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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

DEATH MARCH WITH COCKTAILS

Where have all the flowers gone? Listen and learn.

- Tim Goodman
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Beverly Hills -- There is a spine-tingling, effortlessly great moment in Martin Scorsese's documentary "No Direction Home: Bob Dylan," when watching TV for a living seems like a gigantic mistake and the lure of music's visceral gut punch is almost too much to bear. It's 1966 in London, and Dylan, folk icon, has gone electric. He is young, wiry and full of marshalling genius -- he was probably never cooler. "Traitor!" someone yells. "What happened to Woody Guthrie, Bob?" another yells. Boos ring out, and Dylan, in a check suit and pointy shoes, drolly steps to the microphone and says, "These aren't British songs, they're American songs."

Beautifully audacious. In comes the guitar and drums, and Scorsese's camera captures the backdrop: a huge, wall-size American flag. "Judas!" someone else yells later. But it's too late by then. "Like a Rolling Stone" is filling the hall -- rock 'n' roll has just put a knife in folk music.

For all the emotional fulfillment one gets watching expertly crafted, brilliantly nuanced and superbly performed television, sometimes there's no real substitute for rock 'n' roll.

And so there was a keen sense of anticipation when PBS decided to screen "No Direction Home: Bob Dylan" to roughly 100 people last week. It was one of those rare moments on the Death March with Cocktails: a desire to actually watch something. Even better, it was the first time the 3 1/2-hour film, with loads of never-before-seen footage, was going to be seen by anyone in the world.

That's probably one reason why actor Benicio Del Toro snuck in, hat pulled low, and slunk into a screening-room seat on the Fox lot. The film, which will air in two parts on Sept. 26 and 27, had been a well-guarded secret. Apparently, Dylan didn't want a bunch of TV critics -- possibly some among us less

scrutable than others -- loading the DVD onto the Internet or using it for a mortgage on a new house thanks to the deep pockets of some rich Dylan nut.

We were told that this was it: Watch it on a studio lot in July, and use your memory to review it in September. Perhaps that and the film's length are one reason the herd was thin. But those who didn't see it missed out. "No Direction Home" is the latest in a well-orchestrated campaign of legacy building and deification for Dylan, but it's absolutely essential viewing. Dylan's manager kept private a wonderfully honest, far-ranging on-camera interview with Dylan that forms the backbone of the documentary. Those interviews, apparently filmed a handful of years ago, were not even seen by Scorsese -- a Dylan fanatic who had already shot "The Last Waltz" -- before filming began.

There must have been something in the air down here last week. A musical vibe crept in that was unmistakable. Even before MTV was set to arrive with its bevy of music stars and the related product they will push out to the masses, stodgy old PBS had, of all people, seminal rapper Chuck D on the scene to promote yet another public television documentary, "Get Up, Stand Up: The Story of Pop and Protest."

That film will air Sept. 28, one day after the Dylan documentary ends, so it can be said right now: Fall is going to rock. But there was also something oddly out of place about all of this work in the pipeline: Where are the protest songs of today? Is that ideal part of an era long gone, rising only as a blip on the screen when Billy Bragg decides he's got something to say, or when Bright Eyes goes on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" and belts out "When the President Talks to God" while a clearly uncomfortable Leno squirms? Maybe it's too easy to say the protest song is now musty enough to be documentary material -- after all, Matthew Sweet's searing "Holy War" randomly popped up and blared out on the iPod between these two PBS events -- but it is hard to escape the notion that, for what it's worth, protest is dying out in the current musical climate.

"You can't quantify everything by the amount of gross figure something sells in order for it to be something that works," Chuck D said, sounding optimistic. "I think the next Bob Marley could be here right now. The next Pete Seeger could be here right now."

Could be. But certainly the golden age of protest songs culled from topical stories is long over. That's made abundantly clear in "No Direction Home," in what may be construed as some heavyweight myth shattering. As the film documents Dylan's rise -- and remember this film is sanctioned by Dylan -- it suggests that not only was Dylan barely interested in being a protest singer, or even a folk singer, he was resolutely unreflective. "I can't self-analyze my songs," Dylan says at one point. He refutes that he ever changed his name in honor of the poet Dylan Thomas. He tells Studs Terkel on a Chicago radio station that "Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" isn't some apocalyptic bomb song and,

despite one reporter's desperation for interpretation, Dylan says his choice of clothing on the cover of "Highway 61 Revisited" has no deeper meaning than that's what he decided to wear.

And Joan Baez, whose contributions to the film are both insightful and funny, recalls how Dylan never thought much about the meaning of his lyrics, but they shared a laugh about how people in the future certainly would.

It doesn't really matter. When Dylan goes electric at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, charging into "Maggie's Farm" and "Like a Rolling Stone" to the horror of the masses, Pete Seeger included, it's just about one of the greatest rock 'n' roll moments you'll ever witness.

Seeing that -- and seeing Chuck D walk off the stage to "Fight the Power" -- brought a welcome rush of adrenaline to the ensconced critics here. Those moments were reminders that it's one thing to see, a whole different thing to feel.