

REVEREND BILLY & THE STOP SHOPPING CHOIR



REV AND HIS CHOIR NOW ENRAPTURE LARGE AUDIENCES WITH
SERMONS TO WHICH JESUS HIMSELF WOULD HAVE SAID AMEN.

- KURT VONNEGUT



ARKTYPE

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ABOUT REVEREND BILLY & THE CHOIR

Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir is a New York City based radical performance community, with 50 performing members and a congregation in the thousands.

They are wild anti-consumerist gospel shouters and Earth-loving urban activists who have worked with communities on four continents defending community, life and imagination. The Devils over the 15 years of their “church” have remained the same: Consumerism and Militarism. In this time of the Earth’s crisis - we are especially mindful of the extractive imperatives of global capital. Their activist performances and concert stage performances have always worked in parallel. The activism is content for the play.

The Choir’s Director for all performances is Savitri D. The Choir has won several awards including an OBIE Award, the Alpert Award, The Dramalogue Award and The Historic Districts Council’s Preservation Award (for leading demonstrations to save Manhattan’s Poe House), and half of their singing activists have been jailed, most frequently during Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. Reverend Billy has been arrested over 70 times.

The choir employ multiple strategies, including cash regis-

ter exorcisms, retail interventions, and cell phone operas.

Outdoors, they have performed in Redwood forests, between cars in traffic jams at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel, on the Staten Island Ferry, at Burning Man and Times Square and Coney Island, and on the roof of Carnegie Hall in a snowstorm. Under Savitri’s direction, the choir has released CD’s, books and TV shows, among them the eight episodes of *The Last Televangelist*, created with shooter-editor Glenn Gabel. In 2007 they co-produced with Morgan Spurlock the acclaimed film *What Would Jesus Buy?* - appearing on over 100 screens nationally and which has been broadcasted on Sundance Channel.

The Stop Shopping Choir is a diverse array of economic, ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds and has members from every continent except Antarctica, which they’re working on. Among them are scientists, teachers, artists, therapists, welders, cyclists, builders, developers, hairdressers, dog walkers, actors, truck drivers, tech geeks, scholars and executives. The Choir has toured in Europe, Africa, South America and throughout North America, and appears for most of the year on a regular Sunday service schedule at Joe’s Pub at The Public Theater.



SELECTED TOURING HISTORY

2010

Donau Festival, Krems, Austria

2011

Impulse Festival, Mulheim, Germany

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater, REDCAT, LA

Battersea Arts Centre, London

Latitude Festival, UK

Burning Man

14 performances at Zuccotti Park (Occupy Wall Street)

2012

Steribischer Herbst, Graz, Austria

Hemispheric Institute's Encuentro, Chiapas, Mexico

Battersea Arts Centre, London

Amsterdam Fringe Festival

Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, Switzerland

The Influencers, Barcelona, Catalonia

Cabaret Voltaire, Zurich, Switzerland

Aksimoa - Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, Slovenia

2013

Battersea Arts Centre, London

Latitude Festival, UK

Secret Garden Party UK

Burning Man

Art & Resistance - Hemispheric Institute, Chiapas, Mexico

2014

Secret Garden Party UK

Symbiosis Festival, California

Edinburgh Fringe, Forest Fringe

Joan Baez' Stand With Ferguson, New York

Songs at the death site of Michael Brown, Ferguson, Missouri

2015

Donau Festival, Krems, Austria

Laurie Anderson's Live Ideas Festival, NYC

Neil Young's Revel Content Tour - six arenas, Pacific NW

People's Church, Chicago, March Against Monsanto

Farmers' Markets of New York City Tour

Joe's Pub at the Public Theater

Wilton's Music Hall, London, UK

2016

Laurie Anderson's Live Ideas Festival, NYC

Neil Young's Rebel Content Tour 2016

Market Hotel, record launch "The Earth Wants YOU", NYC

Rediscovering the Radical, Liverpool, UK





The intensity of his emotions is outlandish – but also moving because, for all the absurd trappings, the message is vital, the warnings of impending armageddon sincere. The best cabaret performance entertains but it also reminds us of what's possible when all the people in a room decide to collaborate. The result is a show that isn't just enjoyable or interesting but empowering, reminding us of the power we all have if we choose to use it. Rev Billy Talen's work delivers that in spades, and encourages us to expand that awareness to cover the whole world. Earthalujah! - *TimeOut London*

The collar is fake but the calling is real. - *Village Voice*

It's an act. It's an art. It's almost a religion! - *New York Times*

When our white-suited pastor — recently returned from protests in Ferguson and Detroit — gives us the gospel truth, calling on America to get radical again, **it's hard not to feel that this is one essential act.** - *Village Voice*

Unselfconsciousness is a hallmark of Rev Billy's work. He and his choir see no need to define where their shows sit **on the spectrum between performance art and activism**, or between stunt and spiritual gathering... **the Church's honesty, passion and lack of cynicism is inspiring.** - *The Guardian*

Reverend Billy is a classic American type, a self invented huckster, Elmer Gantry crossed with Michael Moore - *Wall Street Journal*

Reverend Billy is zany and energetic enough to hold the attention of those he's preaching to-average to extreme shoppers, many clueless to what globalization means-long enough for them to consider his crusade. - *New York Times*

That Reverend Billy is accompanied by a stirring choir and fine live band is icing on the cake, of course, but that cake is what nourishes. His politically radical parody of a fundamentalist church service may indeed preach to the converted. But all Sunday services, at every church, do precisely the same thing, though usually without Mr. Talen's sly, subversive humor. **Reverend Billy may not convert you. But you will think twice about shopping once the show is over.** - *New York Times*

Reverend Billy's impassioned pleas to take control of the environment, and make the world a place fit for our children, **had the people in the tent whooping with agreement and up on their feet and dancing** to the final motivational gospel number, urging action and a new way forward. - *Latitude Review*

You must check out the newest from **my favorite transcendent and down to Earth preacher.** - *Laurie Anderson*

Singing instructions for joining the Earthalujah choir! - *Jodie Evans, CODEPINK*

My Earthmojis are smiling for Reverend Billy! And that's all the dirt you're gonna get from me. - *Justin Vivian Bond, trans-genre artist, Radical Faerie*

Mama Earth will shake us ALL off unless we **shake shit UP and shut it DOWN!** - *Bertha Lewis, The Black Institute*

This is what makes social movements succeed—it's the big love-slog we have to go through to achieve change. - *Andy Bichlbaum, The Yes Men*

Join Rev and his merry band of activists as they **imagine ways of arousing concern** for the environment and racial justice. - *Coco Fusco, creator of Eu Sou Um Consumidor*

When the singing activists hit the high notes in a bank lobby or a DARPA lab or the back aisle of a Walmart, **they wipe away the veils hiding the madness of our corporate-controlled, consumer-crazed society.** - *Annie Leonard, director of Greenpeace USA*

Combining the situationalist flair of Abbie Hoffman with an evangelist's tireless zeal, Reverend Billy's efforts against mindless consumerism and corporate greed have **added the oxygen of publicity to flames of a number of worthy causes**, as well as reintroducing a much-needed sense of fun to Manhattan's somber and overregulated plazas. - *Publishers Weekly*

TOUR VARIATIONS & PERSONNEL

FULL CHOIR

(26 Tour Personnel)

Rev Billy
Director Savitri D
1 SM/Sound Engineer
3 Person Band
20 Person Choir

MID-SIZE CHOIR

(15 Tour Personnel)

Rev Billy
Director Savitri D
3 Person Band
10 Person Choir

COMPACT CHOIR

(9 Tour Personnel)

Rev Billy
Director Savitri D
3 Person Band
4 Person Choir
10+ Person Local Choir

CABARET CHOIR

(7 Tour Personnel)

Rev Billy
Director Savitri D
Pianist
4 Person Choir



PRODUCTION REQUIREMENTS

SOUND Stage Platform, PA and Area Microphones as required for clear visibility and audibility for indoor and outdoor performances, where applicable

LIGHTING *OUTDOOR:* Area Lighting appropriate for outdoor performances

INDOOR: Follow spot for Reverend Billy where applicable plus and general lighting for Choir & Band

HOSPITALITY Hot vegetarian meal required prior to first performance at each venue for all visiting and local personnel. Coffee, tea, water, fruit and vegan snacks to be placed in green room, fair trade and locally sourced ONLY. No plastic bottles, please.

LOCAL TRANSPORT Local transport for all Touring and local Personnel provided between accomodation and all performance venues, in addition to public transportation passes for entire residency period.





BIOGRAPHIES

William Talen *Performer / Creator*

William Talen moved to New York City from San Francisco in the early 1990s, where he had originally created a character that was a hybrid of street preacher, arguably Elvis, and televangelist called Reverend Billy. In New York, Talen began appearing as Reverend Billy on street corners in Times Square, near the recently opened Disney Store. Whereas other street preachers chose Times Square because of its reputation for sin, Reverend Billy's sermons focused on the evils of consumerism and advertising—represented especially by Disney and Mickey Mouse—and on what Talen saw as the loss of neighborhood spirit and cultural authenticity in Rudolph Giuliani's New York.

Talen is the author of various books, including *What Would Jesus Buy?*, which was also the title of Morgan Spurlock's 2007 documentary about Reverend Billy and his mission. Though Talen does not call himself a Christian, he says that Reverend Billy is not entirely a parody of a preacher, and his Church of Stop Shopping has grown to number in the thousands.

