Movie Review: 'I'm Not There'

by James Hebert

How do you even go about making a movie that has six actors (one a woman, one a child) playing approximations of Bob Dylan, none of whom is named Bob Dylan and all of whose stories careen through one another like the tracks of some demented railroad, and which further depicts a boy named Woody Guthrie being swallowed by a large, cartoon whale?

'I'M NOT THERE' - Christian Bale as Jack in 'I'm Not There.' CNS Photo by Jonathan Wenk.
RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) "Everybody must get stoned" ... a lyric from Dylan's "Rainy Day Women No. 12 and 35," a song whose improved, intoxicated feel happens to match pretty well the defiantly unconventional ethos of Todd Haynes' Bob-centric fantasia "I'm Not There."

Actually, the director's fit of Dyl-irium might be thought of more in terms of snooze than booze (or other

mind-altering matter). Not that the film's a yawner.

In 1963, Dylan recorded the song "Bob Dylan's Dream." Two years later came his "Bob Dylan's 115th Dream."

Haynes' creation is like Dreams 2 through 114 all bedrolled into one, and it flickers across the screen like the Technicolor reveries of one very fevered sleep.

To call the film impressionistic would be like calling Dylan's music slightly opaque. Even its "straightest" sequences - excerpts from a supposed documentary about a reclusive Dylan stand-in named Jack Rollins - have a cheesy, hyper-real quality that sets the rest in bolder relief.

As maddening and self-indulgent as "I'm Not There" can be, Haynes deserves credit for sheer daring. It's rare to see a studio movie (even a quasi-indie production) experiment so eagerly with narrative structure and visual splash.

The result is so abstract that the film's most affecting moments tend to bypass the conscious mind completely, finding visceral impact in the realm of myth and archetype. (Possible alternate title: "Forever Jung.")

Dylan fanatics will appreciate the references to the folk icon's trippy 1966 book "Tarantula," and the frequent sprinkling of song lyrics: At one point Haynes flashes a video image of LBJ mouthing the "Tombstone Blues" line, "The sun's not yellow / it's chicken."

Average moviegoers might find themselves tangled up in confusion, although it's not as if a

boundary-busting movie from Haynes is a total surprise. This is a man who made a biopic using Barbie dolls ("Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story"), and whose comparatively conventional films ("Velvet Goldmine," "Far From Heaven") still have a stylized flair.

The six faces of Bob are a motley mix. First, we meet Woody (self-assured Marcus Carl Franklin), the world's only 11-year-old hobo, hopping trains with guitar in hand as he dreams of meeting his namesake hero, Guthrie. Arthur (Ben Whishaw) is a young Dylan look-alike who pops up sporadically in black-and-white, giving his last name as Rimbaud (the French poet was a favorite of the real Bob's).

Jack (Christian Bale) is an ex-folk star who has dropped out to be a pastor, echoing Dylan's Christian conversion in the late 1970s. Robbie (gruff, rough-edged Heath Ledger) is a carousing actor who plays Jack in a movie called "Grain of Sand," a presumed nod to the Dylan tune "Every Grain of Sand." Billy (Richard Gere) is a frontier renegade turned recluse in a dying town called Riddle.

In the movie's greatest coup, Cate Blanchett plays Jude Quinn, a play on both Dylan's "Quinn the Eskimo" and the infamous shouts of "Judas!" when Bob went electric.

Blanchett, pale and twiggy with an impressive thatch of troll hair, is a startling match for mid-1960s Dylan, and she has a delicate feel for his offhand oddness, as she glides through Fellini-esque scenes featuring a beatific Allen Ginsberg and an amusingly cartoonish Fab Four.

The intercutting of all this often feels jarring, and the Robbie scenes (with Charlotte Gainsbourg as his wistful wife) go on too long, although Robbie stands as an interesting symbol of those who tried to "play" their idea of a Dylan-esque 1960s hero in life and wound up on the losing end of drugs or divorce.

Aside from anything else, Haynes puts together a righteous soundtrack, with strong cover versions by John Doe ("Pushing On") and ex-Pavement chief Stephen Malkmus ("Ballad of a Thin Man"), among many others.

But as inventively as Haynes attempts to get at the ever-elusive Dylan, the man's own words from the song "I'm Not There" might be prophetic here: "I don't belong to anybody."

Director: Todd Haynes. Writers: Todd Haynes, Oren Moverman. Cast: Cate Blanchett, Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Richard Gere, Julianne Moore, Bruce Greenwood. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes. Rated R. 2 1/2 stars.

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