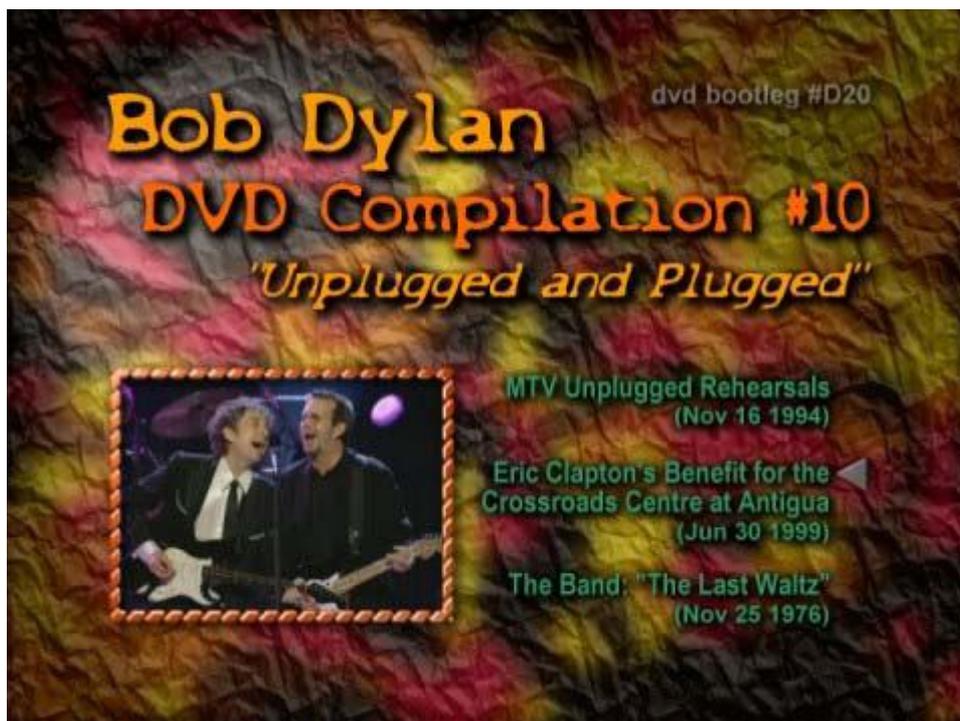


D020 UNPLUGGED AND PLUGGED

The three courses served up by [D020](#) comprise, if not a feast, at least a satisfying meal. Each of the two minor dishes is very watchable - first Bob and old pal Clapton, both looking chipper and plainly comfortable in each other's company, on stage together at Eric's 1999 MSG Crossroads Centre benefit gig. In the brief ten minutes we see, Bob sings Don't Think Twice with EC doing his special thing behind, then the two duet on Crossroads. Sound and image (third screenshot) are as good as it gets with Clapton's band, as you might expect, miser-tight. Only regret here is that, of the seven songs D sang this night, five (including Born In Time, Pill-Box Hat and Not Dark Yet) remain unseen. (Find them instead on the splendid [D852](#).)



Let your mind play across the many filmed Bobs - the opening of *Hard Rain* is well done and George Harrison's *I'd like to bring on a friend of us all ...* sticks in the mind, but my vote for classiest intro goes to the lovely, lazy *Last Waltz* camera drop-down onto his feathered hat as the first notes sound of *Forever Young*. And what's next on [D020](#) is a twelve minute slice of this film, featuring that song, *Follow You Down*, then the ensemble rendition of *Released*. This last allows us to renew acquaintance with some old friends - Richard Manuel, Ronnie Hawkins, Van Morrison, a very "happy" Neil Young with Joni by his side (Canadians sticking together - but then look at the map and you'll see that Bob was very nearly a Canadian himself, growing up just under the border with Minneapolis way off to the south). Aside from its clumsily-executed closing cut, this piece of film is another winner.

And so to the main course here, a continuous, fully-edited, good-looking 69 minutes of *Unplugged* rehearsal footage. Most fans, I suspect, see *Unplugged*, along perhaps with *Live Aid*, as one of the great missed opportunities of D's career. We all know that, at his best, with an acoustic, a mike and a song, no-one can touch him - yet, given these golden chances to remind a sceptical world of his special talent, nothing (or, at least,

too little) was delivered - most frustrating! The televised *Unplugged* shows him, pinboy-clothed, masked and anonymous behind his shades, before an improbably sycophantic rent-a-mob in a place he clearly wishes not to be and the resultant music, stiff and clinical, lacks heart. The Supper Club sets, though far from the earth-shaking wonders some people claim, sound better - Staying Here With You, Jack-A-Roe, Weeping Willow, One Too Many Mornings all fine, but he (or someone) wouldn't have it. Which all goes to make this rehearsal footage the more revealing. Played to an empty studio, at the end of each song there's not one clap, cheer or word of acclaim all through. You have to wonder, as he performs, to whom Bob imagines he's singing: on this day the song is all there is, yet still each (with the odd exception) commands his full respect and, perhaps in order to keep honed his obvious connection, into one after another, audience or not, he breathes life (besides, God's still listening, isn't He?). After a stillborn I Want You come ten takes, all complete and all good or better. After Tombstone Blues, it's illuminating to see some practised endings - good habit to get into, Bob! Another I Want You follows and though once more the song nearly stalls in the middle, D picks it up and sees through what turns out to be a lovely, mellow version. A hoe-down Don't Think Twice is very slick - not bad for a "rehearsal" and with nice harmonica to finish. Then comes a fine D Row with Bob, right on song, deep in his performance. Hazel, less than completely worked out, is still almost there. After Broken and Times, Love Minus Zero takes a few bars to find its groove but then puts another score on the board. Dignity is relatively poor, with D more than once drying up in a perfunctory run-through. But then God On Our Side, in an arrangement well-suited to this dowdy and intransigent song, inspires another impressively whole-hearted performance - and so we're done. No shades today, no designer threads, no yowling crowd - just a man, at relative ease, and his work. Absence of these negative outside influences allows the latter to shine gratifyingly well and MTV could have done worse than tidy this up and put it out in favour of the broadcast version. Of the two, it's certainly the one I'd choose.



Unplugged rehearsal



Crossroads Benefit, 30 June 1999

THANKS M

STARS Overall, four