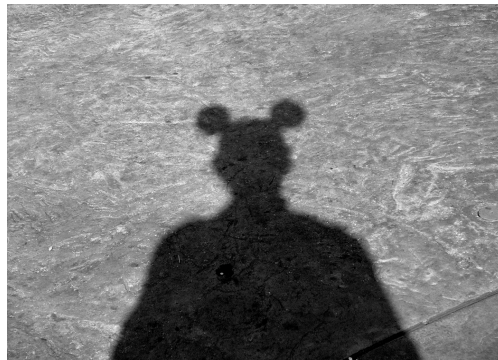


What Would Jesus Buy? | 155

suddenly—a mystery of creation—the moment that changes us is unmistakable.

Can we plan a revolution? Partly yes and partly no. There had to be lots of parallel failed strategies for the one brave moment to break through the cultural inertia. I know we'll live and die trying. I look down at America from this jet—and what a mad riddle it is!



**LETTER FROM DISNEYLAND JAIL,
DECEMBER 25, 2005**

OK I'm in jail, no doubt about that. The Anaheim city prison, on Christmas night. This afternoon, at 1 p.m., we jumped into the Disney 50th Anniversary Christmas Day parade on Main Street USA in front of Mickey and Snow White and Goofy and performed our church-work for—

156 | REVEREND BILLY

thirty minutes?—until finally I got pushed through a seam in the wall.

This jailer here is pacing and humming along with the song *White Christmas*, which is broadcast from his blaster, on the floor out of view to the left of my bars, about fifty feet away. This is a small cell, maybe four feet by seven feet, but I'm glad I'm not in a group tank. This is definitely a California jail—it's all painted white, even the bars. My *White Christmas*.

I've been trying to lie down. The single bench, a concrete ledge on the narrow end away from the door, is too short to curl up, or brace my legs up on the wall. I finally fold my legs up into my t-shirt and let the fabric hold me in a ball, then pull my preacher coat over that. Then I go into the on-purpose sleep of incarceration, a yoga practiced over the course of my 50 lock-ups. My self-hypnosis is supposed to change doing time to doing dreams. I try to picture what we did today, with the Magic Castle in the background, all the thousands of families . . .

The jailer is not happy—not happy at all—to be here with the holiday drunks, still caroling sloppily, and this ridiculous Elvis impersonator in the priest's collar. (I always leave it on in jail because it's safer that way.) The jailer acts like a tough guy, and he's angry to be here working on Christmas night—striding over to shout at

What Would Jesus Buy? | 157

some Mexican kid. Did the ex-CIA guys who work for Disney design this torture for us in Bing Sing? Will I emerge tomorrow morning with *an insatiable need to shop*?

The nice cop at Personal Effects, where I manila-enveloped my belt and wallet, let me keep my old piebald composition book and a pen. So, unable to concentrate on my reverie through Bing the Jailer's attack muzak, I'm writing now—but slowly. Mostly, I'm sitting here like a frozen frontyard Reverend Billy, nearly paralyzed by the jail-house White Christmas—the transmitted distillation of the thousands of snowy reindeer songs on the sound systems in our 5,000 miles of supermalls. It makes me want to write my way out of jail.

Twenty-four hours ago we saw the green interstate sign for DISNEYLAND. We felt the mad magic right away. Where was the falsetto laughter of Mickey Mouse coming from? The unappeased souls of the Disneyland dead? Now, an interstate off-ramp isn't where you expect to have any sensation at all, unless the landscape offers you a car accident. But Mickey Mouse gives you the creeps in the blandest places. A frisson of fear came up our legs, the whole choir went from singing to silence as we turned and lost altitude. We crowded into an Econo-Lodge up 405 toward Los Angeles, but just inside Anaheim's city limits, and therefore inside this Vatican City run by Goofy and

158 | REVEREND BILLY

1,200 underemployed method actors and Walt's frozen comic brush.

In the Econo-Lodge, the concierge had Mickey's eyes and Mickey's ears and we were afraid—the anthropomorphized rodent logo was blended into everything we touched. Anaheim is not just a company town. It's a step past that. It is Mickey's bulbous face bubbling up through the sticky polymers of every surface. The bedsheets that feel like massive plastic place mats have Mickey's beaming head in the quilted flowers. The coffee machine in the lobby sounds like Donald quacking. There seem to be men in sunglasses in the parking lot moving slowly between unmarked cars. Can we say "They know we are here?"

