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Ask almost anyone about Earth's future and you're likely to hear a litany of doom and gloom.

It's not hard to see why. Ominous warnings about climate change and the coming wave of droughts, refugees and extinctions have barely nudged our national habits of militarism, racism, consumerism and economic entrapment. Faced with these problems, it would take a miracle to change course and avert the ever-worsening projections of climate chaos in front of us.

Luckily, one man is promising miracles, and he's got the pointy shoes, all-white suit and shock of blond hair to back them up. That man is Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir – a hilarious concatenation of performance art, political protest, gospel singing and religious service.

Reverend Billy preaches a kind of liberation theology centered on our relationship to consumer goods. Described as equal parts evangelist, Elvis impersonator and Situationist, Reverend Billy is a man of passion who defies easy classification. As an actor and theater producer in San Francisco, Billy Talen invented the character of Reverend Billy to connect with America's overwhelmingly Christian psychology.

For years, the character was a performance piece – sending subversive, liberating messages in the guise of a right-wing, fire and brimstone patriarch. But over time, Talen's character took on a life of its own. After Sept. 11, 2001, Talen's community began relying on him as a pastor, and he fused with his character as the Church of Stop Shopping began performing baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Since 1998, Talen has been bringing religious inspiration to movements for social and environmental justice, touring the country with the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir to give impassioned sermons against consumerism, militarism and racism and traveling twice to Ferguson, Missouri, after the killing of Michael Brown.

Talen's fiery performance often jumps from the hysterical to the profound. And unlike most preachers, he prefers to give sermons in "contested space" under the doctrine of "holy trespass" – which often finds him dragged out of shopping malls, bank lobbies and public squares. He has been arrested more than 70 times.

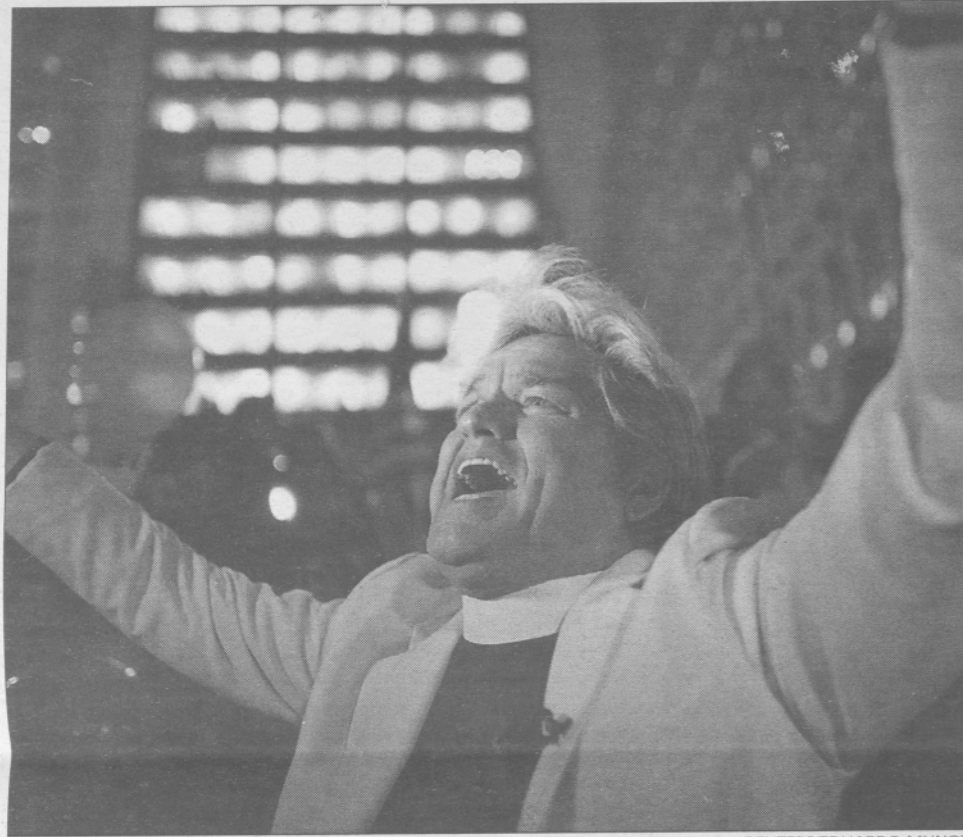
In 2013, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir performed a series of sermons inside Chase banks, criticizing their financing of coal mining and other fossil fuel projects that drive climate change. While Billy preached on his bullhorn, his choir resurrected the golden toads – an extinct species once native to the cloud forests of Costa Rica. Billy faced a year in prison for these performances but ultimately was sentenced to only a week of community service. In 2014, Chase dropped its support for Mountaintop Removal coal mining.

