

April 24



**April 12th / May 3rd Film Series:
“British Invasion” / Bob Dylan: “Don’t Look Back”**



For the next presentation in our rock music film series, scheduled for **Friday, April 12th**, we are planning to feature several of the “***British Invasion***” 60’s



groups. It will be akin to jumping into the famous time machine of H.G. Wells and revisiting bits and pieces of the era ushered in by The Beatles. The excerpts of long-gone TV shows, BBC coverage of The Kinks, The Yardbirds, the earliest editions of The Rolling Stones, and The Who, showed fascinated and surprised viewers of all ages.

The last film we have on tap is long-awaited: it was supposed to have been the first in our recent series and was postponed. With much anticipation, **May 3rd** is the date for our airing of “[Don't Look Back](#)”, the Bob Dylan movie from 1965. D.A.



Pennebaker's film broke the pattern of rock'n'roll-oriented movies that had existed up until that point. Keep in mind that early rock concert tours were “package events”, where promoters put together 8, 10, or 12 stars and young hit-makers, the idea being that each artist would perform his/her hit and latest 45 rpm singles. This common framework led to rock movies which similarly were star or band “rallies” encompassing a slew of performers and some pretty dubious storylines holding the enterprise together. Single-artist rock concerts of any length were pioneered by a few intrepid individuals such as rockabilly singer Gene Vincent, yet most early rock films remained a bit hokey.

When “Don't Look Bank” appeared, it put a keg of dynamite under those previous rock'n'roll movie could have as its subject one person, one musician – and not someone whose manner or music were being processed and sanitized for the grudging acceptance of the parents of teens. And no “hey, let's put on a show, kids” type scripting that went back to the days of Garland and Rooney. Not only did “Don't Look Back” concentrate on one artist, its focus was on a rather controversial individual whose utterly strange, nasal, unconventional voice was a matter of debate amongst both young and old. Dylan's sound was severely criticized by practically everyone representing adulthood in 1965; even executives at the company he recorded for (Columbia) made it plain that they thought veteran producer / A&R man John Hammond Sr., who'd given Dylan his contract, had lost his mind and had made an epochal blunder. It took a while for Hammond to regain his standing as a legendary talent scout.

In 1965, Dylan went to England on what would turn out to be his final all-acoustic tour of the decade. He was feeling confident that his songwriting was being recognized for its high quality (even as arguments raged about his singing) and he had fully realized that he wielded definite power and prestige as an



emerging spokesperson for his generation. Dylan also understood that he had a kind of magnetism which many pop & folk singers lacked. When he took-on weighty social issues in tunes using jokey cultural references, surreal humor and outlandish imagery, people listened. So when the opportunity presented itself and Dylan could star in a documentary film, he was not only ready to declare himself a worthy, quite important subject but also was willing to take the kinds of chances he already was used to as a composer: anything goes! The weird humor and eccentricities of the songs could now be converted into visualizations. The scenes from Dylan's British tour might be slice of life moments or could take a side road into the bizarre and the inner world of the artist. Myriad possibilities.

Although Dylan remained somewhat vague and guarded about his personal life (despite obvious affection for Joan Baez) he seemed ok with tossing almost anything else about himself into the ring the Pennebaker's film. The question then was whether it was a good move for a creative person to display so much of himself on-screen, unfathomable strangeness, foibles, warts and all, along with the music-making. Not every viewer, even among Bob's rock peers, felt that the film was effective in showing the artist in the best light. Instead of elucidating the tale of the man and elevating his artistry, the movie's odd moments might serve to further cloud the mirror concerning someone so many people were curious about.

As a viewer, it will be up to you to decide whether or not "Don't Look Back" makes a good case for the triumphant 60's Dylan hitting his stride or whether the artist almost "shoots himself in the foot" by being purposely hard to fathom. In its unveiling of the conundrums and complexities of a singular artist at a landmark career turning point, "Don't Look Back" remains, however, a masterpiece of its era – and in the evolution of rock films.

Arthur Rovozzo is an EC-CHAP volunteer, curator of the 2023-24 Film Series, and DJ for the weekly radio program "Musical Myriad" on WECS, 90.1fm.