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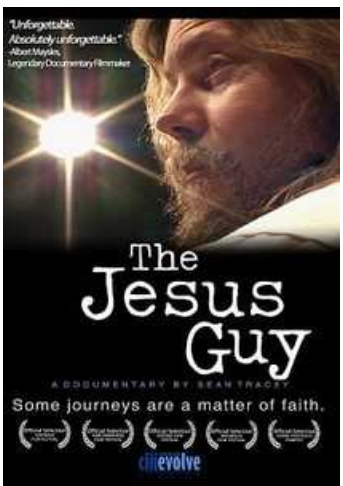
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February 10, 2011

## Movie Review: The Jesus Guy (2010)

Posted by Ron Ford at 12:25 PM



A quote on the liner notes by Albert Mayles claims that this movie is "Unforgettable. Absolutely unforgettable." I can't disagree with that. I found this brisk (67 minute) documentary riveting, and it left me with much to think about. Like many great documentaries, filmmaker Sean Tracey doesn't take sides. He presents his subject from as many angles as he can, and leaves the viewer to his own conclusions. It is not a PR job, nor is it an expose'. Like it's enigmatic subject, what you think about him will have much to do with your own views and what you as observer bring to the plate.

Buy [The Jesus Guy](#) on DVD

The subject of this even-handed chronicle is a man who, for the last nineteen years, has walked across the country barefoot, clad only in a white robe, emulating the traditional image of Christ. He has no possessions beyond his robe and Bible, and accepts no donations. He lives off the food people offer him, and the Eucharist wafers in Catholic churches. He is the first to claim that he is not pretending to be Christ, nor does he believe he is the second coming.

At the time this film was made, he was called only by the question he asks everyone he meets: What's Your Name? In the intervening years, he has decided to call himself James Joseph. But through circumstances in the course of the documentary, we come to learn that his birth name was Carl Joseph. His refusal to go by the name his parents gave him is one of many enigmas that make this unusual man so hard to pigeon-hole. It is also what makes him a fascinating subject for a documentary.

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The first part of the film presents What's Your Name in the manner he wishes to present himself to the world. He seems to be the real deal. He accepts no money at all, routinely refuses it, and even is reluctant to take food when offered. If this man is a charlatan, it's pretty hard to fathom what his game is. He has a sincerity that is quite hard to dispute, and he is obviously an intelligent enough person. He is rational, does not rant, and is consistent in his message. I am not a religious person, but I was impressed by his seeming integrity. He walks the walk, so to speak. His message is either drivel or inspired, depending on where you stand, but seems to be coming from a sincere place. That message is of course Christian gospel, but with a very Catholic bent. He believes in communion, transubstantiation and confession. At one point he is very critical of the more extreme schools of Christianity, warning them of the obsessiveness of practices like talking in tongues and so forth. That impressed me, too. He preaches caution against letting fervor become mania.

We see that What's His Name has his followers who accept him without question, and also those who are suspicious and will not see past that either. In one town he is constantly followed and harassed by the police, who seem to have nothing better to do. They are utterly convinced he has some agenda and that it must be illegal, even though they can't seem to come up with a charge. So they switch gears and tell cameraman Sean Tracey that he needs a permit to shoot on public property. To which Tracey reminds them that he is at that moment on private property where he has permission to shoot. This was the segment where I found myself rooting the strongest for your friendly neighborhood Jesus Guy.

Later in the movie we begin to see the chinks in the armor. He seems to love the attention and the media, never slow to remind people that he was featured not once, but twice, on the network show 20/20. When he finally amasses an audience in a hotel on the Jersey Shore, though the room is crowded, he complains first up that he is disappointed at the size of the turnout. And when one college student suggests that he might have emotional issues he becomes angry and refuses to talk with the man further. The student does not get angry or malicious. It is seemingly an honest observation. What's Your Name's ire does not seem to be the reaction of an enlightened soul. More that of an insecure child. And two of the women who house him for a time both claim to be surprised and not a little hurt that he disappears and moves on one day without so much as a goodbye or a thank you.

It is in the latter half of the movie that we begin to see the wounded human being behind the robe. Toward the end he is met by his father flying in to spend time with him (it is his father who calls him Carl after he has repeatedly refused to tell people his "Christian" name). This is an obviously caring father who perhaps has some guilt about how he treated his boy in the past. None of this is dredged up, Geraldo expose' style, but it is there in the subtext and that is enough. His father mentions that his gift to the boy of a New Testament was a major bonding experience for them. Again, the details are scant, but it is clear the emotions run deep.

One of the women who sheltered What's Your Name for a time claims at the end that he was different in private than in public. She said he was nothing special. He was a remarkably ordinary person. And that, she claimed, was the point. That, indeed, is what she respected about him.

And so do I.



Vintage Adult Film Reviews

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Hollywood Roadkill: SNL Movies That Never Happened

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