I’m Not There (2007)

In this autumn season of 2007, I can see that I am going to be thinking a lot about the Bob Dylan song known as “I’m Not There (1956).” At least, that is the title given to it on most of its early, bootleg appearances. Now that it has finally been officially released, the sub-title date has been dropped—which is a pity (since it added an element of mystery to the song) but also understandable (since no good explanation of the date has ever been given).

“I’m Not There” is perhaps the ultimate Dylan bootleg, and has always been a subject for cult idealization as the most obscure of Dylan’s “lost” songs: a major masterpiece that almost no one knows, and which indeed seems to conspire actively against being known. Now, it has become the title of Todd Haynes’s movie I’m Not There, “inspired by the music and many lives of Bob Dylan”—“many” being the operative word. The film is already famous for casting six different actors to play aspects of Dylan at different points in his career. If this strategy is a gimmick, it is a successful one: the film is generating vast amounts of advance publicity, much of it based on the photographs of Cate Blanchett looking, uncannily and androgynously, like 1966 Bob.

The film is not due for North American release until late November, though it has played in prestigious festivals like Toronto, New York, and Venice. I’ve had the chance to see it once, at a press screening in Vancouver: but one viewing is far from enough to comprehend a film of this complexity and richness. I came out of the screening demanding “When can I see this again?” I’d already begun this article well in advance, in early
September, hoping to write my way through my presuppositions, both about the movie and about the song.

I had also seen, on the ubiquitous internet, one brief clip from the film: a scene supposedly portraying the first meeting between Dylan and Allen Ginsberg. In about two minutes of screen time, it contrives to commit about three dozen factual errors, placing this meeting at the wrong date, in the wrong place, in the wrong circumstances, with the wrong dialogue. So I was immediately alerted that the last thing to expect from this film would be factual accuracy: that, indeed, “factual accuracy” is a criterion which should preemptively be discarded as irrelevant, as completely beside the point of whatever the film is trying to achieve. Whoever else is “not there” in the film, one person who is certainly absent is the biographical Bob Dylan. Which is not to say that elements of fact do not persist in the film. There is a great deal of factual material, especially (as I will discuss later) quotation from Dylan’s songs and interviews. For someone who knows the biography well, the pleasure of the film resides to a great extent in observing the intricate dance between fact and fiction, the re-placing of familiar words in new contexts; for someone who does not know the biography well, the only advice is sit back and enjoy, but don’t believe a word.

The internet has also provided, to date, one other preview. The soundtrack CD for the film will include two versions of the song “I’m Not There.” One version will be a new recording, by the band Sonic Youth (I wonder in advance what set of lyrics they will be authorized to use.) The other will be a new, remixed version of the recording made by Dylan himself in 1967; it is this remixed version which has found its way onto the internet, and which is, in and by itself, sufficient justification for the whole enterprise. The song was always already a masterpiece, though of a peculiarly muted kind; this remix, in vastly improved sound quality, removes a great deal of the equivocation. “I’m Not There” is there, and this new version should establish it as one of the great songs of the Dylan catalogue, that is, as one of the great songs of American music.

(“This is American music you’re hearing,” Bob Dylan / Jude Quinn / Cate Blanchett tells a hostile English audience in 1966, with (at the height of the Viet Nam war)
a huge American flag draped across the back of the stage. “I don’t think you’ve ever heard American music before.” For what it’s worth, that is an actual quote. Todd Haynes did not invent it.)

