

music

Bob Dylan pictured at the Aust ferry in 1966 with the First Severn Bridge in the background



Highway 61 Revisited is much more than a Bob Dylan tribute band; it includes a number of musicians who actually played with Dylan and a singer who looks and sounds like him. **Keith Clark** talked to the singer Joel Gilbert and to Dylan's former band leader Rob Stoner about the tribute show, Bob Dylan And The Rolling Thunder Revue

Playing tribute

If you are a dedicated Bob Dylan fan then the name Joel Gilbert will be well known to you. The Californian has written books on Dylan and has produced a number of documentary films on some of his legendary concert tours.

But Gilbert's knowledge of Dylan is not just from an academic angle, he knows his songs from having performed many of them on stage, too.

His highly acclaimed band, Highway 61 Revisited, has received the sort of press coverage and reviews that few tribute acts could ever hope to achieve; indeed, there must be many established bands who've looked on with envy at the reaction the band gets from critics and audiences alike.

For Gilbert happens to naturally look and sound amazingly like Dylan without ever making the mistake of trying to copy him.

"I sing the songs like I sing them and I do use a lot of Dylan's inflections and things, but I don't try to put on a funny voice or anything like that, and I get a lot of compliments for it. The typical comment we get, and I get this from many people, is: 'I really enjoyed your show even more than I did with Dylan because I could understand the words'."

Gilbert originally hails from Tennessee but "discovered" Dylan while he was studying in England, at the London School Of Economics, in the late 1980s.

"When I was in London, I started buying up bootlegs of Bob Dylan at Camden Market, and that's when I first saw the Dylan movie Don't Look Back, on the BBC, and had a sudden revelation. It hit me all at once."

"That was in 1987/88. I later settled in Los Angeles, working at Paramount Pictures as a financial analyst. I started managing alternative rock bands for a couple of years and then I decided I would start my own tribute show because I would always play Dylan songs at open mic nights."

"I decided to start a tribute show to Dylan around 1997/98. I did a solo tribute act first, for about a year, and started doing opening sets for a Beatles tribute band. Suddenly, instead of playing in small coffee houses I had large audiences of 500 to 1,000 people who were responding really well. Anyway, the Beatles tribute fired their George Harrison, who looked a lot like Robbie Robertson, and that gave me the idea of putting the Dylan band together. We were touring some of the best spots immediately."

Gilbert is proud of his band, and the fact that it has attracted some exceptional musicians, and together they have toured the USA. They've even played in the town where Dylan went to school.

"We went to the city of Hibbing, Minnesota, last year, and put on a Dylan Day festival. They had us perform in the gymnasium of the Hibbing High School where Dylan did his first performance with his High School band. We put on a big show there for the people of Hibbing."

Gilbert is touring the UK with Highway 61 Revisited, but it is not just the usual band. Instead, for this special tour, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Dylan's 1976 Rolling Thunder Revue, he has with him some of Dylan's own musicians, including Rob Stoner, who was the band leader on the original Rolling Thunder Revues, Scarlet Rivera, who was also on these now-legendary shows, and Winston Watson, who was Dylan's drummer from 1992 to 1996.

"I'm so fortunate in that some of Dylan's best players throughout the years have been so impressed that they have wanted to join in. It is such an honour to play with Scarlet Rivera, and Rob Stoner has joined us, and Micky Jones has sat in with us. It is such a thrill and you really feel you are there, and I think the audience feels that, too."

The show will feature most of the familiar Dylan songs, as Gilbert explains:

"We do about 25 songs in a show, maybe 30, so we keep it very tight. I feel that it is the best of Dylan, Dylan at his best, his most powerful, and his most memorable performances."

"Some of the songs are from live performance arrangements throughout the years, some are from the records. I feel that we do them justice and present them together in a way that no one has ever experienced before. Even Dylan himself has never put those songs together in one presentation."

● Highway 61 Revisited's Rolling Thunder Revisited show comes to Bristol Bierkeller, The Pithay, All Saints St, Bristol, on Wednesday, November 1. Tickets cost £10 from the venue (0117 926 8514) or usual ticket outlets.



What stops The Rolling Thunder Revisited show being just yet another tribute act is that it features many musicians who have played with Dylan.

And in the case of Rob Stoner and Scarlet Rivera, who were part of the original Rolling Thunder Revues, they are recreating the role they played 30 years ago.

Bass player Stoner was even Bob Dylan's band leader for some years and helped create some of his most iconic records, as well as touring with him.

