



I'm Not There

Cate Blanchett, Heath Ledger, Richard Gere, Ben Whishaw, Marcus Carl Franklin, and Christian Bale star in a film written and directed by Todd Haynes.

By Josef Woodard

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Todd Haynes's head-trippy quasi-biopic of Bob Dylan is not the first film to utilize the jarring effect of multiple actors for a single role. Among the notable experiments in the subgenre are Luis Buñuel's surreal *That Obscure Object of Desire* and, recently, Todd Solondz's *Palindromes*, which aims to unsettle the viewer even beyond the inherently bizarre conceit of musical chair actors.

For Haynes, though, the decision made sense on multiple levels, the most glaring one being the chameleonic persona adopted by Dylan during the past four decades. The kaleidoscopic structure and casting — Christian Bale, Heath Ledger, Cate Blanchett, Richard Gere, Ben Whishaw, and

Marcus Carl Franklin — presumably aspire to present a fantastical overview of a mythic musical figure in an inventive style contrary to the standard biopic.

But I'm Not There is also a mess that runs too long and suffers from narrative vertigo and the kind of pretentious overkill evident in the worst works of Nicolas Roeg and Ken Russell. Still, there are plenty of treats along the way, especially the sequences involving Blanchett, the most captivating of the Dylans. She captures the volatility and elusiveness of Dylan in his early, electric, “all they want from me is finger-pointin’ songs” phase.

Familiar, and infamous, figures from Dylan’s life drift through the film, including his boorish manager, Albert Grossman, and (Santa Ynez’s own) Edie Sedgwick, a sensuously waifish character whose periodic appearances both enliven and confuse the viewer. Gere is a grizzly, bespectacled Billy the Kid-like character in a western town being sold out, and he mutters his way through the scenes while “One More Cup of Coffee” plays.

In the end, it’s hard to know what to make of *I'm Not There*, which too often suffers from a sense of no there there. It could be part satire of the musical biopic genre, or an attempt to harness the nervy excitement of rock culture. Then again, the slippery yet seductive pull of the film resembles Dylan’s own strange book, *Chronicles, Volume 1*, in which he tells his story, without telling his story. There’s an interesting film here, struggling to break free of a tricked-out structure.