We knew that our Disneyland invasion, scheduled for the next day, needed a thorough strategy session that could not be anywhere near a surveillance camera. Savitri assembled all forty of us in a single motel room. Each group—singers, musicians, and film crew—divided into units of six or eight, would infiltrate the theme park the following morning in shifts, entering at the top of each hour. The groups would go to separate designated "lands"—Frontierland for shoot-outs and pow-wows, or Californialand for a simulation of . . . what you just drove out of, or Tikiland, for an oriental jumble of the entire

What Would Jesus Buy? | 159

southern hemisphere. By noon we would all be inside, with one film crew, Savitri and I coming last, for the action itself.

The altos and basses would get into their robes in the Tiki Room bathroom and the sopranos and tenors would do the same in the Tomorrowland stalls. The two lines of singers should be walking in step midway between the two bathrooms, in the center of Main Street USA, at 1:10 PM. I would join from the side, where I would then peel out of the Ali G black track suit covering my white suit and priest's collar. Our cameramen would be positioned up and down Main Street, flipping their cassettes to runners, who would escape from the park every five minutes. In the sweltering one-person-per-square-foot motel room, there was a thorough recitation of the scheme by Savitri that was then recited back to Savitri by the leader of each commando group. We recited the plan until exhausted, and there was no oxygen left in the room, and then we sat there together, sweating. We prayed, "Oh Fabulous Unknown, do not abandon us as we pass into Logoland . . ."

After our prayer, we split up. What social groups formed, which individuals ended up together, was always fascinating for those among us who are social scientists and gossips—and it's always changing. Now we had the

160 | REVEREND BILLY

addition of the luminous Alexandra Jamieson, Morgan's fiancée, joining us in the final days. On the night before the mouse, some lived by the hard party. Others went off to be alone, reading, emailing. It was the night before a cultural invasion and you could almost hear a soundtrack from *Cape Fear* or *The Longest Day*. Out here in Interstateland you couldn't go for a walk, but you could grab the remote and check out the comedy of Orange County cable TV. Some outrageous preachers there, some Cuisinarts for sale that don't just cut your vegetables they listen to your problems and drive you to work. Then of course the aerobic yoga *Bay Watch*—like semi-porn on the beach—Hey! Let's be healthy the California way.

From the distance of New York, and during the tour across the country, the vaguely Bavarian "Magic Castle" with the two-legged animals in glowing tuxedos had always loomed on the western horizon. As we traveled closer, the upcoming invasion of Disneyland began to seem less funny and folkloric and more serious and strange. For one thing, there was the troubling atmosphere of suburban southern California, this White Christmas where I am now jailed. This is the land of Ronald Reagan and John Wayne—and is, along with Lynchburg, Virginia maybe, the cultural epicenter of America's apocalyptic endgame. This is a land of repeatedly announced values that, it turns out, cannot be

What Would Jesus Buy? | 161

experienced, because the land has been retailized and malled to make direct experience impossible. The physical world here only allows, what, shopping and surfing? The locals must shoot their moral fervor into action movies, Bush/Clinton/Reagan wars, immigrant vigilantism, apocalyptic Christianity . . .

Mickey has imagineered the imagination out of the air. Here off this off-ramp we felt Disneyland's sad power, how it was summoning forth the Shopocalypse.

This morning, Savitri and I, Allen with his camera, and Katrina, our friend and native to these parts, drive into the parking lot within the parking lot within the parking lot. We cannot see the Magic Castle yet, or the famous concrete Matterhorn that looms over Main Street USA. It is unbelievable to us that every single Stop Shopping singer got in with the bright gospel red robe in their backpacks and purses. This makes us smile: a good omen. Disneyland is a designated terrorist target, they say. In the landmarks of Americana, it's up there with Lady Liberty and Mount Rushmore—according to the public servants at Homeland Security.

So, as we stand in the first of two lines—in the entrance rituals—the security folks search our suitcase perfunctorily. An official is quickly persuaded that Allen's enormous professional film camera is simply a run-of-the-mill tourist accessory. And then we go to the second line.