The Church of Stop Shopping *Movement*

The Church of Stop Shopping is a New York City-based community of activists who sing. The Stop Shopping Choir is, as the name suggests, anti-consumerist, and delivers its message with "punk gospel" music on Earth-loving themes. Savitri D directs the performances in "contested space" as well as on the concert stage. The forty-voice choir and musicians are guided by music director, Nehemiah Luckett. The group's theater presentations in cities across the country include an annual month-long run at Joe's Pub in Manhattan's Public Theater. They recently toured with Neil Young as the opening act in his "Monsanto Years" tour. Their gospel concerts have taken them to mountaintop removal sites, Zuccotti Park, the police station at Ferguson, Missouri, the Temple at Burning Man, Grand

Central Station, and traffic jams at the entrance to the Holland Tunnel.

The company has received the OBIE Award, the Alpert Award, the Drama-Logue Award, the Edwin Booth Award, and the Historic Districts Council's Preservation Award (for leading demonstrations to save Manhattan's Poe House). The singers risk arrest together, and were taken into custody recently at the Spectra Pipeline, the Flood Wall Street action, which followed the People's Climate March, at Goldman Sachs near Occupy Wall Street, and in both Ferguson and New York while working with Black Lives Matter. Reverend Billy himself has been arrested over seventy times.

Thomas O. Kriegsmann / *ArKtype Tour Producer*

A producer of acclaimed international projects and tours, ArKtype's work has been seen worldwide, including projects with Mikhail Baryshnikov, Yael Farber, Peter Brook, Jay Scheib, Julie Taymor, Yaron Lifschitz, Dmitry Krymov, Tony Taccone, and Victoria Thiérree-Chaplin. Recent premieres include Big Dance Theater & Baryshnikov Productions' *MAN IN A CASE*, Andrew Ondrejcek & Shara Worden's *YOU US WE ALL*, and the off-Broadway and Australian premieres of Nalaga't at Deaf-Blind Theater's *NOT BY BREAD ALONE*. Additional projects include Theatre for a New Audience; Big Dance Theater; Circa (Brisbane); 600 Highwaymen; Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen; Geoff Sobelle/Nichole Canuso/Lars Jan; Lisa Peterson & Denis O'Hare; Compagnia T.P.O. (Italy); Sam Green w/ yMusic & Yo La Tengo; Ethan Lipton; Aaron Landsman and many more. Upcoming premieres include Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen's *HOW TO BE A ROCK CRITIC* and Byron Au Yong & Aaron Jafferis' *TRIGGER*. He formerly served as Director of Programs at New York Live Arts for three seasons.

More information at www.arktype.org

ARTIST PRESS & MATERIALS

Hear, see and read about Reverend Billy & The Church of Stop Shopping including additional individual works and publications at the following sites.

Reverend Billy's Website: www.revbilly.com

Reverend Billy on Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/revbilly/albums>

Halloween 2016 Video Message: <https://vimeo.com/189265879>
Password: hallow



THE EARTH WANTS YOU



REVEREND BILLY

IT'S A LIFE

WE DRESS UP LIKE EXTINCT ANIMALS and sing in a bank and get arrested and go to jail and try to sleep and then we come home and sleep and get up and dress like extinct animals and get on the subway to another bank where we meet the Stop Shopping singers and go into the lobby and sing and hand out the investment information and then get handcuffed and go to jail or maybe just the precinct house for a few hours but maybe the Tombs up to three days and nights and face the judge again and make some promise or other and go home and get ready to go banking. We shower and then study bank investments and then call other shopping stoppers and — can you believe UBS is bankrolling that Aussie coal? — and more extinction reports and then we dress up like another threatened kind of life and go sing in bank lobbies and parking lots and drive-through teller windows and bank-sponsored art events and preach inside the circle of faces which are loathing us or giggling or stunned with thought and we hand out information on Earth crimes sponsored by their money and if we stay too long they hand-cuff us and we go to jail or maybe just get a warning in which case we do more research after returning home and love the loved ones and eat and drink and read and wash and do laundry and put off the bills and we're exhausted so we fall asleep and dream of rainforests and prairies and coral reefs and wake up and dress like extinct animals and get on the subway and meet

the other singers who are wearing giant papier maché heads of the Golden Toad, another casualty of climate change, and off we go to the bank, broke but laughing all the way to the bank, to sing.

SHOPOCALYPSE

Will we survive the fire?

The Shopocalypse, the Shopocalypse

Will we feel the Hell in this shopping list?

The neighbors fade into the shopping mall

The oceans rise but I — I must buy it all!

Shopocalypse!

It ain't the blues

It's convenience

Will we drive fast all night

To the wilderness, to the wilderness?

Will we die of fright when the logos hiss?

Can we go home, break in our own front door?

The TV stops to hear our insides roar!

Shopocalypse!

The problem ain't that we got the blues

It's that damn convenience

THE GOLDEN TOAD GOES BANKING

WE HAD ARRANGED TO MEET UP at the Manhattan Gourmet Restaurant, a glorified deli at 57th and 6th, right above the F Train station, with the Chase bank looming across the avenue. We carried our toad heads in a big sack.

It was a working-class place with a lunch crowd shouting their orders, lots of laughter. The folks were service workers, spiffily dressed people in retail, Verizon repairmen, security and cleaning people. There were about fifteen of us on this improbable mission: Laura the Diva, Dragonfly, Bryce, Ashlie, Erik Rivas taking pictures, Sylver of Picture the Homeless, Lizzie, Donald Gallagher the Radical Faerie, David Yap and Pat Hornak and Dawn Lookkin and Chido Tsemunhu and Susanna Pryce, and Nehemiah Lockett, our music director.

Looking back at the pictures of our preparations, I see a UPS driver staring at us over his tray of food. We're ages 20 to 75, several skin colors and hairstyles, from Mohawk corn-rowed, rainbow-dyed do's to various fades and chops. We're telling each other to breathe, feeling a little giddy and edgy.

We start fitting on our toad heads. Each singer knows which one of the orange cardboard-and-papier-maché constructions fits onto his or her own head. Some of us wear baseball caps to stabilize what amounts to a big off-kilter hat

— the protruding lips of the frog jut out over the forehead, so the beak of the cap helps to keep it up off our eyes.

We had re-conned the bank earlier, and now we're re-viewing the route, describing the bank's floor-plan and where the personnel are stationed, where we should walk and who to face when we sing, how to signal to each other that it's time to stop and leave.

The people at the next table, hair salon or nail shop ladies who have been cackling with gossip since we got here, they tell us if we're robbing the bank they want a cut to keep quiet. We tell them, "No, you should pay us, 'cuz we're performing for the workers up there because they get so bored." And a lady with beehive hair like the Shangi-Las from the '60s, she says, "Oh, I know. And those tellers don't get paid anything, minimum, it's terrible. Some of 'em's on welfare. Can you believe that? Working in a bank and getting food stamps?"

We walk out onto the Avenue, a stream of toad-humans. It's raining lightly on our garish, gold-orange reptile heads with the fat black eyeballs. We tread carefully over the potholes in the pavement, steadying our head gear. Following our plan, we stop in the bank's glassy downstairs lobby where there's no security, and in fact, no customers either. A semi-circle of ATM machines — with the blown-up photos of smiling actors with checkbooks — stand there looking lonely in the floor-to-ceiling glass enclave with 6th Avenue streaming by.

The part of the bank that contains our audience is upstairs at the end of a long shiny escalator. At the top is where we want to hop! We chose this bank because of its strange design — this escalator will deposit our radical toads directly into the midst of "wealth management." Whereas most bank

designs have a more fortress-like defense of their rich clients from the street, this building leaves them more vulnerable to, shall we say, the natural world.

We circle up, hold hands and pray to the life of the Earth, and to the memory of our animal guide the Golden Toad, and to the thousands of animals that have run, flown, slithered and jumped into extinction. We ask for assistance in our fight with this Devil. Life around the world is under attack by this fossil fuel bank, the old Rockefeller Standard Oil bank that has always paid for the drilling, gouging, scraping, burning and shipping of the flammable blood of the Earth. Chase Bank is currently the top financier of CO₂ emissions. According to Banktrack.org in the Netherlands, it is the single most climate-changing institution on the planet. Sometimes we have so much fun in our church that I have to put the fear of the Devil back into our singers (and myself). Yeah, Chase really IS the Devil.

The toads hop onto the escalator and the action is on. The Stop Shoppers adopt their crouch, elbows flared out, knees bent in our human approximation of long-legged frogs or toads, rising smoothly toward our interruption.

The escalator delivers us to a little landing pad that opens onto a row of teller windows to the left, and I remember the nasal voice of the beehive-hair lady with her tellers-on-welfare story. To the right is a carpeted area where the uptown rich are received. A series of desks and lovely hardwood chairs and little plush couches are a habitat for the six or eight 1%-ers seated with their portfolio managers. The priests of money sit at their computers, reviewing the returns for their demure clients. The rich are here in the middle of the day —

elegant women, who upon seeing us become suddenly frozen into impassive-faced John Singer Sargent poses, their eyes lidded, chins turned away, not wanting to admit that a choir of singing extinct reptiles and an Elvis impersonator preacher type seem to have taken over the bank.

