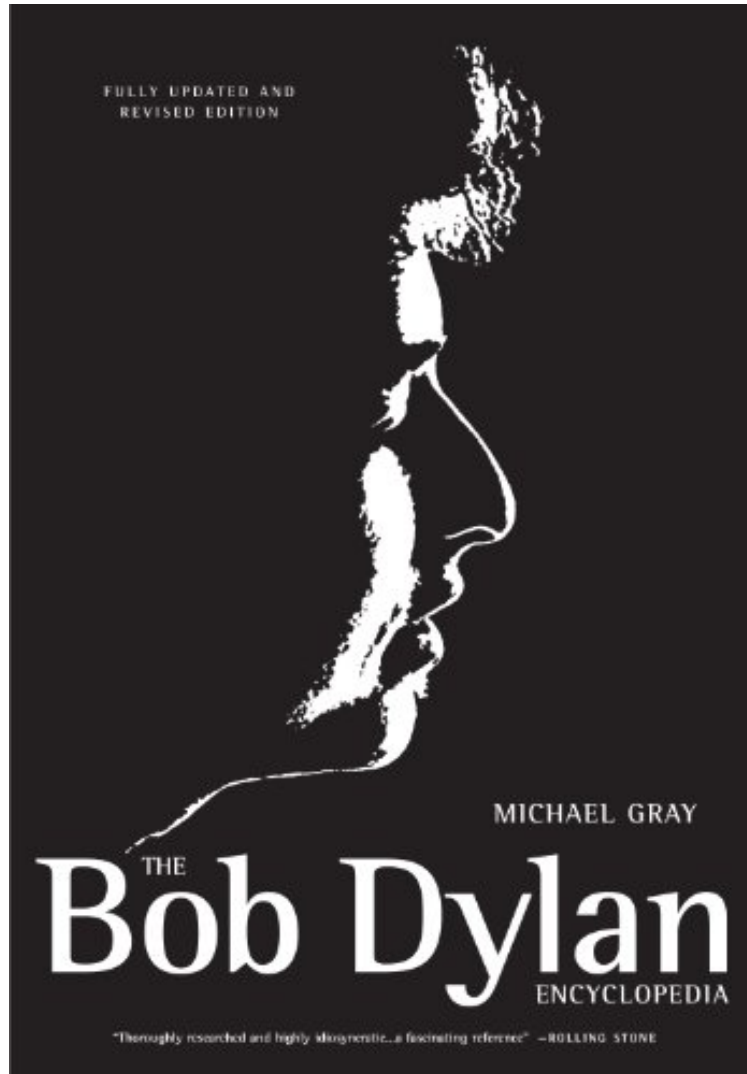


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The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia: Revised and Updated Edition

Michael Gray

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Michael Gray : The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia: Revised and Updated Edition before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia: Revised and Updated Edition:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A must for music fans By John H This is a great book - not something you read from start to finish but something to open at a random page and skim until you find something that interests you. 36 of 38 people found the following review helpful. The most amusing encyclopedia ever By Masked and Anonymous Michael Gray's Dylan encyclopedia is enormously impressive as a piece of research, but this is not simply an academic tome by any means. Gray's amusingly opinionated observations about songs, concerts, band members,

etc. permeate each of the entries, making for an interesting read. One of the best parts of the book is that persons who have their own entries are listed in CAPS, so you can read one entry at random, find a reference to another Dylan-related figure or event that catches your eye, and skip right to the corresponding entry. Gray also includes entries for other Dylan biographers/scholars, including relatively obscure folks who've done interesting work and the legendary super-fan/scholar Olof of internet fame. What really makes the book is that despite Gray's obviously obsessive interest in Dylan, he doesn't treat Dylan as a god or waste time defending in the indefensible among Dylan's enormous output as an artist. If anything, his judgments (such as his putdown of the 1983 album *Infidels*) strike me as excessively harsh, although he also takes pleasure in calling attention to his appreciation of records that he likes more than most, like *Under the Red Sky*. In any case, this is a highly entertaining Dylan book. It'll be of much greater value of course to those who've read at least one of the standard biographies and are familiar with Dylan's career in some detail. But I would rank this book, and also the Cott book of Dylan interviews just out, in the VERY top shelf of Dylan-related books (and God knows there are a lot of those....) 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. 4 and 1/2 Stars -- Invaluable, Could Have Been Great By Bill R. Moore