162 | REVEREND BILLY

I feel the general BUY SOMETHING music rising from its source in a hundred feature films going back into the mists of pop time. A monorail train sails over the trees. Undeniably, there is excitement here. And the people!

The place is very crowded. So many families have decided to spend Christmas at Disneyland. One of the singers had said Disneyland used to be closed on sacred days. Of course, now The High Church Of Retail And Used Magic has moved into all the holy days on the calendars. As the four of us move up in the second line, the music of Disneyland closes in around us, all Disney, oh yes, the great media corporation is stalking us. The company with the power to convene the US Congress and extend the copywritten Life of Mickey Mouse to eighty years . . . is singing to us. Someday My Prince Will Come, Elton John with his lions, Chim Chim Cheree, the theme from the Mouskateers, and what's this? Ragtime, Scott Joplin? Cementing it all, mysterious choirs invoking winter wonderland scenes for the thousands, fanning themselves with Mickey-shaped fans in their Bermuda shorts.

Then the ticket window shut in our face. A tired-looking lady is announcing that the park is closed! NO! Allen is immediately on the radio to Morgan—this cannot happen. We are all on airplanes tomorrow morning, back

What Would Jesus Buy? | 163

to our jobs in NY. Not to mention, if Reverend Billy is stuck at the gate, we're out the \$2,000 for everyone else's \$50-per-head ticket, and the tour's climax is gone. We could go back to the Econo-lodge and have romances and long talks . . . Yes, we could make a French film. THIS IS CRAZY! The ticket lady says, "No, the park is over capacity. No one else is allowed in until later tonight."

This is a particularly vicious court injunction from Murphy's Law.

And the emotional conclusion, the arrival, the release and deliverance from malled America by way of the planned trial and public tribulation of Billy, suffering for our shopping sins. All the moral art of it, our year of hopes, up in smoke. Our Lewis-and-Clark expedition across the wilderness of America's shopping season . . . I began to lose it.

Savitri grabbed my arm. "You do not preach until you are on Main Street." I froze in my ridiculous Ali G tracksuit and pointy big-hair-hiding Dr. Seuss hat. Savitri and Allen were having trouble on the radio phone. Then the nightmare deepened: Yes, it appeared that all radio and cell phone signals *are jammed in Disneyland*. But of course! We should have thought of that! We stood in the crowd, amazed, and sneaking glances at plainclothes Disney cops. Were they closing in?

164 | REVEREND BILLY

“This cannot happen,” said Savitri, through clenched teeth. She then walked over to the window and pounded on it with her fist. In polite, grinning Disneyland this is the kind of sound that stops everything around it. We froze. A hundred yards of small families froze. Here was our first small opposition to the mouse, and it sent ripples through the crowd, now stranded with nothing to do for Christmas day. A hand pushed the small door back, and immediately Savitri sagged against the opening like Desdemona making her final gesture, prostrating before the god of tragedy. “WHAT AM I GOING TO DO? MY FRIENDS AND I HAVE PLANNED THIS TRIP FOR A YEAR? NO ONE TOLD US THIS COULD HAPPEN? NONE OF THE DISNEY PEOPLE I TALKED TO ON THE PHONE, NOBODY EVER SAID COME HERE EARLY IN THE DAY. NOW OUR FRIENDS ARE INSIDE AND WE’RE OUT HERE!” And then, to my surprise, she started sobbing.

The battered ticket-takers had all gone halfway back into their regular lives already, little coats half-off and dreaming of a cigarette break. But Savitri somehow managed to gather these exhausted ticket-people to the window in the wall, and in the gasping conversation we heard the words “exception” and then “emergency,” and Allen and Katrina and I traded a small smile. Not that

What Would Jesus Buy? | 165

anyone in the long line behind us was really expecting to get in, but this forlorn crowd of our-day-off families was getting some entertainment, anyway, in this desperate form. Then Savitri took the wad of bills she was carrying for the choir's \$20-a-day allowance, and added that to her histrionics, waving it in her fist. As she pressed for her emergency exception, her screams and sobbings alternated with soothing sounds and lawsuit threats. Now the window opened wider and our bills moved toward the opening.

