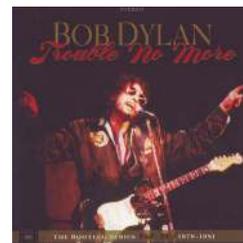
DISCOGS £69



THE BOOTLEG SERIES VOL. 11: THE BASEMENT TAPES COMPLETE

Originally recorded in 1967, *The Basement Tapes* (a collaboration with The Band) wasn’t released until 1975. This collection is the ultimate putting together of music from these sessions. Bootlegged and the subject of myths for years, it collates much of the work from one of Dylan’s most beloved periods.

DISCOGS £48



THE BOOTLEG SERIES VOL. 13: TROUBLE NO MORE 1979–1981

A collection of music released from slap bang in the middle of Dylan’s born-again Christian phase. Much like *Self Portrait*, albums from this period (*Slow Train Coming*, *Saved* and *Shot Of Love*) were seen as low points at the time, but over time have gained a stronger cult following.

DISCOGS £33

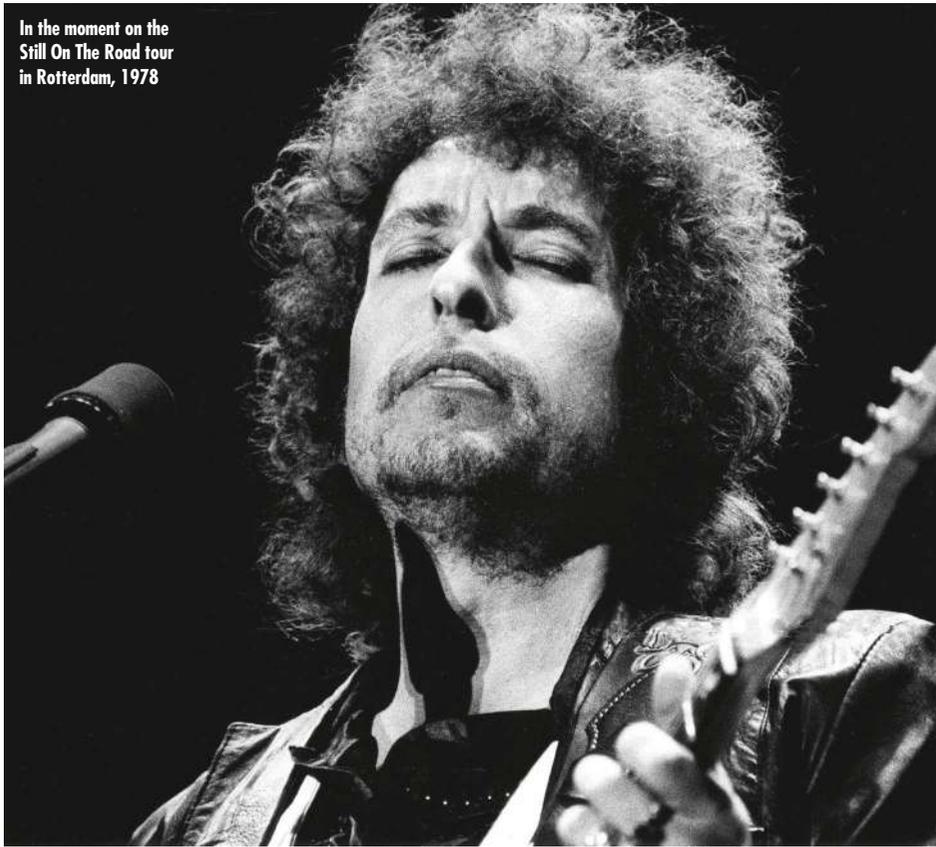


THE BOOTLEG SERIES VOL. 14: MORE BLOOD, MORE TRACKS

More music collected from the sessions of one of Dylan’s greatest albums. A fascinating insight into his songwriting process and how he played so seamlessly with melody, with songs overlapping in similarity in demo form only to go on to be distinct and unforgettable on the finished album.