There is a virtual library of books covering nearly every Bob Dylan aspect, but this is the first that anyone should buy. Unlike most, it is very general, touching on criticism, biography, and nearly every other area. Unlike many, it is written for a general audience; the casual and curious will get at least as much out of it as hard-cores. This is a veritable treasure trove of Dylan facts, criticism, figures, trivia, and more. All fan levels will find much to enjoy and appreciate; readers are both entertained and enlightened. Simply put, no serious Dylan fan can be without this, and anyone even remotely interested should seriously consider it. The best thing about the book is its comprehensiveness - over seven hundred pages plus a generous amount of pictures, an interesting preface, and a well-compiled index. Michael Gray is keenly aware of his audience and clearly learned from one of the main complaints about *Song and Dance Man III*, his prior Dylan work. This aimed at hard-cores, and while they appreciated the painstaking documentation, many found it at times overwhelming, and some were especially annoyed by the many long footnotes. Documentation is just as extensive here, but Gray wisely relegates it to brackets at entries' end, letting those who do not care for it easily skip. The simple alphabetical index also makes for easy browsing, as does Gray's convenient capitalizing of entries mentioned in other entries. Yet the book is not perfect. There are a few clear flaws, but they are relatively minor and take away little. The most important thing in such a book is accuracy, and this reaches a very high mark. I noticed about half a dozen errors and have seen a few others pointed out, but they are thankfully minor and mostly not about Dylan directly. Besides, such accuracy is extraordinary in a work of this magnitude, especially one written by a single person. However, many of Gray's subjective choices are controversial, and individual tastes will go a long way toward determining how much one likes the book, though thankfully nothing overrules the indisputably positive features. First and most importantly, it is important to realize that the title is somewhat misleading. Though encyclopedic in scope - at least if we restrict ourselves to one volume encyclopedias -, this has very little resemblance to standard encyclopedias. For starters, it is not a purely reference work. The preface admits that the book is primarily the work of a critic, and there is also much biographical material, trivia of the sort that would not make an encyclopedia, and many comments of various natures. This last is the most important; in stark contrast to actual encyclopedias, Gray does not even pretend to be objective or neutral. His opinions are everywhere; many are negative, and quite a few are controversial. A good number even seem inflammatory; hard-core Dylan fans are a warring camp, and Dylan books are known for this, but one can easily question the usefulness and relevance of igniting old battles in such a work. Much of this is of course Dylan-related - e.g., Gray's constant bickering about latter-day concerts -, but the most controversial probably relates to others. Fans of Joan Baez and Roger McGuinn will be particularly offended, and I probably need say no more about The Beatles' entry other than that it says only "A pop group." Many will likely be bothered not so much by the presence of opinions as by the way Gray delivers them as if they are facts. On top of this, a significant amount of what he says is discursive, and a surprising amount is personal. Perhaps this should not surprise; it is after all his book, and its nature is clear in the very first entry. Some may even be glad; it after all gives the book a personal, informal feel that makes reading more entertaining - there is even occasional humor, though the jokes sometimes fall flat - than a standard reference work would be. Those normally bored by such books could even be delighted. However, those wanting standard encyclopedic tone will be disappointed - perhaps even to the point of disliking the book and/or finding it near useless. The book is also not what it seems in other ways. Indeed, it may be best to describe the work as not about Dylan directly so much as about things related to him, often quite tangentially. The strange description on the back implies this, but I assumed it was misleading; perhaps it should be considered a warning. For example, a very large percentage of the book consists of entries about musicians who have played with Dylan. All have the basic information one would expect: biographical summary, information about the Dylan connection, and a bit about other work. Many, perhaps most, will want nothing more; this is after all supposed to be about Dylan. However, many entries go much further, some even lasting pages. Such extended entries go into considerable detail about biographical and other non-Dylan matter. Even stranger, some barely mention Dylan; he is sometimes thrown in as a sentence or two at the end seemingly as an afterthought. Such entries are always revealing and frequently interesting; much is even fascinating on its own terms. However, their relevance is very debatable; many will likely skip most or all of them.