The deal? It took the whole wad. How very Disney of you. The whole \$500. Savitri had purchased two twelve-month Fiftieth Anniversary deluxe passes to all Disney parks in the known world, including Hong Kong and Paris. Yes we now had the crème-de-la-crème access—across the moat and into the land of singing logos. So, we were in. With our loss of all our remaining money, the eighty years of Disney music seemed to swell. Or was that just that our emergency had passed and we now could hear and see again? We had been swatted by Tinkerbell's magic wand.

As our butterflies subsided, our dreamstate unfolded. We were hyperaware that all the people of our Disneyland action—the singers, musicians, lawyers, shooters, runners, and Morgan—were all now out of touch. We would have to somehow find our church members in the

166 | REVEREND BILLY

vast, dreaming crowd. We were now walking slowly up the perfectly scrubbed late 1800s Midwestern Main Street USA with its slightly shrunk store-fronts. (I had read that this main street replica was reduced to 80 percent of its historical model.) We stood there and looked out over a sea of consumers, all with their backs turned to us, looking up into the sky.

This was the Fiftieth Anniversary of the founding of Disneyland, and the crowd was all gazing up at the faux Matterhorn, where near the top, an enormous Mickey Mouse was mountain-climbing up a long series of large numbers, with, you guessed it, fifty at the summit. Minnie was scared, Mickey was stupid, and Donald Duck, a duck far out of water, was urging Mickey to fall, quacking his abusive jokes. Mickey would slip down, with Minnie and 40,000 kids screaming as he fell onto an unseen mattress. Then the great mouse would totter back up toward the big 5-0 once again before falling back again, Minnie crying and Donald flapping his duck bill madly. I was as consumerized as the next person, staring up with my mouth slackly open. Savitri told me to warm up my voice during the general sighs and screams of the crowd below—and I did. When Minnie led the crowd below in shouting, “WE LOVE YOU MICKEY!” And then “CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR 50TH MICKEY!” I

What Would Jesus Buy? | 167

was trying my little grunts, shouts, letting out falsetto whoops, I gradually got my voice louder and louder. Then suddenly Savitri punched my shoulder. The concrete and spackle mountain was still. Mickey and Minnie and Donald had frozen. Loudspeakers on all sides were making a breathy announcement, “If you would like to take a picture of this historical moment, Mickey doesn’t want you to miss it, he’ll wait for you to run to the camera store on Main Street, right next to the piano player on the east side, you can buy a good camera full of film, go ahead, Mickey and Minnie will wait for you. You’ll have this moment forever.”

I had to sit down. Savitri and I watched the crowd get in line for history. And I began to have trouble with my voice. We knew we wouldn’t get a bullhorn through security, so I would have to get my own body’s bellows vibrating nice and loud. But I had never felt this way before. I was frightened, disoriented, and my throat felt like metal. Savitri began to talk to me like a boxing coach. “Eat something. Some protein. Keep breathing.” And so I sat there with a \$12 Mickey-shaped bowl full of chili, and my Mickey-shaped toast, and let out occasional groans and vowel scales and big sighs to loosen my voice, as the crowd in Main Street shouted “GO FOR IT MICKEY! GO TO THE TOP! FIFTY YEARS IS SURE A LOT!” and the

168 | REVEREND BILLY

army of brand new cardboard cameras flashed to document this moment, a new height for western civilization.

Then it was one o'clock. I was looking at the Mickey Mouse at the top of the Magic Matterhorn and wondering about the nonunion actor who was looking out across this great plain of consumers, peering through the little mesh window in Mickey's mouth. He's feeling the drop-off of the cliff below him, I'll bet, but he probably has that mountaineering belt around his waist and someone talking to him in his ear bud. He probably wants to check the belt, make sure it's all there, but his hands are deep inside his colossal three-fingered mits. He's waving them to the beat of "the Circle of Life," sawing the air out over the yawning abyss of Christmas consumption, while above him the ears loom like floppy radar dishes. "It's one o'clock. Are you ready?" Savitri said, from her Mickey-shaped chair. We are really caught inside the logo of Mickey's face here aren't we? We're inside the most famous logo in the world. Logoland. I feel this vertigo. I have to use the bathroom. "Make it quick." OK. I look for a can, and as I go, I'm watching that actor up there on the tip of the anniversary summit, and I'm thinking that he REALLY invaded the logo.