I’m Not There (1967)

The original performance of this song, a classic of “American music,” is the only known one by Dylan himself. There is only one take on the 1967 tapes, and he has never returned to it, either live or in studio. This one recorded version took place in the summer of 1967, as part of the series of recordings known as “The Basement Tapes.” In 1966, Dylan, with a finely-tuned instinct for self-preservation, had used a serious motorcycle accident as the occasion to withdraw from the frenetic life he had been living as the era’s pre-eminent rock star. In Haynes’s film this accident is presented as in fact/fiction fatal—as some of Dylan’s so-called “fans” might have wished. It would have been quite gratifying to see him crash to an early death, like Keats or Shelley, an ultimate image of the Romantic Poet. But he didn’t. He cancelled concert tours, recording sessions, book publications, and TV films, and retreated into rural seclusion in Woodstock, in New York State’s idyllic Hudson valley. Doing so almost certainly saved his life; he could not long have survived the pace which was being demanded of him. In this respect, he chose among his mentors: like Allen Ginsberg rather than Jack Kerouac, he was in it for the long haul. If he had died on his Harley, he would have endured as an archetypal figure of the artist who burned brightly and flamed out early. No one would have predicted that he would still be doing some of his best work a full forty years later.

His back-up group—The Hawks, now beginning to work their way towards a new name, simply The Band—had taken a house in the same area, at Saugerties, a property known as Big Pink. In the basement, they had set up rudimentary recording equipment (a couple of microphones and a tape recorder), absurdly inadequate to the quality of the music they were about to record. Throughout the summer of 1967, Dylan and The Band met in this basement, almost daily, and recorded dozens of songs. Much of this material
has never been officially released (there is one limited, sanitised, dehydrated album), but about six hours circulates on bootleg. Many of the songs have subsequently been performed or published by Dylan; the most obvious one that has not, that has been systematically forgotten and ignored, is “I’m Not There.”

The Basement Tapes were never intended to be released, or scarcely even to be heard. Some of the songs were “demos,” versions for other groups (such as The Byrds or Manfred Mann) who might, and indeed did, record them; most, however, were for Dylan and The Band’s own benefit, and pleasure. The great attraction of the Basement Tapes is thus the allure of eavesdropping. Listening to these recordings, we are hearing things which (unlike concerts or studio recordings) we were never meant to hear. They are recordings made with absolutely no preconception of an audience. As a listener, quite literally, I’m not there.

So let me give, here, a preliminary statement—long before seeing the film, working just from the title—of this whole meditation on the song, and on the movie. I’m not there. Absence. I state it first (though I will restate it in other ways) as the condition of the listener to the Basement Tapes. The circumstances of the recording eliminate the presence of a listener. These songs are sung to no one. These songs are sung by no one. I’m not there.

The majority of the Basement Tapes songs were not written by Bob Dylan. They range from traditional folk songs to the purest pop-music schlock. Sometimes the band members weren’t sure which song Dylan pulled out was his own, or something he had retrieved from his limitless memory of American music. So, for a great part of the Basement Tapes, another person who is “not there” is Bob Dylan, songwriter. The greatest songwriter of his age chooses to sing the traditional “Wildwood Flower,” or Dominic Behan’s “Royal Canal,” or the parody pop song “I’m Your Teenage Prayer.” Dylan’s absence is one of the most powerful characteristics of The Basement Tapes—at the same time, of course, as the presence of his own, utterly distinctive voice reasserts the opposite: if anyone is there in this wild diversity of songs, it’s him. And that comes out as much in the trivial “Kickin’ My Dog Around” as in the national epic “Tears of Rage.”
(I suspect in advance that the same will be true of the film. The multiplicity of actors representing him will be an index of his absence: no one portrayal can be enough. He is more, or less, than the sum of his images. No matter how many actors portray him, he’s not there. *He* has an alibi. *He* has an alias.)

But even the Dylan “originals” on The Basement Tapes are deeply, weirdly strange. (Haynes tries to capture this feeling in the Richard Gere sections of the film, but frankly, he’s not weird enough.) These songs combine grammatical transgressions with gross scatological imagery; they move from plausible surrealism to downright nonsense. They range from the sublime (“We carried you in our arms / On Independence Day”) to the ridiculous (“Pick up your nose, you canary”). They are so strange as to constitute another kind of absence: the psychedelic, word-spinning, but deadly accurate poet of “Gates of Eden” or “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands” *is not there*. From the compulsive verbal expansiveness of *Blonde on Blonde*, just over a year earlier, we have moved to an opposite extreme of reductiveness, semantic ellipsis, and willful obscurity. Songs like “Odds and Ends” or “Yea, Heavy, and a Bottle of Bread” defy explication. Songs like “Tears of Rage” or “I Shall Be Released” invite explication, and then defy it.

