

Charles Shaar Murray on the afterlife of famous rockers

## Dead Groovy

John Lennon (d. 1980) was 1990's Dead Rock Star Of The Year - the winner by a short head and a money-losing Liverpool charity tribute concert over Jimi Hendrix (d. 1970), his closest competitor - and Jim Morrison (d. 1971) has already nailed down this year's title with a considerably larger margin over his runner-up, Bob Marley (d. 1981). Janis Joplin (also d. 1971), a figure of comparable eminence at the time, didn't even rate the courtesy of a Greatest Hits album when her zero-in-the-date anniversary rolled around: partly because her particular brand of white-blues histrionics has aged extraordinarily badly, and partly because Joplin was a woman and, for some reason, authentic Croaked Legends have to be male.

It is a truism of our time that there's nothing sexier than a dead rock star. Croaked Legends are a marketing department's dream: they are infinitely predictable and unlikely to compromise a winning streak in the applecart-upsetting manner of a Bowie or a Prince, unlikely to complain (except through the medium of a live lawyer) and equally unlikely to provide inconvenient surprises, except in the case of Elvis Presely (d. 1977), still apparently appearing in supermarkets or alive and well on the moon. However, if your favourite rock star is sufficiently inconsiderate to be still alive, then Undead is the next best bet.

The main advantage that an Undead rocker has over a genuine stiff is that the Undead can tour (and that anyone who can tour can therefore cut a Live album). Case in point: The Who. Their membership includes an actual dead person (Keith Moon, d. 1978), and they have been formally dissolved several times. In other words, they are a dead band except that they can tour when the occasion demands it (ie, when the bank account of any of the three surviving members dips below a certain balance), and they don't make disappointing new albums.



The Rolling Stones are almost Undead, except that they spoiled things by releasing not only a 'souvenir live album of the reunion tour', but a topical single attacking the dishonesties and stupidities which created the Gulf War. The aforementioned Bowie, having cocked up his last two or three metamorphoses, managed to recoup some of his investment by launching a recent Undead tour before diving back into his Tin Machine for another exercise in audience alienation.

Which brings us to Bob Dylan, who turns 50 this year. 1991 also marks the 30th anniversary of the release of his first album, which combination of events delivers enough zeros to satisfy even the most demanding anniversary addict. To celebrate, Columbia Records have issued a 3-CD boxed set of out-takes and marginalia impossibly entitled *The Bootleg Series Vols 1-3 (Rare and Unreleased) 1961-1991*, and a new biography has also appeared: Clinton Heyman's *Dylan: Behind The Shades* (Viking, hbk £16.99).

Both projects make much of the continuing evolution of the subject, but nevertheless, 'Dylan Classique' stubbornly remains the mid-60s

edition: the period between the British tour captured in Pennebaker's *Don't Look Now* and the cover-photo session for *Blonde On Blonde*. The *Bootleg Series* box carries a particularly striking 'Dylan Classique' cover shot, as does *Behind The Shades*. While Heylin's book fails to live up to its title, it does at least provide the most tightly focused close-up of said shades currently available. Heylin is very good on the what and when of Dylan's doings at any particular stage of the proceedings, and he is a tireless and painstaking seeker after the sources of Dylan's assorted inspirations; but the why of the former Robert Zimmerman's seemingly capricious shifts and fancies remains as irritatingly enigmatic as ever.

The CD set lives up to its title by proving, fairly conclusively, not only that the stuff Dylan was rejecting in the 60s was considerably more powerful than what he is issuing now, but that some of the material that he rejected recently - most spectacularly the astonishing 'Blind Willie McTell' - is also better than his current official project.

Significantly, Heyman's book quotes virtually none of Dylan's lyrics; a clear sign that the book remains unsanc-

tioned by the great man and his representatives. It is one of Dylan's rules that permission to quote from his lyrics will not be forthcoming if the context is unflattering: I myself fell foul of this stricture in a book of my own. Dylan's proxies may have been overcautious in the present case: while Heyman is no sycophant, his admiration for his subject is beyond doubt.

Dylan Classique remains unassailable: the curly-haired dandyish young cynic who appears on these covers is the man who did not so much bring poetry and politics to rock and roll as demonstrate that the potential for both was already there. He is 'hot, sexy and dead', as a *Rolling Stone* cover described Jim Morrison in 1981. Beside him stands the Dylan of the present day: a cantankerous old curmudgeon capable of staggering obtuseness (on gender, politics and religion) and severely dodgy records, some of which his devotees claim are works of authentic

This is Dylan the born-again Christian, Dylan the ayatollah of anti-feminism, and Dylan whose interpretation of Zionism is undoubtedly closer to the vision of Ariel Sharon than that of Amos Oz.

You can accuse this mean-spirited old crank of many things: Undeadness is not one of them. His shows are too inconsistent, his attitudes too inconvenient, his politics too changeable for him to be anything other than alive, if not necessarily well.

And one more thing: Dylan, like James Brown (who also has a major box-set due out around this time) has more than made his point. Like Brown, he can make crappy records, deliver crappy shows, and express crappy attitudes for the rest of his life if he so desires (and he probably does): his achievement is unassailable. Dylan Classique is dead and pure: Dylan himself is alive and kicking. Long may he evade the ranks of the Undead, and any marketing gurus who would drive a stake into his miserable old heart.