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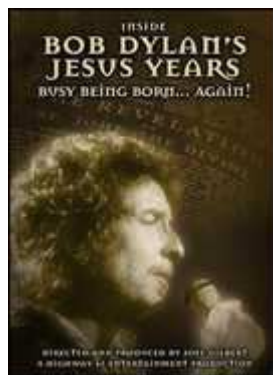
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[The Cinema of Rock: Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years: Busy Being Born...Again! \(3/5\)](#)

By [Dustin](#) on Sunday, November 23, 2008

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Inside Bob Dylan's Jesus Years: Busy Being Born...Again!

dir. Joel Gilbert

Featuring: Bob Dylan, Jerry Wexler, Pastor Bill Dwyer, Joel Selvin, Spooner Oldham, Regina McCrary, Pete Howard

[Official Website](#)

Release Date: Oct. 28, 2008

Released by: Highway 61 Entertainment

F10 Rating: ★★★★★

Director Joel Gilbert's ode to Bob Dylan's largely underrated "Jesus Years" is a warm love letter from a Dylan enthusiast that is crying out to understand a period of Dylan's career (which is generally a dangerous

endeavor) and simultaneously trying to legitimize what is widely seen as his least interesting period. Gilbert's documentary is a long ways from Scorsese's thoughtful [No Direction Home](#), or D.A. Pennebaker's masterpiece [Don't Look Back](#), or even Todd Haynes' [I'm Not There](#) for that matter.

Gilbert is a true Dylan fanatic. This is his fourth documentary on Dylan, he fronts a Dylan cover band called Highway 61 Revisited, and his production company (he has done one documentary not focused on Dylan) is called Highway 61 Entertainment. He looks like Dylan, he walks like Dylan, he is the kind of guy who I would trust if he started raving about Dylan to me over a glass of whiskey at an empty bar on an anonymous highway in the Midwest.

Unfortunately, sheer enthusiasm for one of the most legendary American musicians in history is not enough to make a compelling film. The film is filled with talking heads, and some oddly juxtaposed images in the midst of the interviews that otherwise lack an aesthetic principal. If the film would have acknowledged that it was simply going to be a series of interviews and a lo-fi look into a period of Dylan's life, that would be one thing, but the relentless angle shifts and inversions during interviews, flipping from color to black and white, and other odd cinematic tricks make the interviews a jarring and discontinuous.

There is a lack of authoritative figures from this period of Dylan's life speaking in the film, but the interviewees who were chosen are interesting. What it lacks is anyone who was close to Dylan during this time, but then again, who has ever been that close to Dylan, that's part of the mystery and intrigue of his personage. The olio of people who were involved in Dylan's life at this time, or who came into contact with him only because of his conversion to Christianity is an interesting (if not purely speculative) approach to dissecting this period. While it does not have the all star cast from Dylan's past like *No Direction Home*, it does make the most of what it has going, and manages to take an engaging angle. Among the interviewees are Pastor Bill Dwyer who was Dylan's first pastor during his initial transition to Christianity, legendary producer Jerry Wexler is certainly the highlight of the film, he produced both *Slow Train Coming* and the less interesting *Saved*, rock journalists Joel Selvin and Pete Howard weigh in on the experience of being huge Dylan fans and rock journalists during the late 70s and seeing Dylan's sudden transformation, and a few minor members of Dylan's band at that time (background singer Regina McCrary is also a member of Gilbert's Highway 61 Revisited) round out the selection of experts to which Gilbert puts the questions. The string of interviews, though disjointed, and lacking of a theoretical trajectory, makes for a unique study in Dylanology.

Nonetheless, the film spends too long lingering on religion itself instead of prying into the transformative process for Dylan. Interviews with Dwyer and Jews for Jesus founder Mitch Glaser play a heavy role in the first act of the film, and leave the emphasis on what it means to be "reborn" and how a person of Jewish descent makes the transition to Christianity without actually applying these ideas to the person of Dylan outside of scattered anecdotes. These would be great touchstones if the film returned to them in a meaningful way, applying them to Dylan through his music. But the film never digs that deep into Dylan's conversion.

In fact Dylan is notoriously missing from the film. There is a brief snippet from an interview with Dylan during this period and a couple of audio tracks of him speaking about Jesus at a concert. Otherwise the film lacks any input from Dylan himself or source material. It doesn't even take the time to explore the lyrics from albums like *Slow Train Coming* (except for a brief point when they elaborate on how Dylan understood Christianity very quickly and how "Gotta Serve Somebody" exemplifies that understanding). Even Dylan's music is missing from the film. The large majority of the music in the film is actually Gilbert's Highway 61 Revisited covering songs from this period, which are good covers, but seem like an odd directorial decision in the end.

I don't want to give the impression that this film is not worthwhile. It's truly about time a filmmaker tried to legitimize this period of Dylan's career. Thematic content aside, *Slow Train Coming* is one of Dylan's best albums, it marks another transition in his career which led to the brilliant discs of his late career like *Time Out*

of *Mind* and *Love and Theft*. Gilbert is a rare kind of director, a passionate indie director who has managed to break through the smoke screen and get low budget films seen and heard. There are far too many Dylan documentaries for this to become a classic, but it is certainly the best documentary that attempts to take on the much storied, argued about, derided, and praised "Jesus Years".