Nehemiah has the singers blazing:

*I'm a frog, I'm a tiger, I'm a manta ray
I'm a life in the great death wave.
Extinction is my name,
Call me Climate Change!*

Everything happens at once. Some of the bankers leave the room, some converge on us, and some sit with the rich ladies as if consoling them. I'm preaching, "Stop this banking! Hear the demands of the spirits of life you have killed!" Nehemiah is comforting people, "This is a protest about your investments. It will be over in a minute." Lizzie is handing out our research. The toads are moving through the maze of desks, hopping, jerking their black-eyed masks back and forth, fingers splayed out the way frogs do, and always singing the song.

The song's point of view is an expression from threatened life: *I'm a bat, I'm an aspen, I'm a wolverine / I'm a banker's wildest dream.* As the preacher, I'm shouting into the gaps of the song the way I've learned to do in our concert shows. "This is life singing! — Living things giving you — your profit report — your drills, your explosives — your poisons!"

Five minutes, then ten minutes go by. Laura and Dragonfly are walking between the desks, boldly crossing away from

the area in front of the teller windows where I'm preaching. Laura's grandfather was a leader at the World Bank. She's not afraid of the rich and their bankers. Dragonfly is fearless too, but from another angle. Her dad was a lifer in the army. Back when Standard Oil was founded her family was just coming out of slavery.

The boldest soldiers from the other side also come to joust. There is one classic red-in-the-face type with the old saw about private property and the police are on their way and YOU MUST LEAVE THIS ESTABLISHMENT! THIS IS A CRIME! The toads surround him. Toad-power is real. Consider the species that adopted us with its history: the Golden Toads were killed off in two years by a blast-furnace-hot El Niño that dried up their mountain ponds — this, after having evolved as a species for a million years.

It's good activism to remember the heart of your purpose at the point when you are most challenged, and that banker backed down in the face of a pile-up of angry life. The lyrics of the song anticipate opposition: *We surround you / You take the names of what you kill / We may be dead but we still sing / We surround you*. And so the red-faced warrior was surrounded by vengeful toad ghosts. Rough.

Now the extraordinary interruption of the ritual quiet of the bank is creating eddies and swirls of activity across the desks and partitions. Different reactions set in. Bankers are giggling, shouting into phones, frozen and silent, staring out the window. One loan officer is smiling and laughing, taking a movie with his cell phone, like it's for his kids. Meanwhile, the Golden Toads are singing at the top of their lungs. *We surround you! / We surround you! / We may be dead but we still sing!*

As adrenalized as I was with my preaching, I remember loving what was happening, thinking, *this* is church. The life on Earth that we have given ourselves up to, surrendered to, is coming to life here! The dead are singing! It's *Resurrection Time!*

There is the impending arrival of the police to be concerned about, but we must also avoid the increasing risk of our own anger. Although we're trained in nonviolence, we can become worried that we're not breaking through, and then naturally we want to apply more force. We feel we must sing and preach louder because of this banker-blowhard in the foreground, but also because of our own fear that we aren't doing enough.

I want to stay and have debriefings with each banker and each wealthy customer: "Do you get it? Will you ask yourselves some questions about Chase? Is divestment a possibility? Are we getting through? After all, given the Earth's crisis, this sober and elite separation from the reality of your investments must end. This bank must be interrupted by all citizens, all the time — *to save our lives.*"

I feel myself being pulled from my perch on a window seat. It's time to go. I go on a bit more, "STOP BANKING, START LIVING! THIS EXTINCTION WAVE IS RISING WITH YOUR PROFIT! WHAT KIND OF ECONOMY DEPENDS ON MASS DEATH?"

Now Nehemiah has got me by the polyester lapels, "It's time. It's been fifteen minutes. Let's get out of here." The toads are also having difficulty stopping their hopping. Several of our troupe are highly trained underemployed method actors. Their hopping is so convincing you'd think their legs are

fifteen feet long. But Nehemiah is able to wade out into the pond we have created here and collar the toads. They finally do stop their hopping, take off their toad heads, and walk toward the silver moving stairs to descend.

We re-cross the Avenue. It isn't raining anymore. So much has happened that it feels surprising that the Manhattan Gourmet Restaurant is the same as it was when we left it, but that was only twenty minutes ago. They had kindly allowed us to leave our backpacks behind the counter, and now they let us reach over and grab our stuff. We say goodbye, and maybe we spend a little too much time with the hugs and thanks.

We go down into the subway, at perhaps too leisurely a pace. And the singers do manage to commute to freedom. Nehemiah and I, however, are caught by the police on the station's platform still holding our damning evidence, the sack of toad heads. We have six officers surrounding us. We're cuffed in front of our fellow commuters and led away.

Escorted back up to the street, the police decide to leave us in the glass ATM lobby. The lunch hour crowd gawks at the black man and the sad preacher in handcuffs surrounded by now an incredible number of cops. Forty? Fifty? *All these cops!* — lots of New York's Finest, standing there studying us.

Who knows how long we were there — a half hour? More? I know that more people witnessed us standing there than come to a year's worth of our shows at the Public Theater. We gathered around us a sizeable group of mildly scandalized citizens, and a flotilla of police, cruisers with lights pumping. Nehemiah was amazing, laughing the whole time. He acted like it was a reality show.

One John Wayne-like cop, older and clearly in charge,

came down on Nehemiah for his good humor. “You think this is funny?” “Well, yes it is,” I replied. “We are extinct animals in a protest.” Nehemiah added, “Extinct animals who don’t appreciate being extinct . . .” The white shirt looked at us like he’d bitten into a piece of bad meat. Then he jerked back to attention. “Okay, whatever your weird religion is, we’re taking you in.”

Finally, we were told to get our asses into the back seat of a cruiser, our handcuffs making us lie sideways. The precinct house for crimes committed in the Broadway and Times Square area is called “Midtown North.” At 54th St and 8th Avenue, it wasn’t far away, but mid-town is a constant traffic jam so it took a while. John Wayne was already waiting for us when we got there, with his pen and forms laid out on the desk, ready to process us into jail. Bummer.

It could have been a more severe bummer. The police in the front seat, wending their way through the midtown traffic while we were pretzeled in the backseat, told us that a hysterical woman in the bank had locked herself in a bathroom and called 911, sobbing and retching and proclaiming that she wouldn’t unlock the bathroom door until the police arrived. “I need to save myself from bank robbers in animal masks . . .” She incited a robbery-in-progress alert, a Code 19 went out, and police were running red lights all over Manhattan to get to our toad pond.

So, no, we didn’t think that was funny. That was not good. Somebody could have gotten hurt. We had thought we were being clear enough with our explanations and the comic appearance of the toad masks. We had thought that the singing, though certainly forceful, was also entertaining.

Nehemiah and I sat in the cell a while together, the sad cage rich with the smells of Times Square drunks and pick-pockets. We let out a long exhale, weighing the day's blur of events.

Our softly spoken conversation had the oxygen burned out of it by the stare of Captain Wayne. And, we murmured to each other, we are . . . we are *so* in the system. John Wayne will put us so deep in Kafka world, that is to say, so deeply incarcerated in the city jail (known to locals as "the Tombs"), it ain't funny. "Looks like we're going downtown," I said. "The issue is not in doubt," answered Nehemiah, maestro of the singing toads.

Suddenly Officer Beaudette, an old friend from our dozens of arrests downtown at Union Square, bursts into the police station. Beaudette plants himself between the sad prisoners and the triumphing moralist of stage and screen. "Hi Jack," says Officer Beaudette. (Oh, maybe his name *is* John Wayne.) Then Officer Beaudette sees us. "Billy! Another protest! That was you at the bank??!! How's your daughter, she must be four now, right?"

Oh! Oh my god. Beaudette is the Captain of Midtown North! He's been stationed up here! When Captain Beaudette indicated that he knew my family, that turned John Wayne into Robin Williams in *Patch Adams*. Well, maybe not that cuddly. But he stopped sending us to the Tombs at that moment. Resurrection Time! Officer Beaudette, a man who put me in the Tombs probably twenty times when he worked at the Union Square precinct, said, "Oh sign the Rev and his friend out. They're good for their word. Get Rev back to Lena." And turning to me, "Got a picture?"

We had thought the toads would be like Disney characters, poignant and political for the people who did get it, and outlandish and comic for the people who didn't. For those who did, well, those people would remember the natural world and connect their work in the bank to its consequences. But that lady in the bathroom unleashing the NYPD? She freaked out. That shouldn't happen.

And a couple of months later, in court, the District Attorney's office imitated the upset woman. They called our action a "menace" and a "riot," and urged the judges (a series of four of them over the next six months) to send Nehemiah to jail for three months, and said that I should go in for a full year.

Eventually, the Assistant DA, a young crypto-yuppie type who had long ago abandoned himself to assholishness, told the last in the assembly line of Manhattan municipal judges, "Your honor, on further review we have determined that these are entertainment professionals and this was a musical presentation."

Nehemiah walked. I was consigned to an afternoon of "community service," cleaning the benches and viewing area of the Statue of Liberty. I selfied myself with brooms and black rubber gloves and much love poured in on Twitter . . .

