

How Does It Feel?

Derek Barker talks to Joel Gilbert about what it's like to be Bob Dylan



It is with stunning authenticity that Highway 61 Revisited, the World's Only Bob Dylan Tribute Band, recreates Bob Dylan's greatest music and stage show, featuring startling renditions from Dylan's cannon from "Subterranean Homesick Blues" through "Gotta Serve Somebody" to the band's latest addition, "Po' Boy."

Joel Gilbert has been working on a number of very interesting projects that include his band's debut CD release in February this year, and a soon to be released video/DVD documentary film with 1966 Bob Dylan World Tour drummer-turned-actor, Mickey Jones. This is what Joel Gilbert had to say on the subject when I caught up with him in June of this year at his home on the outskirts of Los Angeles, California, just fifteen minutes away from Bob Dylan's Malibu house.

Joel Gilbert: April of 1999 was the first show as the full Bob Dylan tribute band, Highway 61 Revisited. Prior to that for a year or so I'd been doing solo Bob tribute shows, playing coffee houses, some Legend Shows, and small theatres as an opening act. Half the time I would get a great audience that would come to see me because it was Dylan, and half the time it would be just background music for people that were walking by and talking. So I realized that it was time to "go electric," to expand my audience base and the types of venues I could play and the amount of money I could make.

"It is fascinating for me as a Bob Dylan fan to play these shows because it gives me a rather unique insight into how Dylan might feel and how people react to his songs."

Continued on next page

The first song that inspired me to want to recreate Dylan's music was "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," from the movie *Don't Look Back*. The amount of power and passion that he put into that song just amazed me, and I just had to capture that sound; somehow, I had to do it. I was living in London at the time so I started buying bootleg tapes from Camden Lock Market, but when I tried to play the songs I realized they were a lot different from the Bob Dylan music books I was buying from shops on Denmark Street, so I started to learn to play them on my own.

I moved back to the U.S.A. and was doing my MBA degree in Washington, D.C. I was working for Senator Al Gore, doing an internship as a part-time job. They'd give you something to do in the morning for about an hour and then you had nothing to do for the rest of the day. So I used Al Gore's computer to write up my notes on all the Dylan songs I learned. Then I thought to myself: I've been working here for two or three months doing all of nothing why don't I just go home and put all these notes into book form and that's how my book *The Acoustic Bob Dylan* came about. After I graduated from George Washington University with my MBA, I moved to L.A.; and the first week I was here, I was doing an open mic Dylan sound-alike tribute at the Java Café on Beverly, and guess who was in the audience? None other than Jakob Dylan. I talked to him for a while, and he said I did a really good job.

Later, in the early-mid nineties, I started managing an alternative rock band and through that, I got quite big in the music business. After that band broke-up, I got out of the music business for a couple of years, but I missed it; so instead of promoting another band, I decided to promote myself.

I started doing Dylan solo tributes and expanded it into a band. L.A. is full of great musicians, but the music business in general had been dead for probably the last ten years. There are still all these great players around, so through my contacts in the business, I was able to put together this great band of veteran L.A. musicians. My guitarist, Roger Wynfield, is a renowned session player. He toured with Glen Campbell for six years and has played with Mick Fleetwood and Stevie Ray Vaughan. My bass player, Jon Lamb, is a former member of Canned Heat and has toured with Big Daddy, Tony Joe White, Billy Swan, Dwight Yoakam and a whole bunch of other

people. My keyboard player, Wayne Peet, has been featured in recordings and appearances around the world. He has played with Jazz musician Vinny Golia and composes for film and television, including *Bull Durham* and *White Men Can't Jump*. My drummer, Howard Greene, is extremely versatile and has appeared on six major record releases, including '80's artist Bow Wow Wow.

In the last three years, I guess we've played about 150-200 shows at about 150 different venues, including Las Vegas, L.A., and Anaheim House of Blues. We actually played the House of Blues in L.A. on the same night that Dylan was performing at the House of Blues in Vegas. That caused a little confusion of reality. We've also played the El Rey Theater in L.A., where Dylan has played. We've played The Whiskey A Go-Go, which is very hard to get into. We've also played private parties for celebrities for some very big money.

