

A Complete Unknown: A drama about singer Bob Dylan's rise to fame

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2 January 2025

From director James Mangold (*Ford v Ferrari*, *3:10 to Yuma*, *Walk the Line*, *Girl, Interrupted*), *A Complete Unknown* follows in the wake of a number of films, mostly documentaries, on the life of Bob Dylan. Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007) was perhaps the most notable one that fictionalized Dylan's life and times.

A Complete Unknown is written by Mangold and Jay Cocks and based on the 2015 book by Elijah Wald, *Dylan Goes Electric*. Wald also collaborated with Dave Van Ronk, a key figure in the Greenwich Village folk scene and Dylan's friend at the time, on *The Mayor of MacDougal Street* (2012), Van Ronk's autobiography.

The best feature of Mangold's latest film, frankly, is the music. In its 141 minutes, *A Complete Unknown* explores the evolution of Bob Dylan from his 1961 arrival on the vibrant folk music scene in New York City to his electrified performance at the Newport Folk Festival in late July 1965. Prior to its official release on Christmas Day, *A Complete Unknown* was the subject of a tidal wave of publicity both on the television talk shows and in social media.

Timothée Chalamet, cast as Dylan, Monica Barbaro as folksinger Joan Baez and Edward Norton as singer-activist Pete Seeger have been highly praised for their work in the film. Each had to learn the instrument and voice of his or her character, which each did remarkably well. To what extent the performances remain at the level of skillful impersonation, rather than profound understanding of the different personalities, is a more complex matter.

Despite the potential of the film to be simply a nostalgia piece for Dylan fans, Mangold has made a conscientious effort to identify the social and political context of the artist's development, from being "a complete unknown" (a line from Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," 1965) to the massively popular cultural phenomenon he had become by 1965.

The opening scene depicts Seeger's courageous statement in his 1955 appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee, "I am not going to answer any questions as to my association, my philosophical or religious beliefs, or my political beliefs, or how I voted in any election, or any of these private affairs...." For his defiance of the hearings, Seeger was sentenced to a year in prison. The charges were subsequently dropped.

While the McCarthyite "Red Scare" was effectively over by the late 1950s, anticommunism exerted a significant political influence, as it still does to this day. When the 20-year-old Bob Dylan arrived in New York City, the Bay of Pigs invasion was being prepared and the US was beginning its buildup of troops in Vietnam.

The generation of young people who came of age in the 1960s were less weighed down by illusions in the greatness of "American democracy." The postwar economic boom was beginning to unravel, industrial cities like Chicago and Detroit were experiencing the first signs of a slowdown in manufacturing; 1963 witnessed 900 protests over civil rights and jobs in 100 cities, culminating in the massive March on Washington in August (at which Dylan sang). Twenty thousand people were arrested and 10 killed

in the course of those various protests.

As we have previously noted, a *New York Times* headline

in October [1963] raised the specter of death by starvation in Appalachia during the coming winter. In eastern Kentucky, a state of virtual civil war existed between miners and coal operators. Michael Harrington's *The Other America* appeared, documenting the persistence of social misery in the US.

There was a growing awareness among the young in particular of the falsity of the picture of American life presented in sitcoms like *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It To Beaver*. The reality of postwar America included widespread racism and segregated neighborhoods, the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, social inequality, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the pervasive anxiety bound up with the Cold War. These actualities were the source of the discontent and restlessness that gave rise to the protest and folk music scene and to Bob Dylan's music itself. For a period, he personified that unease and dissatisfaction in an artistic and intriguing manner.

The years covered by *A Complete Unknown* were politically intense. It was a time when large numbers of young people began to shift to the left. However, that radicalism was inevitably of a confused character. The musical protest circles were still largely dominated by the Stalinist politics of the Communist Party or its intellectual vestiges, along with a witches' brew of Maoism, Castroism and the New Left. What had once been the Trotskyist movement in the US, the Socialist Workers Party, led by James P. Cannon, essentially broke with Marxism in 1963 and set out on a wretched, anti-revolutionary course.

The circumstances, in other words, for the artist in search of a genuinely anti-establishment, anti-capitalist path, free from Stalinist and other baleful influences, were challenging.

Mangold's film, unsurprisingly, does not touch on the political, ideological intricacies. However, lacking a coherent "theory" of the time, it falls back too often on clichés. One grows a little tired of Seeger-Norton's seraphic, slightly smug smile and Baez-Barbaro's "dark," foreboding stares.

A Complete Unknown tells its story chronologically, and perhaps too facilely, leaving out aspects of Dylan's personality and musical background that Wald's book points to. Dylan himself hid his own middle class, Midwestern background behind fantastical stories of traveling around the country as a carny and learning songs from a variety of sometimes imaginary misfits.

Dylan is inspired by his idol, the Dustbowl troubadour Woody Guthrie (Scoot McNairy), afflicted fatally with Huntington's disease (a hereditary neurodegenerative disorder), to whom the young man pays visits in a grim New Jersey hospital. Guthrie invented his own persona, as does his young

acolyte, although more emphatically. His girlfriend of the time, Sylvie Russo, played by Elle Fanning (Dylan requested the name of this real girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, not be used), calls him “a jerk” for keeping himself distant from people by fabricating his own history. He answers, “People make up their past. They remember what they want. They forget the rest.”

