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ARTS COLUMN: THE REVEREND BILLY PROJECT Not Just Any Old Book Release Party

By: [Roslyn Bernstein](#)
 June 22, 2011



They ran out of chairs at the Housing Works Café and Bookstore on Crosby Street on June 13th at the book release party for [The Reverend Billy Project](#) -- a book that chronicles the passionate protests and renegade escapades of the Reverend Billy and his choir of committed consumption-loathing activists.

Check out their [website](#) and the bold mission of the Reverend Billy (Bill Talen) and his wife, Savitri D, and The Church of Earthalujah immediately becomes apparent. They are a New York City-based radical performance community with 50 performing members and a "congregation in the thousands." They are "wildly anti-consumerist gospel shouters and earth-loving urban activists who have worked with communities on four continents defending land, life, and imagination from reckless development and the extractive imperatives of global capital."

The creative organizers employ diverse tactics and strategies, "including cash register exorcisms, retail interventions, and cell phone operas combined with grass roots organizing and media activism. They are entertainers and artists, performing regularly throughout the United States and Europe."

Mixing religious zeal and performance art with aggressive activism, campaigns have included Save Coney Island, Union Square is Not for Sale, Buy Nothing Day, Defending the First Amendment, End Mountaintop Removal, and the targeting of numerous corporations including Chase Manhattan and Starbucks -- the worldwide chain which pays Ethiopians 78 cents a pound for coffee that it sells for over \$20 a pound. Starbucks, says Rev. Billy, is the global giant whose mermaid logo now has no nipples!

Savitri D had the SoHo audience roaring Earthalujahs and Amens as she described the dynamics of their "licking" action in a Barcelona Starbucks. In an effort to absorb and detoxify Starbucks, infiltrators licked every available surface -- the Reverend Billy himself licking the spout to the steamer. All this while patrons gasped and tried to avoid acknowledging what was going on.

And Bill Talen described a second action outside of the Starbucks on Astor Place in Manhattan. There was a wedding, and the cops were present. Although they never entered the store, the choir's singing was enough to get the Reverend Billy arrested and sent to The Tombs -- a prison that he described as deserving of its grim name.

The reading ended with the choir singing a selection of songs, including their theme song, "[Stop Shopping](#)."

Co-written by Savitri D and Bill Talen, the book was edited by [Alisa Solomon](#), who got involved in the project at the invitation of a series editor at the University of Michigan Press. Solomon, the director of the arts journalism program at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, explains that the series pairs a scholar/critic with a playwright/performance artist to put together a volume of the artist's text with an intro and commentary by the critic. Solomon was invited



because she had written about the Reverend Billy from his early days (in *The Village Voice*) and because she had included his work in a special issue of the journal, *Theater*, that was devoted to theater and social change that she guest-edited in 2001.

When the three of them got together to discuss plans for the book, Solomon says that they all agreed that, "rather than publish Billy's performance texts — his sermons (which don't read as well as they play) -- it would be better for them to write narrative/analytical accounts of their performances and actions."

In the end, Billy and Savitri each wrote half of the book, and Solomon wrote the intro and conducted some lengthy Q &As that close the volume. Converting the story to a book was challenging. But, says the Reverend Billy, "writing the narrative and preaching the sermon are related, of course. Trying to read my own writing or Savitri's writing and imagining the experience of the phantom reader was always nerve-wracking. I'd rather face a basement full of Episcopalians."

The Reverend Billy has no idea whether the book will reach a different or wider audience, but he does hope that it "will affect younger people who are inheriting this Earth so completely controlled by cynical mediocrities to the point of actually degrading the physical life of the planet."

It would be great, he added, "if the book could be of some use to the upcoming political prankster generation."



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seth_shellhouse I'll be hangin out at Mr. Dom Kennedy's sick album release event on Thursday. Yall cant come but I'll take pictures @buzzine @DOPEITSDOM
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