

Reverend Billy does his thing
in *What Would Jesus Buy?*



Shop-ocalypse Now

Putting Christmas out of business

WHAT WOULD JESUS BUY?: Directed by Rob VanAlkemade. Music by Steve Horowitz and William Moses. Starring Bill Talen and Savitri Durkee. Werner Film, 2007. PG. ★★☆☆☆

Somewhere, the man behind *Borat* is laughing. After all, Sacha Baron Cohen only grappled with the fear, hatred and bigotry of rural America. Gritty stuff, but by comparison, the Reverend Billy is on a *mission*: He wants to kill Christmas by starving it to death. Actually, he's convinced we're spending far too much money during the holidays, an urge which flies in the face of what Christmas is supposed to represent. But when you realize just how much money is at stake — America spent \$455 billion during the holidays last year — even a professional grouch like the Grinch couldn't take down the hordes of maniacal shoppers. So what is Reverend Billy up to?

The conceit of *What Would Jesus Buy?* is simple. Billy, who closely resembles the fallen evangelists he's trying to pantomime, is leading his flock from New York to California via a biodeisel bus. The destination is Disneyland, a magic kingdom to some, but to Billy the symbol of all that is wrong with consumer culture. It should be a massively chaotic — and massively entertaining — endeavor. To a limited extent, it is. There's an irresistible scene in which Billy uses a portable confessional to hear the sins of a young shopaholic; it's both wonderfully transgressive and silly, since Billy misses her point. Awkward confusion settles over a wealthy suburb when, posing as Christmas carolers, Billy and company deliver harshly alternative lyrics. (*Joy to the World! In the form of goods! Consume! Consume! Consume!*) But far too many scenes whimper out rather than work magic. In Bloomington,

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I mention *Borat* because *What Would Jesus Buy?* is in many ways *Borat* lite. Reverend Billy is actually Billy Talen, a comedian, caterer and former Times Square resident who watched his New York neighborhood become an amusement park. What elevates Billy's act above that of the sky-is-falling corner preacher's is the Church of Stop Shopping Gospel Choir, a group that boasts 35 men and women as well as a seven-piece band. Together they sing the vices of consumerism in churches and performances halls, events that have a wildly Pentecostal feel, what with Billy fainting after "exorcising" the credit cards of the audience. But the preferred tactic of this "anarchic Mormon tabernacle choir" is to enter a local Starbucks guerrilla-style, singing or humming faintly while Billy starts speaking in tongues about the evils of the corporate world. The choir members, singing stormtroopers in red robes, break into elated song as Billy gets handcuffed and arrested yet again.

Minn., the group crashes the infamous Mall of America, a monument to commerce that last year alone received 40 million visitors. The choir's intrusion should be an act of civil disobedience for the ages, but Billy just ends up apologizing. A raid on Wal-Mart headquarters also fizzles.

As an issue-driven documentary, *What Would Jesus Buy?* suffers for its lack of attention to personality and character. We get a rough idea of Billy and a slightly murkier sense of his wife, and the rest of the choir are pretty much immaterial. It's a shame, because anyone who would hitch their wagon to Billy's must be somewhat unusual. A choir member named "Quilty" says he's worried about being taken seriously — has anyone told him he was named after toilet paper? — but these moments are all too rare. I greatly admire the courage of Billy and his troupe; you might disagree with their methods, but you can hardly debate their message. But as a movie, *What Would Jesus Buy?* doesn't add up to enough. **ew**

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