

# Renaldo & Clara - Another look, 45 years on

By John Nogowski

“I’m glad Bob made a movie,” D.A. Pennebaker told me over the phone one afternoon many years ago. “You know, if *Lincoln* made a movie, I’d dig it.”

At the time, the great documentary filmmaker didn’t particularly care to offer any critique of the much-maligned, nearly four-hour Bob Dylan film “Renaldo & Clara” which had been released by “exclusive engagement” in the early part of 1978. But the idea of him mentioning Bob in such a prestigious historical context was at least surprising and looking back, intriguing.

“Renaldo & Clara” floundered on original release, was re-cut by about half, re-released as a concert film more or less, and since has pretty much disappeared like Jimmy Hoffa, the Hemingway manuscripts Hadley lost on that train in Paris and the rare critics who were complimentary of Dylan’s opus on its release. A good chunk of it is available now on YouTube and there are links of the whole film around if you’re curious. I was. Again.

As one of hundreds who made the trek to Boston’s Galeria Cinema on Boylston Street 45 years ago this January to catch “Renaldo & Clara” on its first run, I distinctly remember four things about that night; (A.) that nobody, even devoted Dylan fans (like me) would like it, (B.) the musical interludes were absolutely electric and brought back some of the thrill of witnessing the Rolling Thunder Revue in person (Thank goodness someone filmed these shows!) (C.) the powerful smell of weed in the theater (perhaps a requirement for an attempt at full comprehension - I abstained) and (D.) was this guy’s life a mess or what? That he was headed for divorce was no surprise.

One more thing that occurred to me on the way home, how did he get *Sara*, who was reportedly in the process of divorcing him, to *GO ALONG WITH THIS*? Shouldn’t someone with negotiating skills like his work for the State Department or something?

Painstakingly viewing Renaldo & Clara all these years later - emphasis on the “pain” part - it would be misleading to say that Bob’s artistic intent with the film suddenly became clear. It isn’t. With very close, careful inspection, there is, as almost always with Dylan’s work, a lot going on. And maybe worth reconsidering.

## THE RECURRING ELEMENTS

In the number of interviews Dylan gave with the intent of promoting his film, he often spoke of it as a composition rather than a narrative. Which, having viewed it a half-dozen times, seems to be somewhat of an understatement. He does, however, provide some touchstones that recur in the 3 hours, 44 minutes and 34 seconds of “Renaldo & Clara” that help anchor things a little bit.

The most obvious one is performer David Blue, who we see playing pinball as he gives us a look back at Dylan's early days in NYC. Every so often throughout the film, Blue will pop up, offer a comment or a brief story, return to his pinball game. In the dreamy, unreal world of the film, he serves as a return to reality.

Blue shows up several times throughout the film and his final comment is, perhaps, the one that was most telling. It occurs right around the three-hour mark, following a stirring live performance of Dylan's Desire album closer "Sara" (the aching song he supposedly debuted for her personally in the studio; one which includes the lines "Staying up for days in the Chelsea hotel writing 'Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands' for you...Don't ever leave me, don't ever go.")

When Blue pops back up here, we haven't seen him for a while. And he sounds annoyed at this filmic intrusion, "Somebody said 'What's going on here?' This is a myth," Blue snarls. "And you know what a myth is. A myth. (Camera pulls away to show him being filmed playing pinball by a pool.) "He lives like a human being, he's a guy with a wife and a family, you know what I mean? It's ridiculous."

Well, Dylan might have had a wife when Blue said that but in real life, not for very much longer. When the next shot we see is Dylan, in a black vest, lying on his stomach in a hotel room with Sara (in a wig) sitting next to him on the bed, asking if he'd like her to scratch his back, well, what can you say? They sure don't look headed for a divorce. But that's exactly what happened.

The film's other major touchstone might be what we might call "The Greek Chorus, sponsored by the American Tobacco Institute." Periodically, we see a bunch of guys with hats, glasses, mustaches and endless cigarettes sitting at a small table in a diner. The commentary is led by one beefy mustachioed ex-con, a deeply sincere know-it-all, who sparks the group, which then takes turns offering some high-falutin' pontificating/philosophizing about Dylan's meaning and career. One word keeps popping up - "truthfulness."

