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Sister Smile
The Jesus Guy

Few songs in the history of Top 40 radio have been as irritating – after the first 1,000 or so listens, anyway – as the Singing Nun’s exceedingly cheerful “Dominique,” which, in 1963, topped the Billboard charts. Even if almost no one in America, apart from nuns of the Dominican Order, knew what the words meant, the Belgian novice’s chirpy ode to St. Dominic was put into heavy rotation alongside “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Louie Louie” and “Puff the Magic Dragon.”

She went on tour and appeared on Ed Sullivan’s show, a month ahead of the Beatles. Three years later, Debbie Reynolds would play a singing nun in a highly fictionalized movie based on Sister Smile’s life. The real Singing Nun, Jeanne-Paule Marie Deckers, would dismiss it as “fiction.”

Without Vatican censors standing in the way of the truth, two biographical movies about Deckers’ tumultuous life have been released in the last 10 years: Roger Deutsch’s Italian-language **Sister Smile** (2001), starring Ginevra Colonna, and Stijn Coninx’s **Soeur Sourire** (2009), with Cecile De France in the lead role.

Neither found distribution in the United States, so most Americans familiar with the song probably think the Singing Nun is either dead, by now, or opening for the Pope on his pastoral missions. In fact, Deckers was never comfortable with life in the spotlight. Neither did she enjoy having to justify her progressive beliefs, including the need for the Church to allow birth control, to her superiors. Without another hit to promote, the Dominican sisters waved goodbye to Sister Smile in 1967, knowing her original vow of poverty would keep residual checks flowing to the order.

In Deutsch’s film, Deckers finds companionship among hippies and other denizens of the Belgian underground. Still seeking personal redemption, she gets hooked on drugs and is tormented by demons that could be traced back to her father and early sexual issues. Finally, she accepts her romantic feelings toward other women, specifically longtime companion Anna Pécher, with whom she founded a school for autistic children. Tortured by the demands of tax collectors, who refused to accept that Deckers’ share of music revenues were kept by the Church, both women committed suicide in 1985. Only 51 at the time of her death, Deckers was buried alongside Pecher in a Wavre cemetery. Colonna’s portrayal is very powerful. The DVD set includes two of Deutsch’s shorts, **Dead People** and **Mario Makes a Movie**.

Also from MVD Visual comes **The Jesus Guy**, Sean Tracey's documentary portrait of an American evangelist who walks the planet barefoot, preaching the word of God and looking very much like holy-card images of Jesus Christ. Citing the bible, Brother James Joseph (a.k.a., the Jesus Guy, Whats Your Name? and Carl) accepts no money, carries no food or personal belongs, and owns only one tunic. He doesn't claim to be the reincarnation of Jesus or anything but a messenger for His teachings.

In the 1960s, Brother Joseph would have been greeted with signs that read, "No shirt, no shoes, no service." Although some people still consider him to be a kook, the Barefoot Evangelist has enjoyed generally warm receptions on his spiritual mission. He has appeared on 20/20 and in dozens of publications, including Time and the Wall Street Journal. For the past 16 years, Joseph has wandered through 47 states – last month, he was spotted in Tampa, Florida — and 13 countries. In the film, a Catholic priest compares his mission to that of St. Francis of Assisi. The religion correspondent of the Washington Post attests to the genuineness of his appeal before townspeople she's interviewed. Indeed, the worst thing said about him is that he's "only human" or a "normal guy," not the deity they wanted him to be.

As is to demonstrate his affinity with Jesus Christ, Tracey films bonehead cops demanding of Joseph that he obtain a permit for exercising his constitutional right to chat with Americans – not proselytize or beg – on the streets of their home towns. That local officials probably wouldn't give such an oddity a permit, even if such a thing were available, is as immaterial to cops today as it was in the '60s or in Jerusalem, 2011 years ago.

He's far more welcome in nursing homes, at church groups and halfway houses. I've run into men who've looked like Joseph and spouted scripture to beat the band. None have listened to the people to whom they're preaching, as the Jesus Guy does, or debate doctrine. I've never encountered a televangelist who's gone an hour without asking for money or offering to trade prayers for donations. Typically, Joseph refuses such offers.

Does Joseph have foibles? Yes. Does he lose patience with skeptics? Occasionally. Is he a slave to the media? Probably. Does he appear to be more genuine about his religious beliefs than most American politicians and bible-banging religious leaders? Undeniably, yes. The DVD adds Q&As and panel discussions with Tracey and the Jesus Guy at early screenings.

- Gary Dretzka