*I’m Not There* (1956)

Such obscurity is prevalent throughout The Basement Tapes, and has invited whole tomes of baffled commentary: but, for the moment, let me stick to “I’m Not There (1956),” which is not only Basement Tapes style weird, but has a couple of additional layers of obscurity. The first is the title, or rather the sub-title: 1956. The song was always listed this way, on any account given of the Basement Tapes recordings. But no plausible explanation of the date has ever been advanced. Given the song’s lyrical sophistication, the idea that it might have been composed as early as 1956 seems utterly unlikely. No biographical study of the young Robert Zimmerman suggests any traumatic experience in 1956, when he was in his 15th year of a placid middle-class childhood in Hibbing, Minnesota. Any possible reference to the pop music of 1956 (early Elvis?)
seems equally remote. This sub-title remains inexplicable, and Haynes’s film does nothing to clarify it. The film’s title, and the soundtrack CD, simply omit it—so, I guess, the question will remain moot.

The 1967 recording poses an additional problem, partially resolved by the new remixed version. No one really knows what the words are—and that “no one” includes Dylan himself. He is notorious for his poor enunciation, but even so, “I’m Not There” retreats more than most of his songs into an indecipherable mumble. It is likely that the song was, fundamentally, unfinished: on many of the lines, he was singing what are called “dummy lyrics”: just any combination of syllables improvised on the spot to fill in the metre and the tune. Thus, even when the words can be distinguished, they don’t always make sense: “She’s the way, for sale and beautiful, she’s mine for the one”; or “I’ve been told, like I said, when I before, carry on the grind.” Some people have gone so far as to call this “the greatest song ever written”; I prefer to call it “the greatest song never written.”

Quite apart from dummy lyrics, often enough the words can’t be clearly distinguished. For one line, various listeners have guessed “She’s my Christ-forsaken angel,” “She’s my prize-forsaken angel,” or even “She’s my price for Lake and Angel.” (The new remix, and the Sonic Youth version, clearly favour “Christ.”) Another recording by Dylan might resolve some of these problems; but perhaps it is better if they are left in a vocal haze of indeterminacy. Precisely one of the reasons that this song is so prized by Dylan fans is that it does not have to rely on an audible set of lyrics. This is Dylan singing purely, almost without words: the emotional effect of the song does not depend on the lyrics: it depends entirely on the music, and the tone of his voice.

And that effect, the meaning of the song, is undebatable. Emotionally, this is one of Dylan’s purest, truest performances. In a long and memorable career, I can think of a few songs that come close to this one, none that surpasses it. Everything about the song—the fragmented words, Garth Hudson’s spare accompaniment on the organ, the aching intensity of Dylan’s voice—points in just one direction. Loss. Absence. “I wish I was there beside her, but I’m not there, I’m gone.” Greil Marcus memorably described this song as one of ultimate betrayal: “No one, you say to the singer, can be left as alone
as you have left this woman, can be abandoned as finally as you have abandoned her—
because it is plain that this is no mere love affair that has dissolved.” Indeed, for Marcus,
setting this song in the context of other Basement Tapes songs such as “Tears of Rage,”
what is at stake is America itself, the ideal state betrayed (in 1967) in Viet Nam, and forty
years later (in 2007) in Iraq. (Just listen to Bob Dylan, in 2007, singing “Masters of
War,” written in 1963, and still sounding as if it was written yesterday, blood dripping
off the page.)

Whatever the political implications may be, “I’m Not There” remains an ultimate
confession of failure: the song of a man who should have been “there,” but who has failed
this elementary duty of presence, witness, support, accompaniment. The fact that he
knows it is no consolation: quite the opposite. What you hear is pure, unalleviated pain.
No wonder that Dylan never revisited this song; the wonder is that he even tried it in the
first place.