"It was an honour working with Bob as I have been a Dylan fan ever since he came out in the early Sixties. I couldn't believe my fortune to have landed such a plum job and wanted to make the most of it. I was very gratified that he entrusted me with the administrative details of his band for years."

"My first job with Dylan was playing on the Desire album in 1975," he remembers. "Scarlet Rivera is also on this tour and it was her first album with Dylan too. I did the Desire album and the John Hammond TV show that same year, 1975, and the subsequent Rolling Thunder Revue in 1976. Actually, I was the bandleader for two Rolling Thunder Revues, 1975 and 1976, and then I was also the bandleader for the beginning of the world tour that Dylan did with the big band."

The Desire album, the follow-up to the introspective Blood On The Tracks, featured a really pared down sound with Rivera's intense violin work and the extremely strong rhythm section of Howie Wyeth on drums and Stoner on bass. Emmylou Harris and Ronee Blakley provided the backing vocals.

"It nearly wasn't quite this simple a set-up; the first day of the recording session has gone down in music folklore because Dylan had invited everyone along and the studio was packed with musicians (around 21 it is said, including Joan Baez, Roger McGuinn, Eric Clapton and English rock band Kokomo), friends and family. It was obvious to everyone that this wasn't going to work, so Stoner suggested they cleared the studio and that Dylan just used a very basic line-up of musicians."

"Yes, I was the guy who suggested they all go home, and he came back with the pared down thing. They weren't getting any results, that was the bottom line, it was just a confusing scene, and I could see that they weren't going to get anywhere until they pulled it down to basics. They solicited my opinion and I told them, and they



Top: Rob Stoner with Bob Dylan around 1976. Above: Scarlet Rivera

listened, and took me up on it, and the next night they got results."

This was one of the factors behind Dylan's decision to form his own band, with Stoner as band leader.

It was also around this time that Dylan began putting together his Rolling Thunder Revue, a massive caravan of musicians and singers that turned up almost unannounced in a town and put on a show.

The first Rolling Thunder Revue went out in the autumn of 1975 and played 30 shows around the north-eastern seaboard and into Canada. Travelling with the Revue were Joan Baez, Mick Ronson, Beat Poet Allen Ginsberg, Joni Mitchell on some nights, and even, on one occasion, Mohammed Ali and Roberta Flack.

In keeping with the circus theme, Dylan often appeared in a mask or painted as a white-faced clown.

"It was a travelling rock 'n' roll carnival, hence the make-up. Bob took a big chance, it was very brave of him to try something that was so radically different, and sometimes we'd play small places, we'd play little college gyms and small downtown theatres."

"Of course, they didn't announce the ticket sales for those, they just announced it on the local college radio station or something, and it would be sold out in a couple of minutes. It was a very unusual undertaking for one of the largest acts in the world."

Having so many artists on one travelling show could have been a recipe for disaster, but Stoner says that everyone worked together really well, aware perhaps that they were making history.

"It was a lot of fun. The camaraderie was great. One would think with so many acts there, so many egos, that it would be a problem, but it wasn't at all. You couldn't have anyone throwing an ego trip under such circumstances. It required everybody to be egalitarian. Everyone was just really into the moment."

It was so much fun, in fact, that Dylan followed it up with another Rolling Thunder Revue which rolled out in the spring of the following year, covering this time the southern and south-western states.

"Each tour had its own peculiar strengths and weaknesses, each one had its own personality, the Rolling Thunder Revues were unique and covered different geographical areas of the United States which have totally different characters as well."

And out of it came a mass of bootlegged recordings, a subsequent film of the shows and, of course, the Dylan/Sam Shepard film, Renaldo And Clara, which included a lot of footage from the tours. Stoner actually acted in the film, playing the part of Gene Vincent.

Having worked so closely with Dylan isn't Stoner's only claim to musical fame; he was also on Don McLean's massive worldwide hit, American Pie.

"I wasn't just the bass player," he explained, "I'm also the singer who's singing the high part of it. Every time the chorus comes around you hear another voice come in - that's me."

"That was when I was playing pretty much as a session man and I played one-off sessions with various artists. I played with so many folk people, that was one of the ways I came to Dylan's attention."

"I began as a singer, and fronting my own band, which had a record deal with Epic at the time Bob hired me. He knew me as a country singer from New York, in fact I was the only New Yorker, the only Yankee I should say, to ever be on Sun Records. But I figured that my role in the business was to be an accompanist, a journeyman musician."

"I mean, I always had eyes to do my own thing, and I did put out some solo albums of my own material, but apparently fate had it in mind that I should have success as an accompanist rather than as a frontman."