Reverend Billy was in Portland on May 1 to celebrate Portland's May Day rally and to speak at Powell's about his new book, "The Earth Wants You," a motivational handbook about creative direct action. Street Roots caught up with him to discuss Earth activism, demonology and his book.

Stephen Quirke: Your new book is called "The Earth Wants You." What does the Earth

The reverence of irreverence

A conversation with Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping



Bill Talen, known as Reverend Billy, delivers a speech to Members of the Occupy Wall Street movement in Zuccotti park in New York City, Oct. 25, 2011.



Reverend Billy (center in white jacket) delivers a speech during the Occupy Wall Street campaign in 2011.

want from us?

Reverend Billy: It wants the human race to join it in a serious defense of life, and we're not doing that yet. We're still allowing this momentum of overconsumption, overpopulation, fossil fuel use, toxicity, pollution, and we haven't really turned the corner yet on what we're doing to the life of the Earth. And the Earth, by her superstorms and tsunamis and tornadoes and earthquakes, mudslides and droughts, flash floods – the Earth is *very* serious in her attempt to cleanse and rebalance and become sustainable again. We're not really joining the Earth, and the price of not joining the Earth is that we will lose our lives.

S.Q.: OK, so where do we sign up?

R.B.: We are trying to get out from behind the corporate mediation of Facebook by inviting people to live in direct relationship. We call it Earthalujahville – join our town! So trade personal information; we have to start trusting each other again. It's in that distrust, in that fear, that the corporation moves in, and then says, "OK, let me take care of this."

S.Q.: As you may have heard, Monsanto is being sued by the city of Portland for polluting the Willamette River with PCBs. A cleanup effort is underway, but community groups, particularly communities of color, are struggling to have their voices heard. Do you

have any message you'd like to send to these groups?

R.B.: The whole process of our response to the Earth's crisis needs to end its segregation. And that needs to start with the nongovernmental organizations, the NGOs, who are often filing these litigation papers. The environmental movement is notoriously white. The only one big NGO that seems to be integrated to any degree is Greenpeace. But many of the other NGOs are not racially representative of the larger population. And the parks departments themselves, the governments themselves, they all need to be democratized.

S.Q.: We often think of church as a building, but in the Church of Stop Shopping, you've made church in parking lots, Walmarts, Harvard research labs and Chase banks. Can you explain your church's doctrine of "holy trespass"?

R.B.: We believe that all social movements, going back certainly through abolition, civil rights, the labor movement, Occupy Wall Street – they were all based on creative trespassing. I don't think that we have any social movements that were successful in American culture where there wasn't actual trespassing or the charge of trespassing. So we are joining those social movements. You have to demand entrance into certain places. In the Church of Stop Shopping, we demand

the right to speak our minds inside corporate territory. We absolutely do trespass on private property.

In the case of Black Lives Matter, the young African-Americans of Ferguson just claimed a patch of sidewalk opposite the Ferguson Police Department for a month after Michael Brown's murder. In one chapter of the book, we're talking about Ferguson – we're about 50 percent persons of color in the Stop Shopping Choir – and we went to Ferguson twice, led of course by the African-American mothers in our choir. That chapter in the book is about going there on Black Friday, going into Walmarts, Macy's and Target stores, shouting, "Hands Up, Don't Shop," following hundreds of African-American Ferguson residents. Of course, for the Church of Stop Shopping, that was a very interesting development.