Postscript: We asked press professionals to estimate the number of "media exposures" posted about this story of a musical, Earth-political action that had been staged inside a wealth-management Chase Bank branch. The estimates were between 80 and 100 million exposures, and in a good number of these, the causal connection of Chase's investments and climate change was stated in the first sentences of text. This

was the case with NPR, and *The Guardian*, the *Village Voice* and *Grist*, *Forbes* and the Huffington Post.

Do we know if this media attention to the information offered up by a comic-political-spiritual (that is to say, very weird because un-categorizable) troupe in New York resulted in a significant number of customers pulling their money out of JPMorgan Chase? We have no way of knowing that.

But we don't expect measurable impacts from our work, not in this case. The point is, most of us usually don't think of banks as financing climate change. The process of education about this has barely begun. To change a critical mass of citizens on this issue, it will take far more evidence than we can present in one action, one trial, some press, and a run at the Public Theater.

On the other hand, we successfully presented a civics lesson: this isn't a question only of information, policy, litigation and lobbying — the solution must be *spiritual*. What we need is an escape from our habitual human-centered fundamentalism.

In the Church of Stop Shopping, we know that behind whatever campaign it is that we're working on, the Earth whispers to us like the ultimate conscience: There must be a change in how we imagine, express, sense life, and how we love.

Magazine

Reverend Billy's Unholy War

By JONATHAN DEE AUG. 22, 2004

On a Monday morning in Los Angeles, in a half-empty strip-mall Starbucks on Reseda Boulevard, two young women are declaring their love for each other.

"I can't keep it to myself any longer," says the one with the two-toned hair -- who, judging by the frowns and squeamish stares from the other customers, has made little enough effort to keep it to herself at all. She stands up. "I love you!" she says joyfully. "Brought to you by Monsanto!" Her companion blanches. The standing woman, it emerges, has obtained an endorsement deal for their love. Her lover, not surprisingly, has reservations, and an argument ensues.

In truth, these two women are not a couple at all; they are putting on a play, one of several being performed simultaneously inside the store. But this has not dawned yet on the legitimate customers. All they know is that their Starbucks routine has been hijacked somehow. They turn to each other, friends and strangers alike, with variants on the same question: Is this for real?

Enter, from the parking lot, Reverend Billy.

He is 6-foot-3, impossible not to look at in his white suit, clerical collar and dyed-blond pompadour. He is also not a real minister -- he is a New York-based performance artist and activist named Bill Talen -- but it generally takes people a minute or two to figure that out, and this confusion over the exact derivation of his authority is the space in which he thrives. "Hallelujah!" he shouts through a white cardboard megaphone as he bursts through the door. "This is an abusive place,

children! It has landed in this neighborhood like a space alien! The union-busting, the genetically-engineered milk, the fake bohemianism! But we don't have to be here, children! This is the Good News!"

The "actors" -- many of whom are members of the choir of Reverend Billy's church, the Church of Stop Shopping -- get up from their chairs and surround Talen, hands in the air, shouting, "Amen!" The manager of this particular Starbucks outpost is officially beside herself. She may not know what's happening, but her first instinct is to try to prevent people from taking pictures of it.

Talen (pronounced TAH-lin) makes his way to the counter, where he tries to lead the congregation in a laying of hands on the cash register. "We must exorcise this cash register," he shouts in his best Holy Roller cadence, "of the evil within it!" By this time -- as almost always happens -- one customer has taken it upon himself to come to the corporation's defense; he wrestles briefly with Talen, who, in trying to vault the counter (he is an athletic 52, but 52 nonetheless), gashes his hand on the register. Things are threatening to spin out of control, and Talen, who is on a tight schedule while in Los Angeles, has promised his wife and collaborator, Savitri Durkee (who is somewhere in the crowd), that he will stop short of being arrested.

"Let's leave now, children!" he says. "Starbucks is over!" Followed by the choir members and a few other acolytes, he exits onto Reseda Boulevard and strides toward his next engagement. As the adrenaline subsides, he looks down at the palm of his hand, which has now bled onto his white suit. "Stigmata," he smiles.

What has he just accomplished? The one person you can be sure will never again cross the threshold of the Reseda Boulevard Starbucks is Talen himself. (In fact, a subsequent court order enjoins him from coming within 250 yards of any of the 1,481 Starbucks franchises in the state of California.) But the proper measure for any street preacher is not the number of souls he saves; it is the purity of his example. The road is long and hard for an evangelical, even a fake one.

Can true activism be funny? Talen's performance would have to be categorized more as guerrilla theater than as activism; to the extent that the expansion of a

business like Wal-Mart (another of Reverend Billy's bêtes noires) is ever successfully opposed -- as recently happened in Inglewood, Calif., via public referendum -- that opposition comes from unions and grass-roots political organizations, not from Brechtian street performers with self-described "bad Elvis hair."

Still, the notion of politically motivated pranksterism is enjoying a renaissance: consider the career of Michael Moore, or the high-wire irony of the fake PAC Billionaires for Bush. By playing, as he says, "the politicized Fool," by being willing to suffer embarrassment and worse in a series of hushed quasi-public places, he can, he has discovered, make these enterprises reveal themselves. At one of the 30-odd "retail interventions" (as he terms them) Talen staged at the Times Square Disney Store, one manager became so unhinged that he made the following announcement: "Anyone who isn't here to buy something will be arrested!" Who said irony was over?

During the past seven years, Talen has made himself a thorn in the paws of Walt Disney, Nike, Home Depot, Barnes & Noble and any other chain he says he views as casually destroying the essence of neighborhoods. Just one day before the Reseda Boulevard Starbucks intervention, he led 40 disciples to a Los Angeles Wal-Mart for a bit of protest theater known as a Whirl. The participants enter separately, discreetly, as if they don't know one another; each grabs an empty shopping cart and simply circulates through the acres of aisles without stopping, falling in line behind other empty carts as he or she encounters them until a silent conga line of nonshoppers forms, snaking through the store in a hypnotic display of commercial disobedience. It gets under the skin of the store managers in a spectacular way. A spokeswoman for Wal-Mart, while recognizing Talen's name, wouldn't utter it herself, referring only -- and repeatedly -- to the corporation's general disregard for "special-interest groups with specific agendas."

So what is Talen's agenda? Just as the God's Angry Man role steals back a kind of musty, reactionary archetype (Lenny Bruce, one of Talen's heroes, had a right-wing evangelist persona as well), Reverend Billy claims for the left a concept usually owned by the right: conservatism. The reason he condemns Starbucks or

Wal-Mart as "evil" doesn't have so much to do with labor practices (though he mentions those), or any other tropes of the left, as with the destruction of place. "We are drowning," he likes to say in his sermons, "in a sea of identical details!" It's hardly a fringe idea; in May the National Trust for Historic Preservation put the entire state of Vermont on its "endangered" list and laid the blame explicitly at Wal-Mart's door.

In a world where our neighborhoods are reconfigured daily by the expansion strategies of anonymous businessmen, Talen has committed himself to the idea that to think locally is to act globally. He no longer stresses, as he used to, boycotts of companies he doesn't like. Instead he is determined to keep alive the collective memory of those communities that the chain stores are equally determined to colonize. "We remember that this place used to be the Astor Riviera Diner," he shouts at passers-by on Astor Place in Greenwich Village, where three Starbucks now face each other across an intersection. "We remember their famously abusive waiters!"

And now it's his own community -- New York City -- whose collective memory he seems to feel is under attack. Angered to the point of disequilibrium by what he considers the Bush administration's hijacking of ground zero for the purposes of staging "an early western," Talen will be working hard to, as he says, "counternarrate" the season's chief provocation, the Republican National Convention. On Aug. 29, the day before the convention opens, Reverend Billy will "marry" (or remarry) any couple who comes to the Great Lawn in Central Park, with the proviso that the wedding vows must include a recitation of the First Amendment. He will also protest, somehow, on behalf of the Madison Square Garden-area vendors ordered by the police to shut down and move on to make way for the G.O.P. And in a scheme inspired by a recent trip to Barcelona -- where store owners called the police to report that Talen was "agitating" in stores he never actually set foot in -- he promises to unleash an army of some 70 imitation Reverend Billys to preach all over Manhattan. "The collars only cost five bucks," he says happily.

What Talen and Durkee now refer to as "the Reverend Billy project" began in

1997. Talen -- a Minnesotan by birth, raised by Dutch Calvinists -- had lived for many years in San Francisco, where he founded, and occasionally performed in, a respected avant-garde theater called Life on the Water (best remembered for producing the work of Spalding Gray, whom Talen can still barely discuss without crying). When the theater lost its financing in 1994, Talen moved to New York to join its legion of actor-waiters. From his new home in Hell's Kitchen -- a reconditioned church, in fact -- he had a front-row seat for the extreme makeover of Times Square.

It outraged him, and as he watched the area's businesses and residents being relocated to make room for what he calls "an outdoor mall," he noticed that the most resistant were the street preachers, whose profound eccentricity still commanded a certain respect. Though there was a rather glaring difference between him and them -- they were, in Talen's words, "flamethrowing right-wing fundamentalists," while his own politics are somewhere left of liberal -- he had the basic fiery-eyed look, and the stature, and the voice trained to make itself heard in the last row. And so, with a collar bought at a clerical-supply shop and a white dinner jacket left over from a catering job, he hit Times Square to preach against its destruction.