What's odd is from the feel of this scene, you can't tell if Dylan is mocking these pseudo-philosophers (always a good guess) or buying into their twaddle just a tad. Since throughout the film we get a fair and otherwise inexplicable assortment of religious relics (Stations of the Cross with Allen Ginsberg, shots of the crucifixion, the Virgin Mary statue, etc.) and some odd commentary/discussion about God ("Does he play a guitar?") it's reminiscent of the religious allusion Dylan threw into Shelter From The Storm: "In a little hilltop village, they gambled for my clothes." Bob as a martyr? As savior?

There are other elements that recur throughout this film, the Lady In White, people doing weird things, somebody carrying a rose, everybody wearing a hat. But having spent some time watching and attempting to decipher each one, the viewer is tempted to take the same approach here that one Lit student did back in the day. The

student was frustrated with Joseph Heller's elliptical narrative technique in "Catch 22" so she took action. In writing his complex, multi-charactered classic, Heller had a far-ranging assortment of characters and he'd reveal a little about each one in each successive chapter. Then, he'd move on to the next character, tell a little more about him and so on and eventually come back around to the first character and carry things a bit further. The idea was that the story would broaden as it advanced.

To counter Heller's technique, this frustrated student went and simply read each chapter headed by that character, Yossarian, say, and then follow every Yossarian chapter until the end of the book. Then go back to the next character and do that with that character. Consequently, she worked her way through the book clinically but not artistically. Heller's idea was to tell his story as a flower might open, not petal by petal.

With Renaldo & Clara, you find yourself tempted to watch all of David Blue clips in a row, then all of the Greek Chorus in sequence, then figure out how and why Bob fit them into his film.

According to Sid Griffin's handy and ambitious book on Dylan's Rolling Thunder years, "Shelter From The Storm," Bob spent more time on this project than any other album, film or anything else. Ever.

Griffin states it plainly. "Renaldo and Clara' is the single project in Dylan's creative life on which he spent the most time," he says. "In fact, the editing of 105 hours of raw Renaldo & Clara footage alone could take the prize for the single-most time-consuming venture of Dylan's entire career."

In giving the film a closer look all these years later, there are indeed so many cuts and maneuvers between scenes that there is no question somebody did a lot of fiddling around with the raw footage. Whether "editing" is the correct term for what they did is another matter. The idea of editing is to make things clearer. That did not happen here.

Working without a script, poorly miked, scene after scene done by obvious non-actors, interspersed with some stunning musical live performances and some well-chosen musical backgrounds underneath some scenes, it's clear that Dylan had some ideas. He was *really* trying to do something and give his viewers/listeners/fans a generous sample of Bob Dylan's life/career/art/view of the world. Bravely, probably foolhardily, he decided to present it all on an enormous canvas *as it was happening*.

### **FREEZE FRAME ON HIS LIFE?**

Looking back at that turbulent period in his life from the distance of all these years and what we've learned since, so much was happening and so fast that it may have seemed to him if he froze it all or even captured healthy bits of it on film, maybe he could slow things down, re-examine and maybe understand it.

Consider that after what seemed a lengthy quiet spell, Dylan returned to public life at the end of 1973, first, with a hastily constructed album with The Band (Planet Waves), then the road for an acclaimed American tour with The Band, trampling his greatest hits. Next, he seemingly mined his heart and soul as his marriage crumbled over the summer, resulting in the epochal Blood On The Tracks (1975.) Dylan then tossed together a two-disc set of the long-sought-after Basement Tapes, whipped out another album of new material (Desire) to start 1976 as he was embarked on the spontaneous circus of The Rolling Thunder Revue, meanwhile recording a couple of TV specials, one we saw (Hard Rain) and one we didn't (Clearwater). It must have seemed like he was running or performing for a camera for a good part of that year.

In that way, "Renaldo & Clara" can be seen now - at least from a distance - as a document of a guy who threw his life back into a wind tunnel. In some ways, all the weird stuff in the 214 minutes of the film does give us a sense of the strangeness of his life. And let's face it, if we know anything about Bob Dylan, it's a sure bet that *any* movie he did was going to have some really strange moments in it. Whatever its many flaws, "R&C" certainly doesn't disappoint on that count.

