

DREAM OF DYLAN'S DISCIPLE

Manchester Evening News

JOEL Gilbert looks like Bob Dylan, he sounds like Bob Dylan and claims to be Bob Dylan's greatest disciple. He calls his band Highway 61 Revisited after one of Dylan's most famous albums and for two years they have been performing in the United States. "We are the world's Only Bob Dylan Tribute Band," he declares.

According to one American reviewer, the band "captures not just the music, but the spirit of a genius of Dylan's stature takes more than a showbiz impersonation, it demands a performance nurtured with the kind of loving detail only a devoted disciple like Joel Gilbert can deliver..."

Not surprisingly, a devoted disciple like Joel Gilbert regards the night of May 17, 1966, at Manchester Free Trade Hall as of "tremendous historical significance in the story of Bob Dylan and indeed of rock and roll music".

He said: "As a tribute band we seek to recreate Bob Dylan's performances down to every detail. Highway 61 revisited is coming to England and Ireland in May to perform seven shows in each country and want to recreate Dylan's 1966 Manchester Free Trade Hall concert in the very same venue as near as possible to the 35th anniversary. Dylan's 60th birthday falls one week later."

Until that seminal moment on the Manchester stage, Bob Dylan's huge following had been built on his reputation as a poet of protest whose raw vocals had been accompanied only by acoustic guitar and harmonica. He appealed to the rebellious nature of rock devotees - but folkies claimed him as their own.

Halfway through the set, however, the times really changed. Dylan and his backing band, the Hawks, "went electric". The audience's stunned silence was broken by the catcall "Judas!"; Dylan snarled a reply and urged the Hawks to "play f*****g loud" and launched into Like A Rolling Stone. It was all captured on Live 66, the most bootlegged rock concert of all time.

For most of the succeeding 35 years, those dramatic moments were shrouded in myth and mystery.

THE myth was that for more than two decades, it was mistakenly claimed the illicit tapes were recorded at Dylan's London shows a week later. Some early bootlegs were entitled Dylan at the Albert Hall. The truth was uncovered by C P Lee, a lecturer in cultural studies at Salford University, who interviewed more than 20 people before publishing his book Like The Night in 1998, the same year that the album was finally "legitimised."

The book also led to the solution of the mystery. Who was the catcaller - damned as a "self-righteous goon" by a later American reviewer - who cried out "Judas"? Almost

Manchester's Free Trade Hall - destined to become part of a new hotel complex - has been famous for many historic gatherings, from the great Corn Law debates of the 19th century to the Dalai Lama's visit in 1998. For more than a century it was the home of the Halle Orchestra whose worldwide reputation reached its zenith under the

leadership of Sir John Barbirolli. But the hall also has a unique place in the annals of rock music. Thirty five years ago this spring, Bob Dylan, one of the most influential artists of the 20th century, picked up an electric guitar on stage and stunned not only his Manchester audience, but fans around the globe.

Now an audacious request for the city to re-open the Free Trade Hall one last time to relive that historic night in 1966 has arrived from Los Angeles...



■ SIXTIES REVISITED: Joel Gilbert, lead singer in the Bob Dylan tribute band, Highway 61 Revisited

3,000 miles away and 33 years after the event, Keith Butler, a bank worker in Toronto, Canada, read a review of Lee's book and realised he

was the most famous heckler in the world. It wasn't a premeditated thing," said Keith, a student at Keele University at the time. "I was just swept along by the mood, which was chaotic. I was feeling disappointed and angry I was just a 20-year-old kid who shouted."

Almost five years after the Hall's Free Trade Hall swansong, however, Joel Gilbert and his band would stand more chance of gaining admission if they were knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door than they do of getting on to Manchester's most famous stage.

City council leader Richard Leese, such an avowed Bob Dylan fan that he claims he was once able to play the rambling Blonde On Blonde track Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands on guitar, held out no hope.

"I didn't live in Manchester at the time but I've heard about the legend," he said. "The Free Trade Hall has been closed to the public for almost five years."

"I don't know what condition it is in inside, but there is certainly no public entertainment licence and no staff. Who would pay what could be hundreds of thousands of pounds to turn it into a poor-quality venue for a one-off? If



■ FOLK IDOL: The real Bob Dylan

Highway 61 Revisited wanted to play a free open air gig in Castlefield we might be able to accommodate them."

JOEL received the news with an audible scowl at the end of the phone line to Los Angeles. "We wouldn't need any special renovation at the Free Trade Hall. Actually I'd prefer to perform in whatever state it's in now."

"The music and the audience would revive anything lacking in the venue. All we need is the door to be open. It would be a fitting final concert."

"I'm sure thousands of Dylan fans from Manchester and other parts of England would attend the recreation of this historic event."

He sighs and adds: "We are willing to perform outside at Castlefield for free if that's the only other choice - but only on condition that Councillor Leese sings a verse of Sad Eyed Lady Of The Lowlands with me on stage."

● Venues for Highway 61 Revisited's tour will be posted on their website www.highway61revisited.com