For forty years, then, “I’m Not There” was a secret treasure, available only on the
bootleg circuit. Wonderfully, incredibly, it is now officially released. No matter how
incomprehensible the words are, the raw emotion of this vocal performance grabs you by
the throat and will not let you go. The words claim that he is “not there”; the voice
overwhelmingly insists that he is there, even if “there” is “not there,” even if it is absence,
loss, betrayal, anguish. It’s a song so painful that it never could be finished.

Now, admittedly, this isn’t an easy conclusion to come to. Most first-time
listeners will only hear the fragmented lyrics, the mumbled words. But this is why “I’m
Not There” is both the most difficult and the most rewarding of Dylan’s unknown songs.
Give it time, and it will sink into your soul. You won’t care what the words are. All you
will hear will be Dylan’s voice, at the aching heart of its expressiveness, its ultimate pain.

I’m Not There (2007)

The movie begins with Bob Dylan’s death. The body is laid out for us, hands
neatly folded, on an autopsy slab. But that is too simple. The person who dies in the
movie is not “Bob Dylan,” but rather “Jude Quinn,” one of six separate and fictional characters, each of which has some more or less close relationship to Bob Dylan, none of which is biographically exact. Bob Dylan survived his motorcycle accident. Bob Dylan is not Jude Quinn. It couldn’t be any clearer—but it does get complicated.

The six are:

Marcus Carl Franklin, a disarmingly precocious black kid, plays a 12-year old vagabond who calls himself “Woody Guthrie,” and is a literal embodiment of every tall tale Dylan ever told about his own fantasized youth (riding the rails, joining a circus). He is also a runaway from “a correctional facility in Minnesota,” modeled on the institution about which Dylan wrote “Walls of Red Wing.” (Red Wing also hosted a Lutheran seminary and a shoe factory—as I write these words, I am wearing a pair of Red Wing shoes.)

Ben Whishaw is a character who claims the name “Arthur Rimbaud,” after the French Symbolist poet and gun-runner. He appears solely in scenes of a police interrogation, in which he answers questions with a mixture of quotations from Rimbaud letters—including the definitive Modernist statement “I is another”—and Dylan interviews—including the premonitory “do Not create anything, it will be / misinterpreted.”

Christian Bale appears as “Jack Rollins,” a character based on the early folk-protest Dylan, and who also reappears as the later gospel singer (though with a severely reduced congregation). Haynes and Bale treat both incarnations almost without irony. Both phases of the character share an intense moral seriousness, which (unlike the other manifestations) is never questioned.

Heath Ledger plays an actor, Robbie Clarke, who portrays “Jack Rollins” in a 1964 movie—an actor playing an actor who plays a fictional version of a real person: got it? He becomes so entwined with the role that he continues to play it throughout the 70s, including an (entirely fictional) marriage to Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), who shares with Sarah Dylan the characteristic of (a) being married to Bob Dylan, but not the characteristics of (a) being French, (b) being a talented painter, and (c) having only two
children. What is true of the rest of the movie is especially true here: don’t, for a moment, trust it to give even a remotely true picture of Bob Dylan’s life.

Cate Blanchett is Jude Quinn, that is, Bob Dylan 1965-66. She is the emotional heart and soul of the movie. Her final scene, in the back of a limo, talking (in Dylan’s exact words) about the “mystery” of traditional music, is stunning. Then she turns to the camera and gives a half smile which utterly embodies that mystery. In the whole history of cinema, I can only think of two moments that equal it: the final close-up of Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina*, or the repeated close-ups of Anna Karina in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville*. It is one of those transcendent moments in which the human face holds more emotion than you ever thought possible. It’s only a few seconds of screen time, but it lasts for eternity. In the audience, you are left gasping for breath. Then (s)he dies.

Richard Gere is an old and outmoded Billy the Kid, who (unlike Jude Quinn) has survived his reported death, and is living entirely in the mythical world of the Basement Tapes. He has a dog which, despite being repeatedly described as female, is called Henry. As the song has it, “Please Mrs Henry.” Or as history has it, not William Bonney but Henry McCarty. He gives the film a weary sense of history, time out of mind.

