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MEDIA REVIEWS

A Complete Unknown. Directed by James Mangold. Searchlight Pictures, 2024.

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In 2020, James Mangold announced that he would be directing a film adaptation of Elijah Wald's *Dylan Goes Electric!: Newport, Seeger, Dylan, and the Night that Split the Sixties* (Dey Street Books, 2015). Wald's book is one of the strongest cultural studies of Dylan, and Mangold had already burnished his biopic credentials with *Walk the Line*, his highly acclaimed 2005 film about Johnny Cash. Even better, Mangold announced that his cast would be headed by Gen Z darling Timothée Chalamet. With his irresistible charisma, media savvy, and androgynous sex appeal, Timmy seemed a perfect choice to play Zimmy as young hipster hero. This was all cause for optimism from Dylan fans, scholars, and teachers.

The only problem, but a seemingly insurmountable one, was the elusive Dylan mystique. How could any film hope to capture the mercurial enigma at the height of his artistic powers? After all, Dylan himself has long struggled to translate his musical magic to film. A few documentaries come close to communicating his artistic magnetism: D. A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back*, Murray Lerner's *The Other Side of the Mirror*, and Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home*. However, none of his efforts as a film actor—*Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, *Renaldo and Clara*, *Hearts of Fire*, *Masked and Anonymous*—manage to transfer his vitality as a performer from stage to screen. Could Mangold and Chalamet succeed where previous filmmakers and performers (Dylan included) had failed? Could they chase down the Voice of His Generation, the Prince of Protest, and the King of Cool, and pin him wriggling to celluloid? I am delighted and relieved to report that the answer is yes. *A Complete Unknown* is a complete success.

It's not the dark shades, the hair halo, the leather jacket and polka-dot shirt, the chain-smoking raspy snarl that matters most—though I love all of those things, and the film nails every one of them. Those are superficial ingredients to Dylan's iconic status, but they don't account for his genius. For that, you have to listen to the music, and *A Complete Unknown* gives you plenty of opportunities. The film includes parts of 40 songs, all performed by Chalamet himself. The project was put on hold during the pandemic, and the leading man made the most of his time by immersing himself in Dylan's music, learning the singer's idiosyncratic verbal mannerisms, his nimble guitar skills, and his alternatingly ear-piercing and sublime harmonica playing. Chalamet avoids the trap of outright mimicry in favor of a hybrid merger of his voice with that of his subject. It works remarkably well.

Music is the true star of the show, which is as it should be. It could have been otherwise. By contrast, consider *Dance First*, James Marsh's 2023 biopic about Samuel Beckett. I admire the excellent performances, but you would scarcely suspect that the Nobel laureate made his living as a writer, so infrequently do examples of his work appear in the film. It's a wonder Marsh's Beckett found time for anything other than arranging trysts and breaking hearts. There are plenty of relationship complications in *A Complete Unknown*, too. Mangold's chief intervention on Jay Cock's original script was to amplify Dylan's tempestuous affairs with Sylvie Russo (aka Suze Rotolo) and Joan Baez. Ultimately, however, this film isn't about a serial philanderer so much as an artist committed with unwavering fidelity to the muse of song.

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In addition to Chalamet's star turn, two other stellar performances are worth highlighting. Edward Norton is uncannily convincing as Pete Seeger. As Wald establishes in his book on the 1965 Newport controversy, Dylan "going electric" wasn't simply a matter of a young firebrand sloughing off the yokes of outdated music and suffocating expectations from the old guard. According to conventional wisdom, history rendered an unequivocal verdict in the case of Seeger v. Dylan (1965): Seeger lost and Dylan won. But as Wald argues and Norton persuasively demonstrates, the Newport showdown was much more complex, and the fallout more ambivalent. Norton plays Seeger as clear-eyed, pure-hearted, and strong-willed. His commitment to music is every bit as steadfast as Dylan's, and for a time their allegiances aligned. By 1965, however, Dylan was following his muse into the jingle-jangle morning of a new day. One of the most moving scenes of the film takes place in Dylan's motel room the morning of the fateful Newport '65 concert, where Seeger earnestly makes his case for why the folk revival still needed Dylan on their side, if only for a little while longer. Norton's Seeger isn't some lame stick in the mud: he is a flag planted on the hilltop of a righteous cause. Dylan had to keep moving on, but the dramatic stakes of that decision were perilously high. Today, no one can regret the path Dylan chose at his Newport crossroads. But Norton represents the hurt and disappointment legitimately experienced by those left behind in the dust of Dylan's relentless forward momentum.

The other breakout performer is Monica Barbaro, a complete unknown to me before her dazzling portrayal of Joan Baez. This is a story we thought we knew. Young Baez was already established as a leading voice of the folk revival when Dylan arrived in New York in 1961. She had the voice of an angel, but she heard something revolutionary in the croaks of this upstart crow from Minnesota. She generously shared her stage and audience with him, only to be jilted as soon as his stardom outshone hers. So the story goes. But Mangold and Barbaro go a different direction. The film doesn't present Joan as victim of Dylan's casual cruelty and arrogance. This isn't a rehash of "Sad-Eyed Joan of the Savoy Hotel" from *Dont Look Back*. Barbaro's Baez is a bad ass. She knows her worth, and she understands that she stands to benefit, artistically and professionally, from the straw Dylan keeps spinning into gold. She also knows a great song when she hears one, as when Dylan debuts "Masters of War" at the Gaslight Café during the Cuban Missile Crisis, or when he first plays her "Blowin' in the Wind" on the mattress the morning after they first make love [two of the many fictional scenes invented for the film]. Dylan's songs are greatly enriched by Baez's sensitive interpretations, and she uses the tension from their off-stage relationship to jumpstart their super-charged duets. One of my favorite scenes in *A Complete Unknown* is when Baez invites Dylan on stage at Newport, using her guitar as a shield from the audience while she flips him off, before launching into a riveting duet on "It Ain't Me, Babe."

About those inventions. Had *A Complete Unknown* made a handful of mistakes about when and where well-known events from Dylan's past took place, the film might have been vulnerable to charges of sloppy homework. But that's not what's happening here. From the first major scene of the film, when Dylan visits Woody Guthrie's hospital room and plays "Song to Woody" for his folk idol and Pete Seeger—a wonderful encounter, and also pure fantasy—it's clear that Mangold is jettisoning historical accuracy in favor of condensed storylines and composite character development. The movie is blatantly inaccurate again and again, and yet it feels utterly truthful and faithful in every way that matters.

Dylan is still on the road, but he's not immortal. At the risk of sounding morbid, we must face the fact that, sooner or later, we'll be living through a post-Dylan era. Dylanologists like me have long insisted that his legacy has staying power, but at this point, that's really just wishful speculation. Truth is, it takes more than talent for art to outlive the artist and still be deemed worth the attention of successive generations. *A Complete Unknown* is winning over a whole new audience for the amazing music of this transformative artist, giving us renewed optimism that Dylan Studies will continue to thrive well into the future.

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