On my way to the loo, the bazaar of rabid buying

What Would Jesus Buy? | 169

pushes me against the wall, and the wall is varnished bamboo with an eave of trinkets and feathers—it's Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Boy land—with a soundtrack of screaming birds over a disco backbeat. The birds are still singing in the bathroom. In there, all these men are standing around, doing nothing, blinking their eyes. There was nothing untoward about it. Some of them were fathers, and they had their sons wait with them, too. I couldn't figure it out. I asked them, "What's wrong?" and they just mumbled that they were taking a break. Oh, I see, it's an actual *restroom* then. They were taking a psychic respite from the Magic Kingdom's onslaught.

While in the stall, I was aiming my ass out of my layers of the Ali G tracksuit and the Reverend's full chicken and suddenly I dropped one of my body-mikes into the Mickey-shaped toilet. A very loud splash followed by silence. I panicked. Did the soundtrack birds stop singing?

"Where have you been, Billy? We have about two minutes. Come on." "Savi, I dropped one of the battery-packs into the jungle river . . ." "You what?" "Into the toilet. You better tell Morgan." "How?" "Here we are." Our spot, on time, everything synchronized. I see the runners too, at least one of them, I see Aaron, the camera man—he's ready for his hand-off, eyes darting around. Mickey is coming down from the mountain. There's that pause

170 | REVEREND BILLY

before the Christmas Day Parade that we planned for. Hordes of Disney characters waiting in their carriages and cars somewhere behind the façade of the perfect Main Street USA, ready to go—Mickey and Minnie and Snow White and Goofy and Aladdin and Pocahontas and Pluto and Donald and Jiminy Cricket and Tinkerbell and Dumbo and Simba and Hercules and Cinderella and Winnie the Pooh and Eeyore and the Beauty and the Beast and Peter Pan and . . .

“There they are!” The long double line of brilliant red-robed singers shown in the sun. And ready for the parade—the thousands of kids up on shoulders, munchkins with solid gold Mickey-ear hats for the anniversary, mothers making seating arrangements on curbs, fathers looking into the distance, strollers and wheelchairs and 1880s surreys with the fringe on top getting out of the way . . . opening up the street for the big moment . . . and here come our friends, humming a fiendish Silent Night. The Christmas cheer goes up from the two sides of the street. James and Savitri trade a signal and the Stop Shopping Gospel Choir swings into “Shopocalypse! Shopocalypse! WHOA! WHOA! WHOA!”

I was deep in my reverie of gratitude. I’m so proud of all of us—my friends—for braving the dark doings of this place. Everyone was cheering to the Shopocalypse Song.

What Would Jesus Buy? | 171

“Do you feel the heat in this shopping list?/The neighbors fade into the shopping mall./The oceans rise but I, I must buy it all./Shopocalypse. Shopocalypse . . . ”

I walked to the front of the choir. The gleeful intensity of it all felt really good. I was scared, but the choir was already something beyond scared, this was High Church. The angels were singing in the heavens as we danced into the center of this world-straddling corporation. We turned and the thousands embraced—cheered for—the choir, apparently thinking that we were from some local church. I started to preach: “Isn’t this wonderful. We asked Santa—and Santa gave us what we wanted. And now here we are in Disneyland! Look at this Main Street. Main Street USA! Here we are in the midst of this prosperity! But wait a minute, something’s wrong! Back in America, it’s not this prosperous. The main streets are shuttered, empty, outsourced!”

People were listening. You could see their faces light up when they caught our Stop Shopping message. Parents were speaking to each other over the top of their kids’ heads, discussing if this was OK. Some people bent over laughing, clapping, thumbs-upping. Others angry. “How can you do this on Christmas Day! You should be . . . ” Yes, yes. “Stop Shopping! Let’s slow down our consumption, children.”

172 | REVEREND BILLY

A person in uniform was already by my side. This was a lady with a long braid, a person who may have been a hippie once in her Life. She was Disney security. So can she really arrest me? I don't remember what she said. I could see the runners working their way through the crowd with their cassettes. We're into the second song, "What Would Jesus Buy?/Buy the Heaven, Get the Hell/What's in the window? What's for sale?/Back away from the product/The shoppers start to wail, wail, wail, wail/Find a way to give/Do we shop till we die? Another kind of gift . . ."