What do I mean by weird stuff? It's guys preaching The Word on top of a van on Wall Street in front of a building where George Washington took his initial oath of office, or groups of African-Americans of all ages gathered around the Apollo reacting or not to the case of imprisoned boxer Ruben "Hurricane" Carter, or Mama Frasca's charmingly unintelligible songs from the Dream Away Lodge in Beckett, Massachusetts or poet Allen Ginsberg performing his poetry at the Sea Crest Motel in Falmouth before a confused elderly audience, a group that must have wondered if Ginsberg had dropped in from outer space.

Or maybe it might even have been Dylan and his entourage visiting the Tuscarora Indian Reservation near Niagara Falls, New York or the very idea of Dylan opening his Rolling Thunder tour in Plymouth, Massachusetts where the Pilgrims had landed 370 years earlier. In the Netflix film, we see Dylan singing "The Ballad of Ira Hayes" to a solemn audience in that Tuscarora visit. That song didn't make "Renaldo & Clara." Sadly.

The sprawling canvas Bob unveils for us over these three-plus hours hints a bit at what his daily life must be like. Or maybe, how he sees the world come at him every day. With exploited minorities. Weird on-tour behavior. Endless shows and hotel rooms. All different kinds of music; some harmless, some not.

While many suggested Dylan should have taken the easy way out and made a concert film - he had plenty of terrific footage - evidently Dylan had other, more lofty aspirations. Maybe he was in so much pain over the imminent failure of his marriage and at the same time trying to maintain a viable, significant musical persona after those years away from the game. Perhaps he thought he could work his way out of it

with a tour, an ever-changing cast of partners, a film, a flat-out escape to the road, adapting to a life on the move. It's a strategy he's adapted ever since.

## ON VIEWING THE FILM

If you sit down to watch "Renaldo & Clara," understand first that you're likely not going to catch every reference or follow the narrative because there really isn't one, not in the usual sense of a regular movie. Viewed in hindsight, it's best to think of it as a series of scenes that are arranged in a particular, not-easy-to-discern way, using the stirring concert performances (and songs underneath the scenes) as your emotional map.

The majority of the songs will be familiar and are generally performed in recognizable fashion, unlike what was to come later on. Those songs that aren't familiar (Kaw-Liga, Little Moses, etc.) are carefully selected to illuminate or comment on a scene. Re-watching the film several times, this is something you might pick up on.

The opening credits roll over a clip of our Bob in a clear plastic mask (is it Nixon?) singing - perhaps with a wry tinge of irony considering the wild-ass footage to follow - "When I Paint My Masterpiece."

After a brief, puzzling clip of Larry "Ratso" Sloman, unofficial Rolling Thunder Tour chronicler, offering perhaps the first of what was to be a million complaints about his "lack of access," we can see right away that this film will be unusual. Judging from Sloman's lengthy book "On The Road With Bob Dylan" covering his Rolling Thunder experiences (Dylan called it "The war and peace of rock and roll") this access issue was something he had to deal with for most of the tour. On the contrary, we viewers are about to be overwhelmed over the next three-plus hours with our own "access."

It's strangely comforting when, in the next scene, up pops David Blue to give us the first in what will be a series of flashbacks on the start of Dylan's career in New York City. Blue has a warm and friendly face, someone who we can count on to ground us as this extravaganza unfolds. Blue goes way back to when it all began in NYC. "That's where I met Bob," he tells us.

For our first Dylan sighting, Bob's picking a guitar with the longest - and dirtiest - fingernails you've ever seen, nuzzling up to the first of what will seem to be an ever-changing array of females throughout the film, perhaps a hint of what he was up to off-screen.

First in the batting order is the tough-looking Helena Kallianiotis, famous for her ferocity in the famous "toast" scene with Jack Nicholson from the film Five Easy Pieces. As Bob is nuzzling her between strums, a mechanic looks up at him and asks "Why are you in such a hurry? Any man who'd trade a T-bird for a cheap bike must be running from the law. Our Bob's opening line? "I am the law."

From there, allow me to guide you through what remains in the three hours of Renaldo & Clara and what I think is worth paying attention to. After some more weirdness with Bob Neuwirth on stage, we see Dylan, in a jacket that looks like the back page of a wallpaper book, standing in the corporate offices of CBS, trying to pressure Columbia to rush releases his new single “Hurricane.” To some, it was Bob’s return to protest with a song about the imprisoned ex-boxer Ruben “Hurricane” Carter.