Dylan’s successes come a little too easily, as if they are simply a product of his own brilliance (a notion to which, unhappily, the singer himself may subscribe). There is no denying his great talent, but Dylan was influenced by turbulent circumstances, above all, as well as by people he met in the Village, notably Van Ronk (Joe Tippett). The latter is featured too briefly in the film. In this reviewer’s mind, a scene of him performing would have added to the truth of the narrative.

Dylan himself acknowledges Van Ronk’s influence in his 2004 *Chronicles, Volume One*.

Dave sang folk songs, jazz standards, Dixieland stuff, and blues ballads, not in any particular order and not a superfluous nuance in his entire repertoire. Songs that were delicate, expansive, personal, historical, or ethereal, you name it. He put everything into a hat and—presto—put a new thing out in the sun. I was greatly influenced by Dave. Later, when I would record my first album, half the cuts on it were renditions of songs that Van Ronk did. It’s not like I planned that; it just happened. Unconsciously, I trusted his stuff more than I did mine. ...

I felt different towards Van Ronk than anyone else on the scene because it was him who brought me into the fold, and I was happy to be playing alongside him night after night at the Gaslight. It was a real stage with a real audience, and it was where the real action was.

In turn, Van Ronk, as cited in Wald’s *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, acknowledged

Even if everyone didn’t admit it, we all knew that he [Dylan] was the most talented of us.

Dylan describes Van Ronk as anti-imperialist. More specifically, he was a Trotskyist and a member of the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, and remained associated with it until the end of the 1960s.

Mangold grasps at a certain level the political landscape and makes an honest, if limited attempt to place Dylan’s music in the events of the time. For example, in October 1962, a 13-day confrontation in Cuba between the US and the Soviet Union brought the world close to nuclear war. “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” and “Masters of War,” Dylan’s deeply passionate antiwar ballad, were both inspired by the Cuban Missile Crisis. “Masters of War” addresses the war profiteers and remains highly relevant today. It is unquestionably worth listening to. The last verse:

And I hope that you die
And your death will come soon
I’ll follow your casket
By the pale afternoon
And I’ll watch while you’re lowered
Down to your deathbed
And I’ll stand over your grave

‘Til I’m sure that you’re dead

Mangold’s film largely leaves out the left-wing sharpness of Dylan’s views in 1963–64, even if it only lasted for a brief time.

The director was born in 1963, so he didn’t himself experience the fear provoked by the missile crisis. He attempts to portray the events of October 1962 through news broadcasts and, in a clumsy and melodramatic manner, scenes of panicked New Yorkers running through the streets with suitcases, flagging down taxis. That simply didn’t happen.

The somewhat mechanical effort to place Dylan’s music in historical settings explains why the film strains to account for the production of particular songs. The November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy is immediately followed by Dylan’s recording “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” This is a period when the artist is furiously writing and recording new songs. Mangold manufactures scenes in the interest of compressing longer-term character development. In a performance with Baez, he plays an earlier tune “Blowin’ In the Wind” which the audience demands but which he initially refuses, claiming that his guitar is broken. Baez insists and eventually prevails, but he turns his back to the audience.

As artists like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones explode in popularity, Dylan’s musical tastes (and ambitions) change. In a chance encounter, Bobby Neuwirth (Will Harrison) invokes his freedom to play whatever he wants. Later, in a fabricated scene, Dylan picks up a siren whistle from a street vendor which he later uses in the recording session of *Highway 61 Revisited*.

Mangold includes many of the tropes Dylan fans would appreciate in the storyline. For instance, the young guitarist, Al Kooper (Charlie Tahan), plants himself more or less by accident behind the Hammond B3 organ in the “Like A Rolling Stone” recording session and, while flying by the seat of his pants, helps produce a consummate instrumental track.

Other scenes from the electrified performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival are the lore of Dylan aficionados and a good deal of mythmaking. Dylan’s canny business manager Albert Grossman (Dan Fogler) and musicologist Alan Lomax (Norbert Leo) get into a punch-up over the performance. Popular mythology tells of Pete Seeger grabbing an axe and attempting to cut the audio cables. That never happened, but Mangold has him glaring angrily at a rack of axes to illustrate his reaction.

Hollywood generally requires that dramas revolve around the love interests of leading characters. Mangold, to his credit, avoids that for the most part, though not completely. The attraction between Dylan and Suze/Sylvie seems genuine and moving. But the scene toward the end where she attends the folk festival, but can’t bear to watch “Bob” performing with “Joan,” seems like a concession to box office expectations. His affair with Baez was well known, but the dynamic seemed almost of a professional/career one as Dylan distanced himself from the folk music scene.

The period of the film’s conclusion was also the beginning of the escalation of US intervention in Vietnam. The first deployment of combat troops was carried out by President Lyndon Johnson in July 1965, about the same time as Dylan’s plugged-in performance at the Newport Folk Festival. It is significant that no connection is made in the film.

Wald’s book, however, documents that a performer at Newport in 1965 named Len Chandler declared himself opposed to Johnson’s sending more troops to Vietnam. That was apparently the only mention of the conflict during the festival.

A Complete Unknown hints at Dylan’s ambitions and his increasing bitterness and paranoia but leaves aside any attempt to explain his further trajectory, including his embrace for the most part of social indifference. Wald’s book provides some helpful insight. Given the artistic and political difficulties of the time, it seems Dylan responded to what he perceived to be the failings of the folk music “left,” by throwing the baby

out with a good deal of the bathwater.

In any case, Mangold's narrative ends with Dylan returning to visit Guthrie again, before heading out on his motorcycle, tying the story up in a neat package. Unfortunately, the world is never so neat.



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