I want to branch out and tour overseas. We had a tour booked in the UK and Ireland in spring/early summer last year, but we had to cancel that because of the foot and mouth epidemic over there. Right now though, we're talking to a promoter in China about going there.

It is fascinating for me as a Bob Dylan fan to play these shows because it gives me a rather unique insight into how Dylan might feel and how people react to his songs. I think there's a point in the first two minutes of our live shows where we break the believability gap and people give a little and then they're there and they feel it, and they get it and believe it. When I've been to Dylan shows they kind of react in the same way. People are like different songs, some are kind of blasé, some dance, some don't, and it's the same with me. People often react to me as though I'm Bob Dylan, and I think it is the ultimate experience for any Dylan fan to be able to play the music and sing it and feel the response. There is no bigger thrill for me than to be able to perform the man's music to an audience, and I think it gives me some understanding of Dylan and how it might feel to be him, but you wouldn't believe how many people blur the reality.

After a show at House of Blues in L.A., this girl stopped me and gave me her card, she was an entertainment lawyer working in L.A. Anyway, I had lunch with her, and she invited me to a party. She said it would be great and that there would be a lot of

weed there. And I said, "Well, you know what, I guess I wouldn't be that interested because I don't smoke pot." And she said, "WHAT? Bob Dylan doesn't smoke pot?" She couldn't believe it. So, those sort of things happen to me, people kind of blur reality and just assume my persona extends to those things, so she was pretty disappointed.

However, the persona thing does extend to tribute bands, and it's interesting to see the comparisons between the persona of an artist and that of the tribute artist because often they are very alike. We put an awful lot into the stage show in an attempt to be as authentic as possible. I've been collecting the guitars for over fifteen years because without those same guitars that Dylan uses, you can't recreate the exact sound. I've had a couple of suits made. It took me a year to find the material for the 1966 houndstooth suit, but I eventually tracked that down in France.

Something I found very interesting was when you're singing these songs, in order to really get the passion that he's putting in to it, you do need to grimace in that one place. It is almost as though his body movements are part of the needed delivery. In the beginning I studied Dylan in concert and went through a few videos to familiarize myself with some of the more common moves, but then I found it came naturally. So, when I make the moves that Dylan makes, it is not just acting these things out, it is actually part of the song. It is not something contrived that he does, or that I do as an act; it is something that flows very easily and naturally from the words. audience, and I think it gives me some understanding of Dylan and how it might feel to be him, but you wouldn't believe how many people blur the reality.

After a show at House of Blues in L.A., this girl

stopped me and gave me her card, she was an entertainment lawyer working in L.A. Anyway, I had lunch with her, and she invited me to a party. She said it would be great and that there would be a lot of weed there. And I said, "Well, you know what, I guess I wouldn't be that interested because I don't smoke pot." And she said, "WHAT? Bob Dylan doesn't smoke pot?" She couldn't believe it. So, those sort of things happen to me, people kind of blur reality and just assume my persona extends to those things, so she was pretty disappointed.

However, the persona thing does extend to tribute bands, and it's interesting to see the comparisons between the persona of an artist and that of the tribute artist because often they are very alike. We put an awful lot into the stage show in an attempt to be as authentic as possible. I've been collecting the guitars for over fifteen years because without those same guitars that Dylan uses, you can't recreate the exact sound. I've had a couple of suits made. It took me a year to find the material for the 1966 houndstooth suit, but I eventually tracked that down in France.

Something I found very interesting was when you're singing these songs, in order to really get the passion that he's putting in to it, you do need to grimace in that one place. It is almost as though his body movements are part of the needed delivery. In the beginning I studied Dylan in concert and went through a few videos to familiarize myself with some of the more common moves, but then I found it came naturally. So, when I make the moves that Dylan makes, it is not just acting these things out, it is actually part of the song. It is not something contrived that he does, or that I do as an act; it is something that flows very easily and naturally from the words.