

# Q+A/

## SHOP-OCALYPSE NOW! REVEREND BILLY

WORDS: JESSE ASHLOCK

From his studio in Hell's Kitchen, Bill Talen had a front row seat for the tidal wave of gentrification that swept through Times Square in the '90s, papering over what legendary urbanist Jane Jacobs called the "sidewalk ballet" of New York's most notoriously colorful neighborhood. What he saw infuriated him. "My devil was the Disney Store," he says, "and Mickey Mouse was the Antichrist. So I started inventing a theology as a way to defend the neighborhood." Talen drew on a lifetime in theater to become the charismatic, pompadoured Reverend Billy, and with his wife Savitri Darkee, founded the Church of Stop Shopping, which she directs while he mans the pulpit. Their gospel is "post-religious," their church conceived in opposition to the "transnational church of spacey consumption" which they believe tramples the First Amendment and destroys communities. You can see the Church in action during one of their rousing interventions at retail establishments like Starbucks and Disney, read their creed in Talen's *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?* or his upcoming *Who Will Survive the Shopocalypse?*, and now the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir on a glorious new CD on Tomato Records. But to really feel the spirit of the Church of Stop Shopping, head down to St. Mark's Church in the East Village the last Wednesday of the month for an ecstatic progressive revival meeting that will ask you to reconsider the way you live your life.

**Q. YOU'VE TALKED ABOUT ENTERING A STATE OF "EXALTED EMBARRASSMENT." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?**  
Just standing up in a Starbucks and saying to the other people in the Starbucks, this is not fair trade coffee, and this business is making money on how cheaply they acquire their supply of coffee from impoverished people. This is not an economy that we should be a part of. To stand up and say that is to enter the state of exalted embarrassment. Now the fact is that it's a whole complex of things. [There are also] the actions and the Web site.

You have the gypsy dancer, you've got the people making strange hieroglyphic shapes in the air with empty Starbucks cups, you've got people mooning into each others eyes that they love each other, brought to you by Coca-Cola. Sponsored love. We have all sorts of dramatic intrusions into the decorous bourgeois hush of the Starbucks coffee shop. There are many ways to do it, but almost always there's that moment of no return, when you're entering the sanctified inappropriate activity.

**Q. HOW WILL THE NEW CD WORK TO DISSEMINATE THE WORD OF STOP SHOPPING?**

We're hoping that people play the album and watch the movie and then that they make up their own characters. We believe the counterattack on the corporate narrative, on the corporate imagery that smothers us right now, is basically with our bodies. We believe that's how social change has been achieved almost always, by committing with our bodies. I just think that the advertising and packaging, the highways, the pavement, the SUVs, the architecture of transnational corporate life, is keeping us in a hypnotized consumer choreography. We have less and less that we can do with our bodies that comes from our own native decision-making, our own chaotic freedom. But that chaotic freedom is exactly what will be the source of the counterattack. We will go back at the advertising in our bodies.

**Q. WHAT DO YOU SAY TO SOMEONE WHO VALUES ECCENTRICITY, BUT WILL GO INTO STARBUCKS BECAUSE IT'S EVERYWHERE, AND THEREFORE CONVENIENT?**

As we say in the Church of Stop Shopping, convenience is not convenient. How many questions would you arrange there to ask yourself if what you're doing is the right thing? At the top of them is "Am I going to get a good buzz?" And then the other questions might never be asked. If you've got to get a good buzz within the next four minutes, the high-caffeine, high-sugar, genetically

altered milk content of Starbucks will give you a buzz in the next four minutes, but down the list, among the questions would be, "Who was kicked out of this building when Starbucks moved in? What does this company do around the world?"

**Q. YOUR CHURCH REALLY DOES OFFER A TRUE, HONEST, UNIRONIC APPROACH TO SPIRITUALITY. THAT'S ABOUT HEALING AS WELL AS CHANGE. HOW DO YOU CREATE A SPACE LIKE THAT?**

We believe in the God that people who don't believe in God believe in, and some of us believe in the God that people who do believe in God believe in. But just don't kill me with your God, if you don't mind. I don't know that right now, the continuous institutionalized gods have a lot of credibility, because their followers are always killing each other. You know the old phrase, "Shoot the Buddha"? I believe you've got to stop God when God becomes a shopping experience. So we pray to the God that is not a product, and the Goddess that swims in the part of the sky not yet slapped with plastic logos. We use the shouting of the "Hallelujah" as a sort of shared joke about right-wing televangelism, but very quickly we had a joyous gospel choir and we were all carried along on a wave of that joy, the joy that comes up physically through your body when you stop shopping.

**Q. HOW DO YOU PERSUADE PEOPLE THAT IT CAN BE FUN NOT TO CONSUME?**

Embody the fun. It all comes down to the decision, what sort of dance am I involved in here? Where are my arms, where are my hands? How far is my voice reaching, what am I saying? It's all physical. It's the physical-spiritual. It's sacralizing the ordinary. Once you take responsibility for that and you're willing to enter a state of heightened oddness in public space, you're by your example having fun outside their consumer strictures.

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HOLY ROLLER: REVEREND BILLY EMBODIES THE FUN. PHOTO: FRED ASKEW