Around the corner from his makeshift pulpit on Broadway sat the flagship of the effort to make Times Square safe for tourism, the Disney Store, and before long Talen decided to take the fight right to it; he entered the store and began thunderously commanding consumers to back away from the smiling stuffed Mickeys that he condemned as the products of sweatshop labor. These semi-regular visits soon attracted the attention of the police. In turn, Talen's lonely crusade attracted aficionados of both fringe theater (at the 1999-2000 Obie Awards he won a "special citation" for his Reverend Billy work) and of left-wing resistance. Talen started working with a director and put together a choir, and the Church of Stop Shopping was born.

The choir, let it be said, is no joke. Numbering 25 or so, rehearsing several hours a week and performing for no pay, they sing Talen's politically inflected lyrics with genuine gospel chops that flatten irony. They are a diverse group in

terms of age and race. Some are professional musicians on a kind of busman's holiday, some are lapsed fundamentalists happy to offend certain sensibilities and some are genuinely religious -- they just feel that their own churches neglect the antimaterialist spirituality that the Church of Stop Shopping, in its oddball fashion, keeps alive. (Two choir members are actually former Starbucks employees.)

Talen met Durkee four years ago in a theater elevator. She was a dancer and playwright who, like Talen, had a strict religious background (Muslim, on her father's side). They live in a modest railroad apartment in Brooklyn, on a tree-lined street of two-story houses with nary a transnational chain store in sight. They get by primarily on fees paid by colleges where Talen takes short residencies and guest-lecture positions. She's the organizational spirit and the emotional ground wire for Talen, who, as he gets deeper and deeper into character, can't always be relied upon to act in his own best interest.

In fact, "Reverend Billy" may finally be less a character than a mode of expression -- one that, he has discovered, people will pay attention to. When Talen speaks in his own voice on the subject of, say, Donald Rumsfeld, he can become quite strident; whereupon, perhaps catching the didactic note in his own voice, he will suddenly punctuate his remarks with a loud, startling and yet somehow tension-lightening "Hallelujah!"

Talen and Durkee's romance preceded their working relationship by a year or two; she gave up her day job to help him sophisticate the somewhat crude iconography of those early days (nailing Mickey Mouse to a cross, for example). Talen soon began broadcasting a sermon fortnightly on National Public Radio. He sent his disciples into various chain stores to perform the scripted public arguments he calls Spat Theater. He tormented Starbucks to such a degree that in 2000 a memo was circulated to all its Manhattan employees, answering the question "What should I do if Reverend Billy is in my store?" Later, Talen gleefully appropriated the phrase for his own book. "In the Church of Stop Shopping we believe that buying is not nearly as interesting as not-buying," Talen wrote. "When you back away from the purchase, the product may look up at you with wanton eyes but the product dies quickly back onto the shelf and sits there, trying to get a

life. The product needs you worse than you need it, remember that."

For a while Reverend Billy was, in his words, "this month's flavor." Then came his own time in the wilderness.

Among the thousands of deaths on Sept. 11, 2001, was one that proved to be temporary -- the death of irony -- and yet when Talen went to the spontaneous village that arose in Union Square in the days following the catastrophe, he did so, for reasons mysterious even to himself, in character as Reverend Billy. He wasn't trying to be funny. He had 30,000 hits on his Web site on Sept. 12, and President Bush was on TV urging all true patriots to go shopping, and, Talen says now, he knew he had some role to play; he just didn't know yet what it was. Something inspiring was happening on that site, he believed, something that, however dismal its cause, resembled the unearthed spirit of community, of unmediated talking, that Talen had been summoning for years. Then one morning Talen showed up at Union Square and everything -- the temporary shelters, the art, the fliers that kept alive the "missing" -- had been collected overnight by the Parks Department.

In terms of Reverend Billy, Talen says, "we were back at Square 1. The choir fell apart, for one thing. The choir leadership was troubled by our political message at that time. They had so many friends that died." Nevertheless, Talen and Durkee patiently rebuilt the project. They reassembled the choir, and they found new spaces in which to perform; and as they did so, they found that something unexpected had happened. For performers and audience alike, the whole Reverend Billy experience, born in parody, was becoming less and less distinguishable from an actual church service -- a reaffirmation, in a ritualistic setting, of a common core of spiritual values.

It sounds like a whole new frontier in sacrilege, but anyone who goes to a Reverend Billy service these days expecting a high dose of camp is in for a confrontation with a profoundly odd sincerity. Talen performs several services a year at the famously left-leaning St.-Mark's-in-the-Bowery Church in the East Village; a recent one, a benefit to fix the church's leaky roof, took place on Mother's Day before a crowd of about 300. Several yellow-robed choir members circulated

in the minutes before the show with rolls of duct tape, with which they good-naturedly covered any visible logos on the congregants' clothing -- the rejection of worldliness, as Durkee points out, being a theme common to most religious experiences.

Soon the reverend entered, shaking hands, working the crowd ("Thank you for coming to church today"), as the choir sang and the three-piece band played. He went through a few signature bits -- a James Brown moment in which he collapsed and was brought back to his feet by the exhortations of the choir; a "credit-card exorcism" -- and people were laughing, for a while. But by the time he got to the recitation of the original (and politically pointed) 1870 Mother's Day proclamation by Julia Ward Howe, and of the First Amendment, and of the reasons that George Bush must be denied a hero's welcome when he returns to ground zero this summer, there was nothing about the responsive amens that wasn't 100 percent on the level.

"The political climate makes people want to be joyous even more," Durkee said later. "I would say we have enough people who come to every show that there's a regular sense that people are going to church. Strangely enough."

What's wrong with preaching to the converted? Isn't that what any church does? As Talen, the wayward son of religious parents, asked the congregants to let their spirits rise communally into the night sky high above that leaky roof, as he led them in prayer to "the God that is not a product," your first thought, perhaps, might be that a psychiatrist would have a field day with this guy. But given the amount of time he spends putting himself in harm's way for the sake of his convictions, it's hard to begrudge him a little worship. And if one or two newcomers are still smirking a little as they shout "Hallelujah" for the first time in their lives, Talen is untroubled, perhaps because he knows from his own experience what's happening to them. Act as if you have faith, and faith will be given to you.

The irreverent Reverend Billy of the Church of Stop Shopping

by **Stephen Quirke** (/users/stephen-quirke) | 2 Jun 2016

A conversation with the man who is preaching the gospel of saving the planet, curbing consumerism and ending the diabolical influence of corporate greed



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

http://news.streetroots.org/sites/default/files/shoes/article_image/Back%20the%20Rev%20Billy.jpg?itok=KdTKPGNM

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 blonde hair to back the Rep. 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 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-zka33sZwQ\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-zka33sZwQ), criticizing their financing of coal mining and other fossil fuel projects [that drive climate change \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHuZdmWaBUQ\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHuZdmWaBUQ). 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 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."

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 –

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 (<http://ourfutureriver.org/>), 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"?



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

Photo by Occupy Wall Street Media Team

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?

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."

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 echoing down from on high.

S.Q.: You're widely known for *exorcising demons from cash registers* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wxjl2ERhnl>). 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 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 the 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.

FURTHER READING: [How moss research laid bare Portland's problem with pollution](http://news.streetroots.org/2016/03/24/how-moss-research-laid-bare-portland-s-problem-pollution) (<http://news.streetroots.org/2016/03/24/how-moss-research-laid-bare-portland-s-problem-pollution>)

S.Q.: *I saw [that map that you released](http://www.revbilly.com/portlandmap) (<http://www.revbilly.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 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luoL5A-SHQk\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luoL5A-SHQk), 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.

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.

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 museumgoer is dead. An exhibit that opens in a museum would be much different if your patrons are all dead. It's a real marketing problem.

Contact Reverend Billy

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Tags: [Stephen Quirke \(/tags/stephen-quirke\)](/tags/stephen-quirke), [Reverend Billy \(/tags/reverend-billy\)](/tags/reverend-billy), [Church of Stop Shopping \(/tags/church-stop-shopping\)](/tags/church-stop-shopping), [Climate change \(/tags/climate-change\)](/tags/climate-change), [Corporations \(/tags/corporations\)](/tags/corporations), [free market capitalism \(/tags/free-market-capitalism\)](/tags/free-market-capitalism), [Black Lives Matter \(/tags/black-lives-matter\)](/tags/black-lives-matter), [Occupy Wall Street \(/tags/occupy-wall-street\)](/tags/occupy-wall-street), [air quality \(/tags/air-quality\)](/tags/air-quality), [pollution \(/tags/pollution\)](/tags/pollution)

The Church of Stop Shopping doesn't pull punches on its return to New York

Reverend Billy Talen and his group are returning to New York City this Black Friday to deliver a simple message to Americans: resist consumerism

Jana Kasperkevic
in New York

Friday 27 November 2015
07.00 EST

Justin Bieber has pulled out of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. But don't worry: the Reverend Billy is still planning to entertain the holiday crowd on Black Friday and maybe, just maybe, add a few Beliebers to his Church of Non-Shopping.

The holiday season is a busy time for Bill Talen - the performance artist, actor and activist who styles himself as Reverend Billy. Last week at Joe's Pub, the downtown music venue where Adele recently performed three of her songs to an intimate crowd of 184 people, Talen was warming up for the big day.