Next, we get a quick cut to Dylan and Helena climbing sets of stairs while he offers us a piano-driven cover of Hank Williams’ “Kaw-Liga,” a song about a wooden Indian who was in love with another wooden Indian but couldn’t speak though “his heart was made of knotty pine” we wonder if that’s a hint. Is this song foreshadowing Bob’s future love troubles?

Next, some more cinema verite weirdness. Yes, Dylan’s now on tour and we find out there’s bad weather for the Providence concert, Helena needs a ride, is offered one to Vermont and Dylan’s then-wife Sara asks how to get to Arizona. Suddenly, we jump into a sizzling performance of Dylan’s song about “marriage” - “Isis” which contains the telling line “Are you gonna stay? If you want me to, yes!”

We get the hint and you get the sense of what Dylan’s doing here. These songs aren’t just *performances*; in this context, they’re commentary, color, information, hints.

We cut to a hotel lobby in Toronto where a well-meaning, uninformed female media type waits to greet Bob Dylan. However, she has no idea what Dylan actually looks like. Echoes of “Something’s happening and you don’t know what it is?”

The media type tries a few various candidates entering the hotel, chats briefly with Ronnie Hawkins, then, for no particular reason, the film cuts to Wall Street where we see some older guys standing on a van, preaching The Word. “The whole world is seeking love,” one says. “I believe Jesus gave me such a baptism of love.”

This puzzling cut then launches us to the diner and the first of several visits with the Greek Chorus - “What do you think God’s work is?” one says. “Maybe Dylan.”

### **THE MOMENT WHEN THINGS COME CLEAR?**

What follows is a strangely affecting shot of the scrawny Dylan, bundled up in a big fur hat and colorful jacket, walking all by his lonesome down the street. As he walks, we hear Gordon Lightfoot warble Dylan’s confessional “Ballad In Plain D,” an emotional song from “Another Side Of Bob Dylan” about his failed relationship with Suze Rotolo, a song he has criticized himself for writing. Seeing Dylan walking by himself, all spindly legs, looking behind him as if someone might be following, hearing another voice singing his song of regret, Bob seems more alone than at any other time in the film.

Hearing that particular song at that particular spot is revealing. As Bob is strolling and we hear Lightfoot sing the lines “The words to say I’m sorry I haven’t found yet. I think of her often and hope whoever she’s met will be fully aware of how precious she is” we get it. Is he talking about Suze or maybe her present, soon-to-depart counterpart?

Dylan settles into a seat in a bar across a heavily perspiring guy (turns out to be a filmmaker named Andre Bernard Tremblay) who tries to advise a stone-faced Bob about love and its attendant failures.

“You have to try,” he tells Bob. “Hope is not there for nothing. I’m sure she will answer. To love a woman and it comes to a point where she is so sure that whatever she does, is so sure that whatever she does, you’re going to be beside her. I thought I was going to die to lose the woman I love. Just the idea that I was going to lose the woman I loved. By all means, tricks, to keep, to have the presence, why should I go that far? But the answer is always the same.”

Just then, a strange woman leans down and kisses Dylan and tells him “Every time you look at me, you turn away.” As inscrutable as ever, Dylan just looks back at her like he might look at any woman at that point in his life. With confusion.

Considering these particular moments in re-watching “Renaldo & Clara,” the film suddenly seems to clear up. Dylan has never been proud of “Ballad In Plain D” and says it’s the one song he’s written that he regrets. As he told Bill Flanagan in Written In My Soul “That one I look back at and I say ‘I must have been a real schmuck to write that.’ I look back at all the songs I’ve written, maybe I could have left that one alone.”

Selecting that particular song delivered by a neutral party (Gordon Lightfoot) in this tender, vulnerable moment, you wonder if much of this film project is about to turn into an homage or an abject artistic apology to Sara. When viewed through that lens, many other scenes - like Ronee Blakely’s ugly argument - “A women needs to feel some love. You haven’t fucked me in three years” or Sara walking around with a Playgirl magazine, or later on, the two of them each applying makeup as Bob’s ode to her “Sad-Eyed Lady of The Lowlands” plays in the background, or the lengthy scene with Sara and Sam Shepard (her implied lover) having a wholly unsatisfying, unresolved discussion, you can sense things breaking down.