DISCOGS £25

In the moment on the Still On The Road tour in Rotterdam, 1978



However, the financial losses of the Rolling Thunder tour, as well as from his derided film *Renaldo And Clara* (of which Scorsese's film is essentially a re-edit) saw Dylan set off on a huge tour of the Far East, playing huge venues as a slick professional touring operation – the antithesis of the chaotic Rolling Thunder days. The result was another live album, *Live At Budokan*, that captured this new slickness and sleekness, combined with radically altered versions of songs that would often lead towards pop-heavy interpretations. It contains some of Dylan's most interesting tweaks of his own work, but people hated it and it saw some of the most savage reviews not only of the decade but of his entire career.

Stoner says he saw a change in him on that tour that might explain Dylan's most radical shift of the entire decade. "He seemed to be a soul adrift in a world of confusion," he recalls. Soon, Dylan would convert to Christianity and it would feature prominently on his next albums. "I think that's one of the reasons he

cleared house," says Stoner of Dylan's decision to once again work with a series of fresh musicians. "He was going through a lot of personal stuff in his life. I could see he was at his wits' end with figuring out what life was all about. He was looking for some kind of deeper meaning. I was not surprised at all that he turned to religion for self-fulfilment."

Mansfield, however, who was also let go, didn't see it coming. "Being let go was a total surprise when he went through his whole religious conversion. He just let everyone go and cancelled all touring commitments. He gave his manager a heart attack. When he was then ready to work again, he just didn't want to work with anybody from the old days."

What followed was *Slow Train Coming*, an album that opens with the religious anthem *Gotta Serve Somebody* that repulsed atheist John Lennon to such a degree that it warranted a response track that parodied Dylan: *Gotta Serve Yourself*. While Mansfield understands Dylan's religious change during this era – he



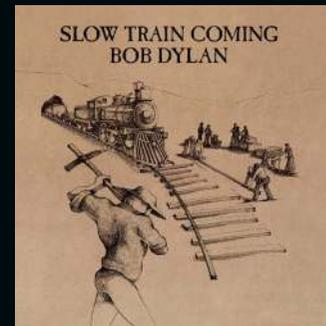
Why I Love...

LIVE AT BUDOKAN

"I can think of nothing more punk rock than Dylan taking all his songs, adored by myopic music snobs, and turning them into shiny pop songs. He totally smashes it, too. This album has the best recorded version of *I Want You* on it and when the saxophone comes in on *Simple Twist Of Fate* it gets me every time. He inhabits the role of the lounge singer brilliantly as well, with all his perfectly placed asides. I love this album so much that I burst with joy every time I put it on."

EDDIE ARGOS (ART BRUT)

Album #8



SLOW TRAIN COMING

20 AUGUST 1979

CBS 86095

More carefully constructed than Dylan's other 70s albums, *Slow Train Coming* saw Jerry Wexler take the producer's chair. Dylan evokes the forces of good and evil throughout an album deeply tied up with his embracing of Christianity. The album was recorded at Muscle Shoals, with Dire Straits guitarist Mark Knopfler and drummer Pick Withers brought into the fold. While both Wexler and Knopfler had doubts about the Biblical content, the results are among Dylan's strongest of the decade.

DISCOGS £4

too went through it – he reflects back on this era and his burning through so many bands and musicians as being something rooted deeper in Dylan's psyche. "When Bob has a band that he's not satisfied with, I don't think he knows how to fix things," he says. "He might say, 'You guys are playing like shit' or have a temper tantrum, but he won't know how to be specific and go about changing things. I saw him play with his band around *Slow Train Coming* era and he had some of the best players in the world, and I think he had them kind of intimidated into barely playing. They were all playing the safest most boring stuff, and then not long after that there was another new band."

When asked for his insight into the way Dylan operated and moved in the 1970s, and how he would sum up a decade of such profound change, unpredictability and highs and lows, Stoner's immediate response is a simple but perfectly apt one. "May I cite the title of his movie, *Don't Look Back*," he offers. "This espouses his life philosophy quite neatly." ●