About a dozen homeless New Yorkers - three of them under the age of five - took the stage with Talen to share their stories of being hassled for living on the street, of being arrested for blocking sidewalks with their carts.

"How can this happen in America?" asked a homeless retired marine, his voice trembling.

"Talk to us, don't talk about us," said another as the audience looked on silently. "I could be a decent person," he added, which was met with echoes of "You are!". Seconds later, he was enveloped in a hug from Talen.

The show may have been more than the audience bargained for. If homeless people are in the audience or up on the stage, you can't avert your eyes or walk faster until you have passed them.

In a performance lasting just over an hour, Talen and his Church of Stop Shopping tackle GMOs, police brutality, racism, homelessness, capitalism, climate change and the environment. They are not there to give you a good show - they are there to make you question your way of life.

The Church of Stop Shopping has been around for 15 years. Talen first developed his Elvis-meets-Bill Graham preacher character in the alternative theaters of San Francisco. The character and the church soon morphed into a vehicle for protesting against what he sees as the destructive rise in consumerism. At first, the group was resisting “consumerism in the broadest sense”, says Talen. Then he identified targets.

Talen is banned from every Starbucks in the world after a series of protests against its “fake Bohemia” in which he tried to “exorcise” the demon of cookie-cutter capitalism from its stores. He’s been arrested outside Disney stores, where the group duct-tapped Mickey Mouse to a cross. Ten years ago the group began an annual tradition of staging a performance-like protest outside Macy’s flagship store in New York City.

But even for Talen some things are bigger than shopping. “Last year, for the first time in 10 years, we were not at the front door of Macy’s in Herald Square at the door buster event,” Talen says. “We were in Ferguson.”

After visiting a Monsanto headquarters in St Louis to perform another exorcism, the group traveled to Ferguson to participate in protests held just days after a grand jury in St Louis County declined to indict Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown. The group also participated in die-ins at the local stores.

When Talen and Savitri D, his partner and director, describe that experience as moving and transformative. Just minutes into his show at Joe’s Pub, Reverend Billy announced that US has reached a landmark - about 1,000 people have been killed by police in 2015.

The church - or the choir, if you will - then launched into one of their songs, Man Down, Brother Down. Moments later, a member of the choir began to list names of those who have been killed: Michael Brown, Oscar Grant, Corey Jones, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin. A moment of silence followed. The only sound was that of drinks clinking on servers’ trays.

The show, which will run every Sunday until 20 December, is not all about being uncomfortable.

“Do you feel her presence?” Reverend Billy says at one point, referring to Adele. He continues, singing: “*Rumor has it ...*”

Talen likes to mix the sacred and the profane - he sees it as a way to remove the barriers he believes people erect to stop them questioning their unbridled consumerism.

When people protest or attend a performance, “we start to meet in the streets again,” says Talen. These interactions come after years of people distancing themselves from each other. “I distance myself from you. I keep buying and buying and buying. Everything around me is monetized and you go farther away as a person. You start to have more and more cars and

perfumes and multiple phones, screens and billboards and [you are] way over there - we used to be within hailing distance, within talking distance, within touching distance.”

It all changed in Ferguson, he says: “We were laying down together. We were dying in together. We were touching each other in new ways. We were talking. We were making new relationships.”

“It’s not surprising,” adds Savitri D. “Social movements - or movements, period - of the last couple of decades, they all originate or come from people who really cannot shop or don’t shop. That are cut off or divorced from consumerism because the aspirational model is impossible for them.”

“That’s what Thanksgiving has to become this year,” Reverend Billy chimes in. “We have got to celebrate the soft, deep emotions: graciousness, trust, intimacy ...”

“Gratitude,” says Savitri D.

“... Forgiveness, being quiet together without football on or video games.”

“How do you resist?” says Savitri D. “It’s really easy to find yourself in a store buying something you didn’t even need.”

This Friday, Reverend Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping will return to its old stomping ground, the Herald Square Macy’s on 34th street in New York, to urge people to - what else - stop shopping.

The church’s shooting and shopping protests are closely aligned, at least in Talen’s head. “Hands up, don’t shop,” was shouted many times in Ferguson, he said. It’s all part of his struggle with “this shared hallucination in the United States, this national fundamentalist religion, which could be expressed in a phrase ‘Shoot and buy, shoot and buy, shoot and buy’.”

“The main ritual in our society right now is shopping,” explains Talen. “It’s the national religion. It’s the thing we all do that we don’t even question any more. That’s how fundamental religions are - you don’t even question any more and if somebody does anything a little bit different, it’s very weird. He is a stranger. He is a threat.”

So while Bieber will not be singing at this year’s Macy’s Parade, Talen and the choir will be there the following day to treat its customers to anti-shopping choral performance. “We will exorcize this big department store, so that its products tremble on the shelves, but we won’t go flash mobbing inside like former years. The carbon emissions and sweatshop labor of their Black Friday sales will be sung to passersby.”

Corporations “have taken Thanksgiving utterly!” Talen said. He’s hoping he can take a little back.

BUSINESS INSIDER

The craziest thing about this legendary singing, anti-corporate preacher is that he isn't real



HARRISON JACOBS
FEB. 4, 2015, 9:51 AM

On the rainy night before Thanksgiving, a man in the black and white outfit of a minister stood shouting in front of the Ferguson, Missouri police department, at the heart of widespread protests over the police killing of an unarmed black 18-year-old named Michael Brown.

"Ten, 20 years from now, when your children are grown up, you will remember this as a turning point in American history! We are here. The bulls--- stops here. We're not afraid! We're not afraid!"



Mike Nudelman/Business Insider

The man, known as Reverend Billy, spoke with an intensity that held the attention of sign-toting protesters and stone-faced National Guardsmen.

"It is no accident that actions are taking place in 37 states at the present time," he said. "The murder of Michael Brown is in all of us."

Behind Reverend Billy was his choir, a set of performers and activists known as [The Church of Stop Shopping](#), who channeled the locals' energy by singing civil rights protest standards and echoing his declarations to the crowd.

At 64 years old, this is Reverend Billy's life. He, the Church, and his wife, director Savitri Durkee, protest everything from consumerism to fracking to race relations and spend their days disrupting the businesses of JPMorgan Chase, Disney, Starbucks, and the half-dozen other corporations he's singled out as the destroyers of America and Planet Earth. He's gained a following that is at once fervently spiritual and radically political. When there is a cause or an injustice that needs protesting, from New York to California, he's there preaching, demonstrating, and, on more than 50 occasions, getting arrested.

As impressive as he is, however, perhaps the most remarkable thing about this activist legend is that he isn't real, or at least he didn't used to be. In fact, Reverend Billy was created two decades ago as performance art by a middle-aged theater producer named William Talen, who plays the preacher; but, over time, the character has become all-consuming and powerful.

A Calvinist kid goes rogue



William Talen, known as Reverend Billy, delivers a speech to members of Occupy Wall Street at Zuccotti Park in New York on Oct. 25, 2011.

REUTERS/Eduardo Munoz

Talen was born in Minnesota, where his parents practiced Calvinism, a branch of Protestant Christianity marked by strict adherence to the Bible. Talen has said Calvinists “try to regiment every part of life.” His father was a local banker for farmers in the area. Talen had little interest in religion or business, preferring hobbies like birding, cello, writing, and — somewhat scandalously — contemporary music and dancing.

By his teens, Talen's family had moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin, putting them near the Packers during coach Vince Lombardi's legendary tenure. Talen wasn't supposed to watch, though, because the games were on Sundays. He did anyway, sneaking into his parents' garage to watch on a tiny television in the bitter cold. In high school, he took a class with [Charles Gaines, the novelist](#), who was a creative writing teacher at the time. The student became close to Gaines and his wife, Patricia, who was a painter and a sculptor.

“Bill was attracted to our very unconventional life,” Gaines recalled. “We formed a bond immediately.”

Gaines described the young Talen as “bright, high energy, extremely kinetic, and obsessed with himself.”

Talen stayed in touch with Gaines when his mentor moved to New Hampshire, and it wasn't long before the teenager hit the road himself.

Talen [hitchhiked from truck stop to truck stop, worked on ranches until the proprietors kicked him out](#), and even worked as a street barker for a New Orleans strip club. He enrolled for a short time at the University of Wisconsin, before transferring to Franconia College in New Hampshire, because the school was known for its avant garde approach to education and because Gaines lived nearby. After college, he hitchhiked up and down the East Coast as a vagabond poet before moving to California to immerse himself in the Beat scene in Bolinas. He drifted in and out of homelessness for a time, before becoming part of [folk singer Rosalie Sorrels'](#) inner circle. Finally, he settled in the Bay Area and became a theater producer, writer, actor, and radio host.

Those wild years would be enough for most people, but he was just getting started.

The creation of Reverend Billy

In the early '90s, Talen ran the Life On The Water theater in San Francisco with a few fellow dramatists, where he produced the plays of local playwrights and, once a year, one of his own. After the performance of his play about an architect dealing with yuppie guilt, Talen was approached by a theater producer and [former Episcopalian reverend named Sidney Lanier](#), a cousin of playwright Tennessee Williams.

Lanier thought Talen was more of a preacher than an actor. He said Talen could become "a new kind of American preacher," one who said what needed to be said.