S.Q.: Where is the weirdest place you've ever held a church service?

R.B.: Well, we always wanted to perform in Carnegie Hall. We have a 35-voice chorus, and the only difference between our choir and lots of other choirs is that we get arrested a lot. So we decided to have our Carnegie Hall debut, but it was in a snowstorm on the roof of Carnegie Hall. And it was *glorious!* Our voices echoed into the canyons below us in New York City. And I believe that people appreciated hearing the angelic voices of the Stop Shopping Choir

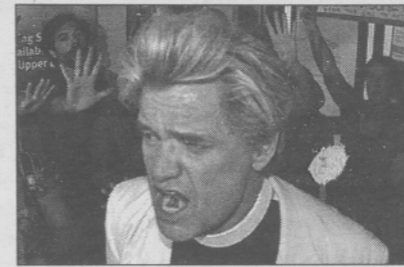


PHOTO BY ERIK MCGREGOR

miracle? Is the moss speaking to us?

R.B.: The ability of the polluters to keep the information from us has got to end. And I agree with the moss that we need to publicize the air and the water and the soil that we live in. After we filed a (public-records) request with Portland Parks Bureau, we found that Portland is officially spraying the virulent toxin glyphosate, manufactured by Monsanto, all over the city. It's much more than most Portland citizens are led to understand; glyphosates are even being sprayed along Waterfront Park. So I'd like to thank the moss and the human moss workers for their hard work. It is a miracle that the moss is talking to us. Let's listen to the moss. We want the human moss advocates to integrate the information that we're getting about glyphosates and the so-called inert elements in Monsanto's Roundup, which are very poisonous, so that Portland can be a cleaner place to live.

S.Q.: I saw that map that you released (www.revilly.com/portlandmap). It showed 1,593 applications of glyphosate over the past two years. What should we do with that information?

R.B.: I think it's important to regard very seriously the willingness of our public officials to spray such a poison as Monsanto's Roundup. It's also something that should not be for sale on the retail shelf. Roundup is also a consumer item. And you have advertising openly on public media, urging people to buy and spray on their lawns and their gardens. We need Portland to lead us. Do the right thing, and become known as the community that took this measure to defend itself against corporate toxicity, and I think others will follow. We're looking to Portland for leadership.

S.Q.: I've been told that you have been banned from every single Starbucks in California. Is that true? What kind of miracles were you performing?

R.B.: We were casting demons from cash registers. We were doing performances there, in which we pretended to be customers, but we would have huge operatic arguments, and we would fall in love, and you know, break the corporation's hypnosis, basically. My partner Savitri, who is the director of our performances, was kicked out of a Starbucks for saying the word "Starbucks." She said the word "Starbucks" in the wrong way or something.

People don't realize how strict the enforcement of certain behaviors is in a consumer environment. Starbucks likes to pretend they are a child of the café society of Zurich and Paris in the 1920s, but that was a radical society that changed the culture. Starbucks is not a radical society changing the culture; it is a conservative element. It is not a fair-trade company. It is a monoculture; it makes us all the same, and it makes bad coffee.

I'm not precisely sure if the injunction against me is still in force or not. I believe that it was just for three years, starting back in 2005. ... But during that period of time, we received a letter from Starbucks headquarters in Seattle that said we were unwelcome in all

the Starbucks in the world, or as the lawyer said, "in the known universe."

We hope that there are no Starbucks in the unknown universe. In our church, we're very fond of the unknown universe. And we believe that almost all of the universe has no Starbucks in it. And we are counting on the universe that has no Starbucks in it to save us.

S.Q.: In your book, you say that our economic system is hiding behind the name "the modern economy" but is actually "a fundamentalist religion and a mental condition." Do you view capitalism as a religion? If so, can capitalists be saved?

