

EARLY EDITION

More than

coupons worth more than **\$39**

**SUNDAY**

**3,300**  
real estate listings

# San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2004

415-777-1111

## Musicians sing blues for Folsom Prison fans

Songs of jail birds part of a tradition

By BRIAN MELLEY  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

**FOLSOM STATE PRISON** — When Bob Dylan imitator Joel Gilbert and his band took to the concrete stage on their latest tour, it was behind a strip of yellow tape usually found at crime scenes.

Fitting, perhaps, as about 100 hardened criminals gathered 30 feet away wearing prison blues, tattoos and wary looks of curiosity.

When the first notes of "Subterranean Homesick Blues" blasted from the loudspeakers, skepticism turned to smiles as the music crossed racial and generational lines and — for a couple hours — bridged the prison's formidable granite walls.

"In here you get so numb in your feelings, and your routine all through the day is always the same," said Jeremy Sims, 33, who has been locked up for murder since he was 17. "You lose sight of what it feels like to be out on the street until something like this happens and then you re-

member what it was like and it makes you want to get out and stay out."

Ever since Johnny Cash recorded his famous concert at the place he immortalized in "Folsom Prison Blues," it's been a destination for performers looking to play on one of the world's most unusual stages and maybe find some of the gold dust Cash left behind.

"This place has become a novelty for artists to play," said Lt. Tim Steele of the prison. "To have that on your resume may be kind of appealing. We don't go out looking for them."

Gilbert's band, Highway 61 Revisited, performed Sunday as the final stop on their Take No Prisoners Tour that played for free to inmates around the state, including a show at San Quentin the day before.

For two hours, they blew the blues away for the men stuck in Folsom Prison.

Lawrence Dale Williams, 60, who's served nearly 25 years of a life sentence for robbery and murder, said he hadn't seen a band from the outside for years. He skipped church services to sit

on a bag of laundry for the show, clapping his hands, tapping his toes and slapping his right knee to the beat.

"Everything I see like this inspires me," he said as the band played "Knockin' on Heaven's Door."

Perhaps the easiest thing about playing a gig at Folsom State Prison is finding a captive audience. The harder part is getting through the door at one of America's most infamous penitentiaries.

Hours before the morning show, Gilbert and his band were at the famous iron gates. They had already passed the criminal background check and had to wait as guards combed through every piece of equipment, down to the guitar picks, looking for possible weapons or contraband.

Inmates were not told about the show in advance, which was originally scheduled for Independence Day weekend until a riot forced all inmates to be locked in their cells for weeks as punishment, said Lt. Robert Trujillo, the prison spokesman.

When 750 inmates were released into the prison yard for recreation, some stopped to watch



the band set up, but most scattered — going to chapel, playing soccer, lapping the small dirt track on foot, shooting baskets or playing handball.

By show time, about 100 inmates, many shirtless and sporting tattoos, had gathered behind a thick yellow line in the asphalt they were told not to cross. Directly above, an armed guard stood watch in a tower. Several guards stood around the stage.

In singing from the vast Dylan songbook, Gilbert tried to relate to inmates as Cash did in his many prison shows, singing of outlaws, the wrongly convicted and redemption. The song titles alone were part of a theme for men behind bars: "All Along the Watchtower," "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," and "I Shall Be Released," to name a few.

"This one's about watching the time flow by," he said as they played "Watching the River Flow By."