Perhaps the moment where Dylan does his most convincing acting (about 90 minutes in) when he’s on a chilly New York street and suddenly we hear Anne Waldman’s loud, hectoring voice, reading her terrifying poem “Fast Speaking Woman” : “I’m the vibrato woman, the detonated woman, the woman with the keys, I’m a fast-speaking woman, I’m the twilight woman, I’m the volatile woman, I’m the volatile woman, the demon woman...” and we see Bob, a panicked look on his face, standing alone on a

chilly New York street. He even panhandles a woman passing by. Too many women for him to understand.

And when, moments later, we see Sara, again in a wig, walking all by herself down the street as Dylan's "She Belongs To Me" plays in the background, the viewer remembers the song title - as Bob does. And the viewer thinks, "Not any more."

What we notice about Dylan's filmmaking technique is that he seems to delight in interruption. What's interesting is right in the middle of that bar scene where Bob is getting love advice, we quickly cut to a scene with Sara and Sam Shepard walking down the street, discussing the merits of sour mash whiskey. Sam tells Sara "If you don't take it, I'm going to give it to him." Sara replies "You're not going to have me and you're not going to have nothing to drink, either." Then it's back to the bar scene.

The brief clip with Sam and Sara foreshadows a much more important scene later in the film where Sara has a heart-to-heart talk with her (implied) lover Sam. Perhaps echoing a previous intimate conversation with her filmmaking ex-husband, Sara says provocatively: "I'd stay if you found the right way to ask me."

Sam: How do you want me to ask you?"

Sara: I can't tell you that...Do you want to be responsible for me?"

Sam: I do want to be responsible for you. I do want to do for you.

Sara: I think I've heard this before." Perhaps from her filmmaking ex-husband?

### **THE MUSIC IS SENSATIONAL, THE ACTING, LESS SO**

As many have correctly noted, the musical sequences - "A Hard Rain's A Gonna Fall" and "Isis" and "Sara" and "Romance in Durango" and many others - are terrific as are the piano versions of songs like "I Want You" and "People Get Ready" and "You're A Big Girl Now" among others to play underneath a scene.

The scenes that drew the most response - something Dylan was almost certainly counting on - were his on-film interactions with his former lover Joan Baez and a very staged love triangle with he, Baez and his then-wife Sara in the final hour of the film.

Baez comes first - as she did in real life - wearing a lovely glittery white wedding dress - a gift from Mama Frasca - confessing to Bob as she greets him at a bar "to be really honest, I got dressed up to come down here when I heard you were coming through town."

Bob mutters something. Through a wide smile that somewhat dims the authenticity of the moment, Joan asks: "What do you think it would have been like if we'd gotten married?"

Bob: "I don't know. I haven't changed that much. Have you?"



She switches drinks with Bob, moves in closer and smiles. “Maybe,” she says.

Once you see the charming outtakes of this scene between these two that Scorsese found for Rolling Thunder Revue and you realize what Bob *decided to leave out* for his film, well, we’re back in bootleg territory again, aren’t we? Hey, Bob, why did you leave that out? Why didn’t you use that footage?

Just after the three-hour mark, we get down to the scenes that you know TMZ would have fun with if TMZ had been around in 1978. Here we see Bob, then-wife Sara, and ex-lover Joan Baez, all in a hotel room. The sequence begins with Baez, dressed all in white and holding a rose, knocks on the door. Sara, wearing a red wig, is scratching her then-husband’s back before they start pawing one another on the bed in front of Baez. Significantly, the tune playing in the background is a Dylan/Baez duet called “The Water Is Wide” which contains the line “but love grows old and waxes cold and fades away like the morning dew.”

There’s a bit of banter between them, Sara suggests she’s a crazy woman. Baez, holding the rose, reads a love note about an appointed meeting place with Bob. After a few awkward moments with Sara hanging all over our hero, Baez says “I have decisions to make. I have places I have to be” and leaves, just as the song’s line “fades away like the morning dew” comes up. Coincidence? As she leaves, Sara asks comically, “Are you sure you have the right room?”

Alone with her then-husband, Sara asks Bob “Have you been lying to me? Would you lie to me? I hate liars.” “Me, too,” he replies. Suddenly, Baez is back in the room, it’s silent all around as Dylan gets up and stands looking at Baez.