Talen, then in his 40s, was in a self-described midlife crisis. He began studying with Lanier, analyzing as many ancient religious readings, evangelical sermons, and popular films as he could manage to try to create his new kind of preacher. Here is one of the first attempts at the character:

Reverend Billy on Fog Town Network--Bill Talen



In 1993, Talen relocated to Manhattan, where he waited tables and worked at Lanier's church, St Clement's, while the two worked on finding a message for their preacher.

Talen found it outside his door in Hell's Kitchen. Manhattan was changing all around him. Then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani [was implementing a harsh "Quality of Life" program](#), targeting low-level crimes like panhandling, jaywalking, graffiti, and public drinking, in an effort to clean up the city. Meanwhile, corporations like Starbucks and Disney were taking over Manhattan, displacing old businesses, opening chain stores, and threatening the gritty, authentic city he loved. In 1997, he began hauling a makeshift pulpit to Times Square and shouting his new theology over the din of other shouters: sideshow characters, theater and comedy club promoters, actual preachers.

While Talen was always unpredictable, even his old mentor Gaines found the new direction unusual.

"He wasn't politically active, as far as I remember," Gaines said. "To me, his political activity was an outgrowth of the persona of Reverend Billy. He had to start believing in things, espousing things, taking positions for the character to exist. Causes accrued naturally around the persona. The more he did it, the more natural it became. There's no doubt now that he is devoted to those beliefs."

"Watching what happened in Times Square — with the corporations and chain stores moving in — changed him," said [Forbes writer Monte Burke](#), who has known Talen for decades.

The message of Reverend Billy was simple.

"Disney was the devil," Talen explained. "Mickey Mouse was the anti-Christ. The sin was Disney's sweatshop labor."

Disney represented a bigger phenomenon in America for Talen. In his eyes, Disney's films and musicals monopolized US culture, while its stores displaced small businesses and exploited sweatshop workers. Talen's distaste for Disney peaked when he first went inside the Times Square Disney Store. Visiting for story research, Talen couldn't contain himself. He bought a Mickey Mouse doll, held it over his head, and began preaching. Talen was arrested, he says, and handcuffed to the Mickey Mouse doll.

The arrest furthered Talen's resolve to continue his Disney Store preaching in the following years. His exploits got him interviews on local television, a regular 90-second sermon on NPR, [features in independent documentaries](#), and a following of theater people, activists, academics, and upset New Yorkers. Talen soon branded them The Church of Stop Shopping.



Performance artist Bill Talen, in character as "Reverend Billy," poses in front of The Disney Store on New York's Times Square Jan. 11, 1998.

AP Photo/Jim Cooper

Talen fuses with Reverend Billy

Talen began to formalize the church by the year 2000, with the church's choir [performing regularly at Manhattan theater the Culture Project](#).

That year Talen met Savitri Durkee, who managed the Culture Project then. Disenchanted with the elitist arts scene in New York, Durkee gravitated towards Talen's direct approach. She took over direction of the Church and the two became involved romantically, marrying in 2002. Talen's show initially offended Durkee.

"I was shocked that someone was co-opting religious imagery," she said. "It wasn't satirical. It was stranger than that. He was saying exactly what he meant at a time when artists were taught to be indirect. He was saying things that mattered ..."

Under Durkee's direction, Reverend Billy and the Church became more elaborate and more structured. Talen became a community leader in the midtown neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen, protesting unwelcome changes like a new Starbucks, working to unionize local workers, and protecting a community garden.

The role of Reverend Billy took on added significance after 9/11, when the congregants who used him to fuel their outrage instead looked to him to grieve.

"People poured in," Talen said. "We were well-known enough at that point that people trusted us to run a fellowship. We grieved together. We cried together. We helped each other get through a traumatic event."

Talen became what he had long pretended to be: a spiritual leader. The responsibility drained the televangelist satire that had been the source of Reverend Billy's creation.

"At that point, I became Reverend Billy. I became fused with the character. Since then, I've married people, buried people. You're standing there hugging the parents of someone who passed away or something — pastoring is not easy. It's surprisingly powerful," Talen told the A.V. Club in 2007.

Here is Talen preaching in Union Square just after 9/11:

Reverend Billy at Union Square in the aftermath of 9/11



A radical who's focused on the present

When I asked Talen about these early days on a blustery evening in November, he gave me as short a summary as possible, even after a couple glasses of red wine. Talen was focused on the sordid present and the bleak future.

"I want to speak to you radically. If we stated to you what we believe, we would be seen as full of common sense and scandalous at the same time," Talen said, before launching into one of his trademark tirades.

"Here is what is killing us. The 8,000 invisible, unregulated chemicals of Monsanto, Syngenta, Bayer, Dow, Dupont, Cargill, BASF; the factory farms, the pesticide-drenching GMO companies. Companies like Starbucks kill people in the Global South through their land grabs, resource grabs, and factory farming. These companies are killing us."

Soon he switched gears to talk about Ferguson, Missouri, police violence, and the American justice system: "Ferguson is a white, racist, militarized Southern police force in a slave state. You've got a white police force and a majority black community. It's black and white."



William Talen, known as Reverend Billy, delivers a speech to members of Occupy Wall Street at Zuccotti Park in New York on October 25th, 2011. The Church of Stop Shopping was heavily involved in the Occupy movement.

REUTERS/Eduardo Munoz

After a few minutes, he segued into a tirade against consumerism and gentrification and environmental destruction.

"The marketing [in the US] has gotten more and more aggressive. You must have straight teeth, beautiful clothes, a big house, a beautiful lady. There is the constant threat that you won't be successful. It's violent. It's ongoing ... We've long argued that rampant consumerism is a source of violence and racism. This year, everybody gets what we've been saying [because of Ferguson]. It's gratifying, but sad on another level," he said.

For Talen, in his infinite reserve of passion and outrage, nearly every cause is linked.

He told me in his sincerest tone: “Right now, activists talk about Human Rights and Earth Rights. They split themselves up into hundreds of different self-righteous cults. It’s all the same thing. We have to protect the rights of people and we have to protect the rights of the Earth. I’m trying to find a word to describe one thing that all of us can fight for.”

It’s hard not to get sucked in by Talen’s charisma and enthusiasm. It’s no wonder the man attracted a congregation with only an ideology, an operatic voice, and a red Village Voice distribution box used as a pulpit.

Talen’s endgame



The Church of Stop Shopping, led by Robin “Sister Dragonfly” Laverne Wilson, sings protest songs at the Michael Brown memorial on Nov. 28, 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri.

© Erik McGregor

Today, Talen leads the Church of Stop Shopping’s 50 performing members in protests around the country, like in Ferguson, where Talen and a group of 25 held a vigil for Michael Brown, led a Thanksgiving protest at agricultural giant Monsanto, and joined community leader “Mama Cat” Daniels in cooking and performing at a Thanksgiving Dinner for protesters.

Talen’s group also puts on shows, like “The Monsanto Is The Devil” show I saw at [at Joe’s Pub, an offshoot of the The Public Theater](#). In that performance, Reverend Billy introduced the packed show like a church service, shouting “Welcome to Church!” [The choir sang two sets of songs](#) with names like “Climate Change Blues,” “Cops and Bankers,” and “Revolution,” before the Reverend delivered an energetic sermon. Impromptu dance routines broke out during and between songs. The Reverend “canonized” a new saint, as he always does — the Ferguson protester who threw paint on NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton. He even put Joe’s Pub on notice, singing, “We got no minimum. You don’t have to buy any drinks. Stop shopping!”



Talen and The Church of Stop Shopping performing the Monsanto Is The Devil show in November.

Erik McGregor

But Stop Shopping goes beyond protests.

“It really is a church,” said music director Nehemiah Luckett, who is the son of a Methodist pastor. “They are committed to supporting each other to become better people. The more I got to know them, the more I thought that a lot of churches could learn a lot from the group.”

That sense of community may be what has kept Talen and Durkee around for so long.

“If you’ve been an activist for any amount of time, you abandon any concept of success. You fail all the time,” Durkee said.

During nearly every conversation we had, Talen insisted the “plight of the Earth” requires our urgent attention and that things are going downhill — fast.

“If you look at the Earth and you ask regular people, ‘Will we make it? Will we change soon enough [to stop climate change]’ They’ll say no,” Talen said. “Corporations and politicians will say yes we will. But nothing’s changing,”

Still, some might question whether Talen’s tactics do anything but annoy people. But Talen calls these acts transformative, as they raise awareness, make people question conventional beliefs, and motivate others to push for change.

“Politicians eventually find their way to effective social movements,” Talen said, “because so many people become convinced that politicians and businessmen have no choice but to listen.”



William Talen, known as Reverend Billy, delivers a speech to members of Occupy Wall Street at Zuccotti Park in New York on Nov. 15, 2011.

REUTERS/Eduardo Munoz

Even when he's beat, he refuses to quit

Several weeks ago, Talen was at it again. Standing in the lobby of Grand Central, he shouted [hoarsely to a crowd carrying black signs](#) emblazoned with Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and others killed by police violence. Protesters had held a vigil for the previous 18 hours.

“It looks as if our brothers and sisters in uniform are tightening their surrounding of the names of these victims, of these heroes, of these children, of these fathers and mothers!” said Talen, as he gestured wildly at the 10 or 20 policemen standing a few yards off. “What they are doing goes right to the heart of the uprising that started with Michael Brown. Black lives matter! Black lives matter! Black lives matter!”