*I’m Not There (1978)*

This is not the first time that a fictional character based on Bob Dylan has been played by someone other than Bob Dylan. In *Renaldo and Clara* (the movie Bob Dylan shot in 1975 and released in 1978), there is a character not only based on Bob Dylan but (thirty years in advance of Todd Haynes) actually called “Bob Dylan.” He is played by the classic Canadian musician Ronnie Hawkins (“You’ll know Bob, he’s the one with the hat”), while Ronee Blakley assumes the role of “Mrs Dylan.” Hawkins takes his part in the midst of that movie’s wild and intricate play with notions of identity, fame and name. Indeed, *Renaldo and Clara*, with its radical dismantling of all notions of identity, not only predates *I’m Not There* by thirty years, but goes a lot farther in terms of film narrative
experimentation. At its full four-hour length, *Renaldo and Clara* is, in many people’s opinion, well-nigh unwatchable. I beg to differ, though mine is a minority stance. For me, *Renaldo and Clara* is Dylan’s masterpiece, though it’s almost as unknown and unavailable as “I’m Not There.” It circulates only as a bootleg tape in poor visual quality, and watching it is, yes, a challenge. But already here is the fundamental idea of *I’m Not There*—that Bob Dylan is never quite himself, that the only way to portray him is through *someone else*, a literal interpretation of Rimbaud’s “je est un autre”: “I is another.”

Two or three years ago, when I first heard the rumours of Todd Haynes’s project, I thought it was a crazy idea. Six different actors playing Bob? But as time went by, it seemed more and more plausible, even necessary. Cate Blanchett was a wild choice, but scarcely more so than Ronnie Hawkins. How else could you do it? Dylan has always been someone else, an alias; he has always defined himself by his absence from any defined role. “I’m not there” is his definitive statement, his lasting alibi. In 1972, in Sam Peckinpah’s stupendous movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, Bob Dylan (anticipating Richard Gere) played a character called Alias. By the time I came to see Haynes’s film, the “gimmick” didn’t seem crazy at all. It seemed, if anything, overwhelmingly obvious.

*I’m Not There* (1971)