Tags: [Bob Dylan](#), [inside bob dylan's jesus year: busy being born...again!](#), [jerry wexler](#), [joel gilbert](#), [slow train coming](#)

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1. **Steads** | [Nov 24, 2008](#) | [Reply](#)

GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY:THE GOSPEL SONGS OF BOB DYLAN

Gold Medal for Excellence

Audience Choice for Best Music Documentary

2006 PARK CITY FILM MUSIC FESTIVAL<http://www.gottaservesomebody.com>

<http://dylangospel.blogspot.com/>

The best African-American covers of Dylan songs since Jimi Hendrix. –International Herald Tribune

“This DVD overflows with interest, and, more importantly, with music.” -Michael Gray, author of *The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia* and *Song & Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan*.

Interviews with Dylan musicians: Jim Keltner, Spooner Oldham, Regina McCrary, Fred Tackett, Terry Young, Mona Lisa Young, and producer Jerry Wexler

Participating artists: Bob Dylan, Shirley Caesar, Chicago Mass Choir, Dottie Peoples, Aaron Neville, Sounds of Blackness, Helen Baylor, The Fairfield Four, Great Day Chorale, Arlethia Lindsey, Mighty Clouds of Joy, and Rance Allen.

Commentary by: Paul Williams and Alan Light

This musical documentary premieres 1980 footage of Bob Dylan performing "When He Returns," the first archival performance released from this important era.

Amazon.com Editorial Review

Gotta Serve Somebody - The Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan is all about redemption. That's apparent enough in the music, where the struggle between sin and salvation is inherent in the tunes that are interpreted here by a host of superb gospel artists. But in a larger sense, the very existence of this DVD (and the Grammy-nominated CD that preceded it in 2003) can be viewed as redemption for Dylan himself, who weathered another controversy and emerged, if not triumphant, then certainly vindicated. When he plugged in an electric guitar in 1965, he was labeled "Judas" by the folkie faithful; ironically, when he turned to Jesus some 15 years later, proclaiming himself born again and releasing *Slow Train Coming* and *Saved*, the outcry was even louder. But once again Dylan has the last laugh, as now, a quarter of a century after the fact, it's clear that the material on those recordings was his strongest not only since 1975's *Blood on the Tracks* but perhaps since his '60s heyday. The quality of the songs lies in what Jerry Wexler, co-producer of the two Dylan albums, describes as the "immaculate funk" of the music, and especially in the heartfelt simplicity (especially by Dylan standards) and emotional directness of the lyrics; clearly, that's what attracted great gospel singers like Shirley Caesar (singing "Gotta Serve Somebody," the most recognized song on the two Dylan albums), Dottie Peoples (a powerful version of the beautiful "I Believe in You"), the Mighty Clouds of Joy (a rockin', sanctified "Saved"), the Fairfield Four (the stirring, a cappella "Are You Ready"), and the angel-voiced Aaron Neville ("Saving Grace") to this project. We also get Dylan himself, performing "When He Returns" at a 1980 concert, along with an animated rendering of his original "Gotta Serve Somebody." Hallelujah, y'all. -Sam Graham

Bob Dylan's Gospel songs, widely reviled when new, have steadily grown in stature and acceptance over the years. Here in the hands of Gospel greats, likely the folks best suited to do them, they come up stronger than ever. Strong recommendation. Much better and more gripping than I expected. -Sing Out!

Directed by Michael B Borofsky
Edited by Christine Mitsogiorgakis
Jeffrey Gaskill Executive Producer

Featured Performances:

Every Grain of Sand (Arlethia Lindsey)
When He Returns (Bob Dylan)
Solid Rock (Sounds of Blackness)
Gotta Serve Somebody (Shirley Caesar)
I Believe In You (Dottie Peoples)
Saving Grace (Aaron Neville)
What Can I Do For You? (Helen Baylor)
Are You Ready (The Fairfield Four)
In the Garden (Great Day Chorale)
Saved (Mighty Clouds of Joy)
Pressing On (Chicago Mass Choir)
When He Returns (Rance Allen)

Bonus Features include: Animated video to -Bob Dylan's original GRAMMY® -winning, "Gotta Serve Somebody."

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- [November 2008](#) (59)
- [October 2008](#) (70)
- [September 2008](#) (107)
- [August 2008](#) (92)
- [July 2008](#) (17)
- [June 2008](#) (2)
- [April 2008](#) (3)
- [March 2008](#) (2)
- [February 2008](#) (1)
- [January 2008](#) (1)

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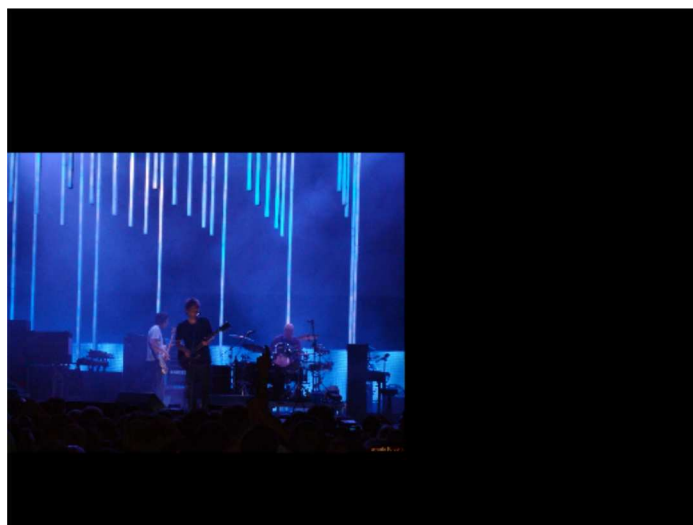
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