Within minutes of speaking, the police moved in on Talen, picking up signs off the ground and breaking up the protest. Talen was arrested without ceremony.



Talen is arrested in Grand Central on January 6th.

Screenshot/YouTube

Talen was placed in jail alone for 24 hours. Within days of his release, he [announced a \\$500,000 lawsuit against the MTA](#) for falsely accusing him of attacking police officers during the arrest.

This is what a living legend looks like, and he's becoming more real every day.

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THE BLOG

Reverend Billy On Disney's Fundamentalistic Apocalyptic Christianity, the Church of Stop Shopping, and How to Save Mother Earth

🕒 04/12/2016 04:21 pm ET



Like 88



David Henry Sterry

Author, activist, performer, muckraker, book doctor

Our Earth is in terrible trouble. Every day I try to figure out what I can do to help. Sometimes it seems like recycling, turning off lights I'm not using, and riding my bicycle instead of tooling around in my gas-guzzling machine aren't enough. So when I got Reverend Billy's book in the mail, I rejoiced. He is a true visionary when it comes to our planet. So now that his book, *The Earth Wants You*, is coming out, I thought I would pick his brain to see what he has to say about the whole thing.



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David Henry Sterry: Why did you decide to write this book?

Reverend Billy: I discovered that under the surreal conditions of 2016, to write powerfully on the page is the same thing as an act of civil disobedience on the street. And the thing that good writing and activism share is the slimy, scary spiritual life of the Earth.

A small number of people over a short period of time (a couple centuries) have turned the Earth's behavior into science fiction. We're trying to get the Earth to be a character in a human drama; get it to act like a world war, or an angry god, or the ultimate criminal artist. So I wanted to join the resistance to casting. This means dodge the smoke and mirrors of the "Environmental Movement" and going straight to the Earth.

The Earth is saying something to us and we have to learn that language and speak it and write it down. I wanted to be the ghost writer and let the Earth be the author.

DHS: What exactly is the Church of Stop Shopping, and how do I join?

RB: You join by letting your own drama out. Let's face it - Consumerism is designed to make us feel fabulous when we're dull and derivative. Consumerism is a con-job. I have seen people run toward us across super malls like we were the Taliban, and all we were doing was singing gospel in the back aisle with the phrase "Stop Shopping" in a nice harmony. Consumerism is like a fundamentalist religion.

TRENDING

DNC Staffer Screams At Donna Brazile For Helping Elect Donald Trump

Donald Trump Limits Traditional Press Access On First White House Visit

As Obama Spoke On Trump's Win, The Faces Of White House Staffers Said It All

Barack Obama Meets With Donald Trump At The White House

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DHS: I love how in your book you say that the Earth talks to us. Why do you think it's so hard for us to listen?

RB: Consumers listen to products. Militarists listen to sentimental patriotism. Religionists listen to Gods that aren't there. In the West, we've got products, patriotism and gods screaming at us all at once. We have a lot of white out here.

But even though we have forgotten how to listen to the Earth, the Earth never stops singing its song to us. It's still there. Of course, we listen to nothing but the Earth before we're born, and after we die - and so we always have this familiar feeling from the scream of a hawk or the ghostly fingerprints of a caress.

Our ultimate radical instruction is never far away, our life is earthy, even in the heart of New York. We can leave our computers, walk outside and look around, and the wind is waiting with its lovely snake of vowels.

DHS: Why should we stop using products from Monsanto? Is it okay to hate weeds?

RB: I'm a weed. I reject the monoculture. I grow along its edges and feast on its mistakes. You can hate me, but if you try to kill me, then I will call out for another weed to come help me and we'll destroy your GMO corn crop. No, genetically tampered crops and their glyphosate herbicides are deadly to life, including humans. Back away from the product! Industrial agriculture is devastating to the climate, living ecosystems, and dinner.

We are drowning in a sea of identical details! Uniqueness is in the shout "Earthalujah!" The corporate state has taken over our food and art, our energy and transportation, our national security and our daydreams, and here comes a wind at a thousand miracles a second because the Earth is hot and bothered.

DHS: When I was hired to write a screenplay by Disney, I found out inside the company their nickname for it is Maushwitz. I noticed that you called Mickey Mouse the Antichrist. Why is that?

RB: Disney is the oldest international media company. The United States Congress openly extends Mickey Mouse's trademark. Disney believes in the monetization of desire down to three year olds. Now it's trying to make deals with hospitals to establish a protocol in birth centers, so that the mouse is the first thing the child sees. Disney runs a sweatshop empire, estimates range to 20,000 factories. That company is the burning lake of hellfire. I have a 5-year-old. I'm battling Christ and the anti-Christ daily. They deserve each other.

DHS: How did we get in the mess we are in today, with refugees roaming the Earth, drought striking down huge parts of our country, crazy violent weather, and insane homophobic, racist, raving lunatics running for president?

RB: I'm encouraged right now, surprisingly enough, because things are breaking open. Think of a few years ago, when the smooth monoculture of the Clintons ran things. The liberal capitalists didn't even know they were colonizers - they were so powerful for so long they thought that they were the natural world. So now people cross borders and the white demagogues scream. Well, that's good. Black Lives Matter at Trump rallies is our guiding moral force.

DHS: What can I, one humble human, do about all this?

RB: First of all, take your own mind seriously. Study your personal dreams and learn things in an on-purpose way. The full-court press of the American con-job is a hell of slippery Devil. It comes at you and won't let go.

Each of us is surrounded by thousands of products who insist that they are freedom, democracy and the American dream. In consumer society, the products say that they are actually *you*. Our identity passes into what we buy. The economy infantilizes us. So to take yourself seriously might feel lonely and harsh at first. But it's like a new kind of sex that you've been waiting for all your life. Get into it.

DHS: America has a great tradition of standing up to bullies, the little guy fighting against the rich and powerful, taking to the streets to try to get what we believe in. How did you start as a street activist?

RB: For years I preached in the Stonehenge of Logos - Times Square. The bully was Mickey Mouse, a 12-foot-tall statue standing behind me. And the bullies were also my fellow preachers up and down the sidewalks. The fundamentalism of right-wing apocalyptic Christianity is very much the same as Maushwitz, and so sometimes I felt surrounded and lonely. But as I started to get my rhythm going, my preaching "whoop", then people started clapping their hands around me. Then

they began to harmonize like a doo-wop group. It dawned on me that I didn't have to be alone. The choir is being born. Activist communities have the best kind of love.

DHS: What do you want people to take away from your book?

RB: The book is a report on the work of the Church of Stop Shopping, our work in the Chase lobbies, at fracking sites on the Hudson River, in the police-station parking lot of Ferguson, Missouri, and in the laboratory in Harvard where they are trying to make a robot bee as Monsanto and Syngenta and Bayer kill the real ones. What do I want? I want a new kind of Earth activism. I'm like everyone else. I want to live and I want my kid to live.

DHS: What was the hardest thing about writing your book? What advice do you have for writers?

RB: We're still in a preliminary period in this apocalypse. At this time, the freak storms and extinction waves are still being sold back to the unconscious predators who make the climate in the first place. We're buying our own tragedy in flashy packaging and punny slogans and plastic credit.

We will stop shopping: stop letting them translate the Earth's screaming wind. We'll let the Earth disrupt us, admit that this tragedy is real - not as a theory or policy or electronic posting—but as life and death. Then we can tell each other that we will change because we *must* change. That is evolutionary dueting with the Earth, which is hair-raising, a shocker, and sometimes dead. But this is true of all the social movements that created freedom in our benighted America.

"Reverend Billy" is the nom de plume of William Talen, a performance artist who lapsed into his Earth ministry with a community of activists who sing as an act of trespassing against abusive corporations. They are "Reverend Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir" and are in recovery from various religions - having defended citizens from the fundamentalism of Consumerism. They originate their work in nonviolent dramatic actions against Devils such as coal companies, big banks, Walmart and Monsanto. The concert stage show, which they call "Fabulous Worship," has taken the company to four continents, most recently a rock tour with Neil Young on his "The Monsanto Years" tour, and a run at Joe's Pub at the Public Theater in New York.

David Henry Sterry is the author of 16 books, a performer, muckraker, educator, activist, and book doctor. His new book Chicken Self:-Portrait of a Man for Rent, 10 Year Anniversary Edition, has been translated into 10 languages. He's also written Hos, Hookers, Call Girls and Rent Boys: Professionals Writing on Life, Love, Money and Sex, which appeared on the front cover of the Sunday New York Times Book Review. He is a finalist for the Henry Miller Award. He co-authored The Essential Guide to Getting Your Book Published with his wife, and co-founded of

The Book Doctors, who have toured the country from Cape Cod to Rural Alaska, Hollywood to Brooklyn, Wichita to Washington helping countless writers get published. He has appeared on, acted with, written for, been employed as, worked and/or presented at: Will Smith, a marriage counselor, Disney screenwriter, Stanford University, National Public Radio, Milton Berle, Huffington Post, a sodajerk, Michael Caine, the Taco Bell chihuahua, Penthouse, the London Times, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, a human guinea pig and Zippy the Chimp. He can be found at davidhenrysterry.com.

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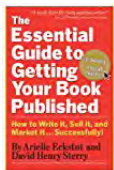
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