The movie begins, as I said, with Bob Dylan’s death. Well, not strictly speaking. It begins with the death of the fictional character Jude Quinn, who represents, more or less, the charismatic Dylan of 1965-66. (This charisma is formidably represented by Cate Blanchett, whose performance is simply beyond words; no critical commentary can even get close to her greatness here. The only performance comparable this year is another actor portraying a great singer: Marion Coutillard as Edith Piaf in *La Vie en Rose.*) In the fictional world of this movie, Jude Quinn actually dies in the infamous motorcycle crash of 1966 Archetype of the Romantic poet: flame out and die young. In which case, he would never have written (among so many other masterpieces) “I’m Not There (1956).”
Meditating on his death, the soundtrack commentary (spoken by Kris Kristofferson) comments “Even the ghost was more than one person.” Like so many other lines in the movie, it is a quotation. (The film is saturated with quotations.) The line, and its fully Freudian context, is worth quoting in full. From Dylan’s book *Tarantula* (written in 1966, published in 1971):

```plaintext
here lies bob dylan
demolished by Vienna politeness—
which will now claim to have invented him
boy Dylan—killed by a discarded Oedipus
who turned
around
to investigate a ghost
& discovered that
the ghost too
was more than one person

(Tarantula, 120)
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Ghosts appear repeatedly in Dylan’s lyrics; it is one of his most significant words. It appears in what is perhaps his greatest single line—“the ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face”—which may also be the only line adequate to describing Cate Blanchett. The ghost—along with other key images: double, shadow, mirror, brother, alias—stands for *identity at one remove*, which is how Dylan always sees himself. Not Robert Zimmerman: Bob Dylan. Alias, alibi: *I’m Not There*.

*I’m Not There* (1969)

The movie is saturated with quotations. It’s not just that the soundtrack includes a wide and judicious selection of Dylan songs. The dialogue is permeated with Dylan quotations, even in the most seemingly casual exchanges. The various interview scenes, especially with Cate Blanchett, are a careful composite of actual Dylan interviews. In one scene, a movie poster on a background wall (a movie, supposedly starring “Robbie Clarke,” not even mentioned anywhere else) features as its slogan “Some us are prisoners,
the rest of us are guards”: a line from Dylan’s little-known song for George Jackson. But perhaps the most telling quote relates to another movie.

The film envisages both a fictional version of the early, “protest singer” Dylan called Jack Rollins (played by Christian Bale), and an actor playing him in a biographical film, Robbie Clarke (played by Heath Ledger). Robbie, at this double remove, becomes a major representative of the “real” Bob Dylan, going through a heavily fictionalised version of Dylan’s marriage. In one scene Robbie and Claire go to the movie, to see Robbie playing Jack (playing Bob). And Robbie’s comment, voiceover, is pure quotation:

> But more often than not, Madeleine and I were disappointed. The pictures were dated, they flickered. And Marilyn Monroe had aged terribly. It made us sad. This wasn’t the film we’d dreamed of. This wasn’t the total film that each of us had carried within himself—the film that we wanted to make, or, more secretly, no doubt, that we wanted to live.

The quotation is from Jean-Pierre LŽaud (the leading actor of François Truffaut’s 400 Blows), playing Paul in Jean-Luc Godard’s Masculin FŽminin (1969). The quotation of this passage by Haynes is not only a tribute to one of the great moments in French cinema (and one with which all of us can surely empathize), but also a tribute to Godard’s habit of obsessive quotation—for the lines from Godard’s movie are, in their turn, a quotation: from the French novelist Georges Perec, in a 1965 novel entitled Things: a story of the 60s. So: an actor playing an actor quoting an actor quoting a film quoting a novelistÈ.

Yeah, Todd, sure. Got it.

*I’m Not There* (2007)

The film is not perfect. Some scenes go on too long (especially with the British journalist crudely depicted as “Mr Jones”); some scenes rely too heavily on the surrealist symbolism. It could easily be fifteen minutes shorter. The Dylan line “Just like a woman” is grossly misinterpreted. The final credits describe “Moonshiner,” an archetypally
traditional song, as “written by Bob Dylan.” I would have yelled “NO!!!” if I hadn’t been listening to Sonic Youth. Yeah, yeah. Quibble, quibble. These are minor flaws in a magnificent film.

Bob Dylan is the ultimate other; he has made a career out of defining himself differently. By so doing, he has been able to touch on all the major social and political ideas of his time, without ever quite touching down in any dogmatically defined position (though he’s some close). The prolonged relevance of a song like “Masters of War” speaks simultaneously to his timeliness and his timelessness. In his film, and in his title, Haynes has seized upon this essential characteristic of Bob Dylan: even when he’s “there,” in the midst of a love affair or a political struggle, there’s always someone who is “not there,” standing at one remove from the action: a ghost, an alias, an alibi. The life suggests that this distance from itself is inevitable, a condition worked deep into the artist’s identity; the song suggests (cries out) the emotional pain this absence causes. The movie takes the indeterminacy of Dylan’s character as the key to explaining a remarkable life (six lives) and a remarkable time. The song supplies the emotional depth to the film’s intellectual conception.

Dylan fans will want a DVD copy, to meticulously footnote all the quotations. But you do need to see it on the big screen, to appreciate the beauty of the photography—not just the landscape (Quebec standing in for the Hudson valley)—but the sheer luminous beauty of Cate Blanchett as the ultimate image of Bob—the image that we all “wanted to make, or, more secretly, no doubt, that we wanted to live.” That’s what Todd Haynes has done. He’s taken the “music and many lives” of Bob Dylan, and turned them into a multi-faceted but ultimately coherent image: one that we all want to see, and be, and live.

Please, when can I see it again?