A quick, tension-relieving cut now reveals Bob and Allen Ginsberg doing the Stations Of The Cross. Two Jews. Why? Is Bob suggesting his trials with Joan and Sara are HIS Stations of The Cross?

Then, suddenly, we’re back to the hotel room with Joan, Sara and Bob.

The conversation goes like this:

Baez: I can’t share. You have to tell me something. I’ve come a very long way.

Sara: You have to tell us *both* something.

Dylan: I think so. I think it’s time I tell you both something.

Sara: Yes, please!

Dylan: Anything. What would you like to know?

Baez: The truth

Dylan: Yes, I’ll tell you the truth. Tell me, what is it you’d like to know? About anything.

Baez: Nothing about the cosmos

Sara: Do you love her?

Dylan stands up, raises hands.

Sara: That's it. That is an evasion.

Dylan: Do I love her like I love you? No. Do I love you like I love her, no.

Once again, just at a moment where we expect some resolution, Dylan drops in a tension-relieving clip of Rob Stoner singing "Catfish" Bob's harmless song about the Yankee pitcher James "Catfish" Hunter, a cut that makes absolutely no sense except to frustrate the viewer. That's our Bob.

If you suffered through "Eat The Document," Dylan's quasi-documentary on his explosive 1966 World Tour with The Hawks, he used the same technique again and again, giving you the beginning of a song, then cutting away.

So suddenly, here we are back in the hotel room with more chat and cigarettes with Bob and Joan and Sara. This time, the tension is all gone. The conversation resumes:

Baez (to Dylan): So what on Earth are you up to?

Dylan: I couldn't explain it to you in a minute.

Baez: You never did.

Dylan: No.

Sara: He never gives straight answers.

Dylan: What is a straight answer?

Sara: The truth.

Dylan: No one's ever given me a straight answer.

Sara: I give straight answers

Dylan: On what time is it?

Sara: Time to be evasive

Dylan: Evasiveness is all in the mind. Truth is on many levels.

Baez, who clearly has heard this line before, scoffs.

Dylan: Am I wrong?

Baez: Ten years I've known him

Sara: Has he ever given you a straight answer?

Baez: Not to my recollection.

Dylan: What is it you want to know?

Baez ignores that and looks to Sara

Dylan: I'm a brother to you both.

Baez: Yeah, you'll never have to make a decision as long as you live." She and Bob and Sara all laugh. The moment seems to have passed. Next, we see Bob about to board a train and in a voiceover as it zooms in on his face, we hear Baez. "I'm busy on weekends," she says. "I'm married."

"Oh," Sara replies. "A weekend husband." Hmmm.

Meanwhile, Bob boards a train with yet another woman, Ronee Blakely, as an obscure cut, "Patty's Gone To Laredo" a sad, plaintive tune, plays in the background. And here's Bob, the tom-catter, on the road again, with yet a different woman hanging on to him. This may be a moment where art imitates life.

We know now that not all that long after the tour and film concluded, Sara came downstairs in their Malibu home to find Bob sitting at the breakfast table with some woman called Malka. This, along with some other ugliness came out in the divorce decree. The marriage was over.

Some years later, Rolling Stone Magazine ran a story about Malibu's Point Dune Hotel and Bob's lucky Room 13 where he supposedly had at least a part-time residency for his extra-marital interludes and also, where between trysts, the story said, he began writing "Blood On The Tracks."

### **WRAPPING IT UP - FINALLY**

In the film's final 30 minutes, we get a brief clip of Baez singing Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne", a Dylan-Baez tour duet, interestingly titled "Never Let Me Go," then a telling shot of Dylan, tellingly reading a newspaper story about the Rolling Thunder Shows which happens to include a photo of Bob and Joan. Sara sees it and says "She's frigid, just look at her, for Chrissakes. She's probably barren." "You don't even know her," Dylan replies. "I know her," Sara says. "We're like sisters."

After one last trip to the Greek Chorus, talk about "truthfulness" and being "bought off" - the leader says "No way, baby" we get a quick cut to Bob singing his classic "Tangled Up In Blue" - the greatest song on Blood On The Tracks and almost certainly, the one song fans who came to the theater were hoping to hear.

