

## Bob Dylan's God-Awful Gospel

By Joel Selvin

These are strange times. Gas costs a dollar a gallon. Someone built a pyramid in San Francisco. And Bob Dylan converted to Christianity.

The ironies flew fast and furious Thursday at the Warfield Theater, where Dylan took the capacity crowd by surprise with an opening-night performance composed exclusively of his singing praises to the Lord.

He never touched the likes of "Blowin' in the Wind," "Don't Think Twice," "Mr. Tambourine Man," "I Shall Be Released," "Just Like a Rolling Stone" or any of the many other songs that secured his fame and allowed him to sell out each of his 14 Warfield shows far in advance, with tickets scaled sky-high at \$15 and \$12.50 apiece.

The audience, given that, behaved with admirable restraint. Catcalls and boos, to be sure, echoed throughout the 2200-seat former vaudeville palace. But mostly, the audience sat in stunned silence for the two-hour show, greeting the close of each of the 17 songs with modest, polite applause.

Dylan himself offered no explanations, outside the devout protestations of his new songs. Taciturn and remote as ever, he spoke to the audience for the first time when he bid them good night. "I hope you were uplifted," he said.

Oddly, he displayed no joy in singing the gospel according to Bob. Typically stern-faced and impassive, Dylan issued warnings, taught lessons, scored non-believers and gave humble thanks for his own deliverance — although his humility fell short of convincing.

He looked like Bob Dylan. The black leather jacket, T-shirt and rumpled pants could have been the same ones he wore last year. His face bore the shadows of not having shaved for a couple days and his customary surly expression lacked even the slightest beatific aura.

Nevertheless, he was beating the drum for God as



surely and thoroughly as Billy Graham.

Most of the songs came from his latest album, "Slow Train Coming," his first recording since his conversion to born-again Christian. The other songs contained even stronger doses of Bible-thumping — "What Can I Do For You?" "Saved By the Blood of the Lamb," "When They Came for Him in the Garden."

Backed by an unobtrusive quartet — surprisingly undistinguished considering the extraordinary excellence of his past accompanists — that included Jim

Keltner on drums, Tim Drummond on bass, Spooner Oldham on keyboards and Fred Tackett on guitar, Dylan rounded out the band with a four-member gospel group to provide background vocals. The three ladies in the group — Helena Springs, Regina Havis and Monalisa Young — opened the concert with six spirituals, accompanied solely by piano.

Dylan and his band took the stage and swung into "You Gotta Serve Somebody," the current single from the new album. By the time he breezed through the opening numbers, "I Believe In You," "When You Gonna Wake Up" and "When He Returns" — all from the new album — it became abundantly apparent that the evening would be devoted to religious studies, not rock and roll.

Genius may be pain, but this guy is not feeling any pain. Anesthetized by his new-found beliefs, Dylan has written some of the most banal, uninspired and inventionless songs of his career for his Jesus phase. He cannibalized melodies from some of his earlier songs to give the new ones their strongest moments.

The lyrics ride on ridiculous rhymes and images — far below even journeyman Dylan, let alone the man's finest work. Nor was his message particularly uplifting or joyous, dwelling, instead, on the dearth of meaning to temporal existence.

This is an historic series of concerts. Dylan, regardless of who the man really is and how he truly feels, once wrote songs that expressed the outrage and alienation felt by an entire generation. His desertion of those ideals in favor of fundamentalist Christian theology symbolizes the confusion and chaos that generation found in its search for answers.

Years from now, when social historians look back over these years, Dylan's conversion will serve as a concise metaphor for the vast emptiness of the era. Dylan is no longer asking hard questions. Instead, he turned to the most prosaic source of truth on Earth, so aptly dubbed "opium of the masses" by Karl Marx.