The book would be considerably shorter without them and arguably better. In strange contrast, despite the remarkable comprehensiveness, a surprising number of things related directly to Dylan that almost anyone would have included are absent. For example, I never doubted that every officially released song would have an entry, but almost none do. In fact, the ones that are chosen seem wildly arbitrary; most of the best-known and best are missing, but quite a few obscure ones are present. Even more bizarrely, the entries are often very short, and the information is in no way standardized; we might get pages of intense critical analysis about one and a few token notes on another. Similarly, all official albums are here, but the entries are extremely short - a few sentences with the most basic information. Many other no-brainers are also missing. For instance, there is no entry with all basic biographical information in one place, and the book lacks obvious, eminently useful lists of things like Dylan's award and sales. It is also easy to take issue with what Gray includes. Long entries about obscure and unpopular topics like Dylan's gospel era, his much-maligned *Under the Red Sky* album, and some of his recent traditional folk song choices will bore many. It is hard to blame Gray for riding pet favorites, but they often seem out of place. More importantly, they make the book distinctly uneven in regard to the length and quality of entries. How much information we get, as well as what type and how well it is presented, depends on how much Gray likes - or hates - it. Those with similar views will be glad; those with widely variant ones may be profoundly disappointed. All of this would of course be taken for granted in a normal Dylan book, but anything with "Encyclopedia" in the title distinctly implies something else. The inclusion of critical material is another case in point. Gray's critical Dylan book has been through three expanded editions, and there are many others by various authors. Anyone looking for such a work can easily find one, but "Encyclopedia" does not imply a critical book, and most will probably be surprised by criticism's presence. It may be a pleasant surprise to some, but probably at least as many will find it annoying and cumbersome. Its randomness is particularly puzzling even to those who like it. There is no method to its distribution; famous songs are passed over without criticism, and we may go dozens of pages without any only to have an in-depth analysis of an obscure song. Many will think criticism is inappropriate in such a work and only weighs it down, but even those who like will really only have their appetites whetted. Gray may have put it to lure readers into *Song and Dance Man III*, but he may well scare away more readers than he wins over. Leaving aside the question of whether criticism should even be present, it should at least be more even-handed. Gray's writing may also irritate some, particularly his overuse of certain words. One would think this could not be a problem in such a long work, but he rides some - particularly "risible" - so hard that it is impossible not to notice. His use of British spellings in Dylan lyrics is also annoying and inaccurate. British spellings might annoy Americans, but no one should take authors to task for using native spellings in their own prose. However, Dylan is American and uses American spellings; non-Americans must not force their nationality onto him. Gray is not alone in this sad trend, but his participation is unfortunate. Finally, though the book has something for all, those who have read many Dylan books, especially Gray's, will get significantly less out of it. As it sticks mainly to basic information, especially when about Dylan directly, hard-cores will already know much of it. Perhaps more disappointingly, Gray reuses much of his prior writing verbatim to the extent of several pages at a time; for example, album entries are direct from *Song and Dance Man III*. This is understandable given the work's general nature, and hard-cores must remember they are not the target audience. Even so, as with much else, there is a strange randomness; for instance, Gray reuses long passages about obscure works but refrains from copying many other sections of at least equal relevance. This can only disappoint hard-cores, but the book still has plenty to make it worthwhile for them. All this may make it seem that cons outweigh pros, but this is far from so. It is just that cons are easier to describe, and listing them will be more useful to potential buyers than simply belaboring the many excellencies. The truth is that this is a wonderful, invaluable book for all fans and, if not perfect, is still excellent. Opinions may vary somewhat widely in subjective areas, but none can deny the book's high overall quality, and it belongs on every fan's bookshelf. If you buy only one Dylan book, make it this one.

The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia is one of the most wide-ranging, informed, entertaining, provocative, and compulsively readable books ever written about popular music. It's the culmination of over thirty years of dedicated research and scholarship by Michael Gray. Inside these pages, you'll find a world of ideas, facts, and opinions. It's a world in which Baudelaire flows on from the Basement Tapes and A.S. Byatt looks out at the Byrds; in which Far from the Madding Crowd follows Ezekiel and Bob Geldof introduces Jean Genet; and in which Hank and William Carlos Williams stand side by side while J.R.R. Tolkien trails the Titanic. Most of all, of course, it's a world in which everyone and everything interconnects, in endlessly fascinating ways, with one of our greatest living artists: Bob Dylan. "Michael Gray... probably Dylan's single most assiduous critic." - New York Review of Books "Fans of Bob Dylan have a multitude of choices when it comes to biographies and retrospectives, but author Michael Gray outdistances them all with this voluminous collection of all things Dylan. ... Insightful and entertaining, Gray's tome will broaden appreciation of the artist, his influences and his legacy." - Publishers Weekly (starred review) "...has all you need to know, and more" - Richard Corliss, Time "This is no mere catalog of facts, but a work of oceanic immersion. It has wit, opinion, style, and asks to be read, not just consulted." - Village Voice "Deeply impressive...destined to be the most important Dylan book, bar none." - Gerry Smith, The Dylan Daily "Utterly idiosyncratic." - Janet Maslin, New

York Times "Amazingly well-researched and surprisingly readable work." -Library Journal (starred review) "Door-stopping detail." -Toronto Star "Magnificent...won't just astonish readers with its detail about Dylan's work...contains so many insights and refutes so many myths about the rock 'n' roll era in general that it's invaluable as both a reference guide and a personality study." -Nashville City Paper "Comprehensive and up-to-date." -Slate

Mention - Today's Books, March 2006 "Comprehensive and up-to-date" -David Yaffe, Slate, May 2006 "...all you need to know, and more, about the little big man." Richard Corliss, Time Magazine "Michael Gray, who has spent years trying to capture Mr. Dylan's lightning in a bottle, has produced Bob Dylan Encyclopedia, a heavy, utterly idiosyncratic compendium. It's even up-to-date enough to make reference to The Essential Interviews and include a snarky reference to Mr. Cott. Among its many other categories: 'book endorsements, unfortunate,' 'blues, inequality of reward in,' 'co-option of real music by advertising, the,' 'radical political activity in 1960s-70s US, the strange disappearance of' and 'repertoire, Dylan's early, unsuited to commercial radio.' Janet Maslin, The New York Times