The song, performed in Harvard Square, is played fast and the camera zooms in on him and his eyes that as Baez once wrote "bluer than robin's eggs" burning out from underneath the foliage on his wide-brimmed hat. When we hear the line "He'd seen a

lot of women but she never left his mind and he just grew, tangled up in blue,” we nod. No explanation necessary.

More weirdness ensues before we’re done. We get the Dylan-Ginsberg chat about God with some kids, whether or not he plays guitar (“No!”) some of Ginsberg dancing, a brief clip of a student from Southeastern Massachusetts University (the show I saw) who doesn’t seem to know who Bob Dylan is and bang, we’re back on stage with Dylan singing a duet on “Just Like A Woman” (this time with Ronee Blakely!) and his concert-closer, the grand finale, “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door.”

After Dylan leaves the stage and walks through a door marked “Private,” we get one last look at the guy, exhausted, lying on his back on the floor. The camera circles him lying flat, his guitar to his side. Then we cut to an unidentified lounge singer, singing some cornball nightclub ditty about castles in the sand. The contrasting styles and substance of the music we’ve just heard - which we assume was intentional - is striking. Some music goes in one ear and out the other. Other music, Bob’s music, lingers in your ear.

### **FILM CRITICS POUNCE**

Critics were merciless on “Renaldo & Clara.” Rolling Stone said “This is meant to work on the level of Freud but it is a lot closer to fraud.” Famed film critic Pauline Kael said “It’s what Louis and Marie Antoinette might have done at Versailles if only they’d had the cameras.” James Wolcott, writing in the Village Voice, suggested “it was like watching the defeat of the Spanish Armada.” Even New Times Magazine hit hard, running a mocking cover of multiple pictures of Bob, “Here’s the cover we promised you” along with a withering article on the film.

Talking later with the always sympathetic Jonathan Cott in Rolling Stone, Dylan responded to those critics who called him “presumptuous, pretentious and egocentric” with this zinger. “Those people probably don’t like to eat what I like to eat, they probably don’t like the same things I like or the same people. Look, just one time I’d like to see those assholes try and do what I do.”

Looking back, however muddled and meddled with the film appears to be, should it be a bad thing that an artist of Dylan’s stature was willing to try something as bold and unprecedented as writing, acting and creating a feature film? If he’d have done away with some of the silly stuff - Ginsberg dancing, the Wall Street preaching, the goofy bordello, even the Mama Frasca stuff, scenes or moments that only served to confuse things and even if he left the “acting” scenes in there and used a good bunch of the material Scorsese found for Rolling Thunder Revue, he might have gotten away with “Renaldo & Clara.”

Is there a film there? In Shelter From The Storm, Sid Griffin spends a good amount of time dissecting the film suggesting what to keep, what to cut. Of course, at that point, Sid hadn’t seen the material Scorsese found. Sid certainly would have wanted to use some of that. Why didn’t Bob?

Once Pennebaker got a chance to see the film, he discussed what he saw with Griffin. “I sensed that all the way through,” Pennebaker said, “what he had was this wonderful idea happening and the Rolling Thunder tour itself with all kinds of dramatic possibilities in his own life and the idea of using fictional people, all that is terrific. What he never had was a sense of what the story was about. In other words, what he was going to settle for to release.”

In light of the personal turmoil and very public criticism, easily the most savage of his career, coupled with the ugly reports of the divorce, some were not surprised that after the “Street Legal” album - a middling success at best - and an exhausting overseas tour, Bob turned to *The Lord*.

Looking back at “Renaldo & Clara” and what left-out clips made it into Scorsese’s “Rolling Thunder Revue” all these years later, we can weigh the decisions filmmaker Bob Dylan made, what he was willing to share with us and what he wasn’t. We got to see some of what he left out and wonder what might have been, what he intended and what he delivered. Given the likely self-created stress in his life at the time, the impending failure of the film, the critical savagery that awaited him, it’s not a topic that interviewers bring up very often. But wouldn’t it be interesting to hear his take now? Tell us where you went wrong, Bob? Or tell us why you made it so intentionally difficult to grasp?

My hope is by using this article as a guide, considering it as one possible explication, “Renaldo & Clara” may be worth another look. I mean, if Shakespeare made a movie, wouldn’t you dig it?

**John Nogowski is the author of “Bob Dylan: A Descriptive, Critical Discography 1961-2022, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (332 pgs.)” Published by McFarland and Co., the book is available on Amazon.**