The choir is floating like angels, serious like bandits. I kept preaching, trying to sum up the lessons of our month-long, country-long Shopocalypse Tour, because I knew I had seconds to go.

Here's the good news!

We forgot something, but now we remember!

We made Christmas!

Santa is our creation!

We made Mickey Mouse!

We built cars, wars . . . And what we made,

We can unmake. We can change!

For so many years, change came from

Technology, and investment, and advertising campaigns!

What Would Jesus Buy? | 173

*We made all that too! The good news?
It's not too late to take back the responsibility of changing
Our lives! Let's take back change!
Isn't that the best gift we can give each other this
Christmas? Yes, let's give each other Change!
Merry Christmas!*

More security is now surrounding me. The police seem to be trying to form moving circles around us. I get more exuberance from the singers. We're turning around the giant Christmas tree at the end of the street and start back, now facing the Magic Castle, and I'm inside a circle of uniforms now but it only helps the drama. I'm taller, I'm still making eye contact with the crowd—I'm the raving head over the top of the police escort. Trying to go for that last tough yard: "Children, where is that product from? What about the products on the shelves in Disneyland? Go and find the label! This is Main Street USA! Where is it made? Sri Lanka! China! The Philippines! We can't afford to be apolitical anymore! Where are these things from? Why is our Main Street dead? Why is the weather so hot? Why is there no work? Why do we keep buying?"

It's not long now. The circle is tightening. I'm being read the Trespassing Act, the Disorderly Conduct Act . . .

174 | REVEREND BILLY

the word “Private Property”—the scurrilous refuge of the powerful is repeatedly invoked. There are maybe twenty-five cops. Several of them are giving us speeches that they are REAL police, “from the jurisdiction of the City of Anaheim, California, and I do hereby instruct you, under the authority . . .” They do have a problem in that so many people here are in costumes, from police to 1880s sideshow barkers and piano-pounding dandies, and all the way up the fabulist ladder to the dancing hippos in Fantasia—all in the pay of the Mouse.

I don’t remember much from the final blur, except the pain in my arm from the twisting and handcuffing. The choir started singing the First Amendment song. Savitri was trying to keep the choir out of the arrest area because we have several vulnerable green card and student visa people. Some of our camera people came in close to get the arrest, and others held back, lining up with the tourists and their cameras.

I found myself sitting on a stool behind the fabled Disney surface, back in Realityland, the paved stinking back area. The people aren’t required to smile back here, and seem relieved not to. I was looking directly into the face of a bored and bitter Snow White, throwing down a cigarette butt and crushing it into the pavement with her glowing white shoe. More of the paraders were waiting

What Would Jesus Buy? | 175

there, with their carriages and horses, off schedule now—because of us.

We are staring at each other, the forty or fifty Disney characters and I. There was a bit of the “Dr. Livingstone, I presume” in this moment. I’m slumped on the stool, breathing hard, heart beating heavily in my full preacher suit. The bad Elvis hair has now collapsed down over my ears. The cop to my right is calling me names. But the actors in the costumes, lined up for the Christmas Day parade, are softly regarding me and wondering. As my breathing comes back to normal, I return the open interest. I’m thinking to myself . . . I wouldn’t be so terribly out of place if I jumped in there, between Jiminy Cricket and Goofy. After all, Billy Sunday evangelists were very much a part of the 1880s Main Street, but then Disney would have to make a morally neutral one. We start smiling at each other a little. Tinkerbell waves her wand a bit, and I nod, with my arms behind my back. Suddenly I want to say I love them so much. I care for them so much. I’m swooning with the feeling that, just, *how do we all do this?* There’s a way of looking at the people in our country that we’re all actors chasing our great Oscar-winning scene, all of us, even in an hour-long traffic jam, even in a lonely wandering off after a romance ends, even while calling our mothers on the phone. Trying

176 | REVEREND BILLY

to get into the park. Trying to get up to the top of the mountain in fifty years.

Bing Crosby finally puts down the microphone. White Christmas has stopped. I shout, "I'd prefer a darker shade of pale!" The Anaheim jailer says I'm getting out tonight. Oh, I'm glad. There's always more shopping to stop.