R.B.: Not in its corporate or neo-liberal form. Some people use the word "capitalism" to describe the effort to make economies with small, local businesses. We defend ma and pa stores because they are the basis of neighborhoods. But successful ma and pa stores in communities have an element that is basic to their operation, which we would call the gift economy. There's much giving and receiving that takes place in a healthy neighborhood that is not monetized. Corporate capitalism, or neo-liberalism, with its global element, that needs to end. That cannot be anything but a sweatshop-laden, polluting, Earth-killing, racist system. That must end.

S.Q.: What about for individual capitalists? Are they capable of redemption – of becoming non-capitalists?

R.B.: Oh, it's happening every day. We've seen so many people from the criminal classes of speculators turn to save their own lives. To be healthier personally and to bring a healthier life to their families, they turn their backs on the corporate capitalist way of life, and they become small-business people, farmers, and then live in service to their fellow human beings and to the Earth. There's a quiet revolution going on that is more obvious in Portland than it is in many other places, involving farmers markets, swap, thrift and cottage industries.

Yes – many people *are* turning to a better life. Earthalujah!

S.Q.: I heard a rumor that you had planned to levitate the Portland Art Museum on May Day. Is that true?

R.B.: We were planning to levitate the Portland museum, but our schedule wouldn't allow it.

Museums today are using high culture the way tobacco used to – to purchase prestige. Museums have to be forced by their local citizens out of that. We were part of the Liberate Tate movement, where we performed three times. We also performed at the British museum and tried to get the Koch brothers out of the New York museum, where I was arrested with members of the choir.

You can't raise money killing the Earth; these museums have to raise money other ways. It doesn't really make sense to have high culture by killing the Earth, because then your museum goes dead. An exhibit that opens in a museum would be much different if your patrons are all dead. It's a real marketing problem.

echoing down from on high.

S.Q.: You're widely known for exorcising demons from cash registers. Have you ever exorcised the CEO of a Fortune 500 company?

R.B.: Well we apparently have gotten too close to a CEO on occasion. One of my sermons on YouTube was deleted, and we think it was because I invited people to go up to the corner office on the 60th floor and take (JPMorgan Chase CEO) Jamie Dimon by the lapels and shake some sense into him. These Silicon Valley companies delete your material, and they don't tell you why. It may have been our cartoonish encouragement that our viewers take climate change more seriously by finding out who's bank-rolling it, and then making those individuals responsible. We tried hard to get through to YouTube and Google to get an explanation on why they had exorcised me. We never heard back.

S.Q.: Would you like to try exorcising a CEO? Perhaps with their permission?

R.B.: You know there are activists who bird-dog individuals, and others who bird-dog customers of bad companies. There is something threatening about getting too personally direct. You have to be careful.

S.Q.: How old were you when you first cast out a demon? Do you have any advice for

beginners?

R.B.: I turned to the Reverend Billy character in my 40s, so it was like a midlife crisis. But lots of people who do this sort of thing do it as young people. If you look back across the cultural shape-changers of history, people like Cesar Chavez, Malcom X and Dr. King, artists like Fela Kuti, Phil Ochs, Lenny Bruce and Abbie Hoffman – the people who took on characters or changed the people around them by being outrageous, by breaking into conservative social norms – many of them were younger. I came to it in one direction. I came to it in midlife. But we are looking to the younger generations to realize that the life systems of the Earth are in jeopardy, and it is a methodical economic and cultural system that is doing this; it is a small number of people in society and the rest of us are just kind of going along with it.

We need a large number of radicals who are young. We need radicals of all ages (laughter). We need 90-year-old radicals as well. Some of the bravest people, some of the most radical are grandmothers, like The Raging Grannies – handcuffing themselves to bulldozers. Earthalujah!

S.Q.: Here in Portland we've just seen research on moss drive a huge wave of activism against toxic air pollution. After years of inaction, the city and county are now considering a local agency to reduce air pollution. You're a man of God; is this a