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Reverend Billy Preaches the Anticorporate Gospel to Starbucks – Rage Against the Caffeine

by Alisa Solomon

Nobody smashed any windows in an overcaffeinated rage at Starbucks in Washington, D.C., over the weekend, as many had predicted after the trashing the chain's outlets took in Seattle in February. But that doesn't mean that the steam has gone off the rebel froth. If, in the coming months, you try losing yourself in a latte at any of Manhattan's 101 Starbucks—yes, 101 of them—the jittering vision that rises before you may not be caused by caffeine alone. Leaping onto chairs in the upscale joe joints around the city, his voice and body trembling as he rails against "the low pay for those who tend the trees" and "the ruination of our neighborhoods," the Reverend Billy is waging a local campaign against corporate domination. Coffee is the second-largest traded commodity, after oil.

Starbucks was the target of a national campaign against ecological damage and unfair labor conditions overseas that was to be launched last week by Global Exchange, one of the IMF rally organizers. But days before the protest, Starbucks announced that it would begin to stock some Fair Trade-certified coffee and monitor consumer demand—and the "Roast Starbucks" action was called off. For Reverend Billy, though, to "dare us to choose the one product for which they're paying the workers fairly and then in six months to say, 'Well, we tried,' is not enough." Besides, the java giant—which currently has 2500 stores in North America, and nearly 400 beyond (including in Beirut and Beijing), and which vows to have 20,000 worldwide within the next few years—"is destroying communities one by one."

The creation of the actor Bill Talen, Reverend Billy began preaching the anticonsumerist gospel in the Times Square Disney store three years ago. Wearing a white dinner jacket over a black T-shirt and a priest's collar, and flashing a salesman's smarmiest smile, he confronted shoppers with the ugly news that Bambi had been built in sweatshops, and lamented the corporate monoculture that has conquered Times Square.

In December, Talen organized a weeklong festival of political pranks and public performances at Judson Memorial Church, called "Millennium's Neighborhood (Not a Celebration of the Malling of New York)." And last month, he presented a series of mock worship-services in his "Church of Stop Shopping" (replete with a campy gospel choir), which canonized as saints such activists as the proprietors of the recently bulldozed Esperanza community garden, and labor rights crusader Charles Kernaghan. At the end of each stirring show, he'd lead the congregation into the streets to take part in a direct political action overseen by the organizers being celebrated that night. With each new project, the flock kept growing and the leftist right reverend began to acquire a weird sort of cachet as, well, a spiritual leader: Though the collar is fake, the call is real. The Reverend Billy has become the Al Sharpton of the ultraironic yet politically committed Downtown set. Reverend Billy's Starbucks campaign began brewing at least as far back as December, when, as part of "Millennium's Neighborhood," activist Megan Wolff led audiences on a tour of the three green-logoed shops at Astor Place, discoursing on the role of coffeehouses in fomenting the American Revolution, the economic history of the pungent bean, and the politics of public space. Starbucks won't keep all three adjacent storefronts in business for long, she predicted. Rather, she explained, "They saturate the neighborhood until the competitors become invisible and soon the neighborhood itself becomes invisible."

The sense that New York is becoming one vast billboard was a central theme of last month's performances, and the reverend always reserved part of his sermon for a lyrical lament about the small businesses that give neighborhoods their character, but are being driven out by the megastores. Meanwhile, the economies of scale that allow the big chains to trample the mom-

and-pop ventures give them enormous clout with suppliers: Their demands for lower and lower prices exacerbate substandard working conditions and environmental devastation. Could there be any better example of this cycle than Starbucks, with its ubiquitous little green sea goddess logo? (Reverend Billy's acolytes are pasting pink nipples on her blank, bare chest on as many iterations as they can get their hands on.) "Times Square is lost," Reverend Billy sighs. "Starbucks is more to the point."

So last week Reverend Billy announces a 24-hour marathon in which he'll preach in all 101 Manhattan shops. But not even the demon dark-roast can keep the Rev revved all night, and besides, most of the joints close at 10 p.m. The marathon quickly becomes a summer-long campaign.

Still, after appearances at half a dozen stores, and hours before boarding the early Saturday bus to join the protest in D.C. over the weekend, Reverend Billy hits the Starbucks at 23rd and Park. He sits quietly at a table with a couple of cronies, then gingerly begins to chat up the customers. With his lifeguard good looks and clerical collar, he meets little resistance as he invades the space of the Frappuccino set. "Pretty strong coffee, huh?" he asks a white guy in a Yankees cap. "Whatchya gonna order?" he queries a black woman laden down with Duane Reade bags. "Get something good and strong, now." Such good coffee, such strong coffee. Gosh, it's good. He works the crowd with that affirming theme, and the bright-eyed workers behind the counter look on with approving smiles.

But gradually the juice he's extolling seems to possess him like the holy spirit. He's suddenly all aquiver, arms outstretched and flaying the air, legs wobbling like tofu. "Hallelujah! I loooooove the coffee in Starbucks, children!" Reverend Billy is shouting now. And the smiles of the counter help begin to morph into expressions of panic as the sermon segues into charges that the shop's "earth-tone touchy-feeliness masks corporate ruthlessness." The reverend's devotees—in this instance, Jason Grote and Beth Sopko—hand around leaflets explaining how Starbucks is screwing the planet, the farmers, the baristas, and New York's neighborhoods, and the manager is dialing 911. "Amen, people," booms the reverend, as he heads for the door.

The Starbucks scene is a tougher gig than the Disney store, he says (despite his string of arrests at the latter). At Disney, he explains, "you've got these listless tourists doing that Stepford-wife drifting, and these comically paranoid salespeople," and it's all "very ethereal and symbolic." At Starbucks, though, "people have a willful alienation from the place," so it's hard to engage them. Yet "it's more direct, it has more traction. People live nearby and remember what used to be there."

Indeed, Reverend Billy is inviting anybody with a pre-Starbucks reverie to e-mail him a six-line sermon. He'll choose a bunch to perform with the writer present in the Starbucks of the writer's choice. Within a day of his e-mailed call for such texts, he has received 80 of them. One, from Brooklyn Heights, recalls the "best small Italian bakery in the charted universe, where a gooey pastry and coffee was still \$1.50, and perfect Sunday hangover food. It was a short jog from the bounty of Damascus Bakery, a haven of wonderful Middle Eastern sweets and breads, both of which go better with strong coffee than any white-bread crap from Morebucks."

Such prose makes the reverend rapturous. "People are describing their neighborhoods with such force," he says. "They're actively missing people and places." He pauses, as if to leave some space for a few amens. "It makes me think that something is possible."

To send your sermon, write to revbilly@revbilly.com

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