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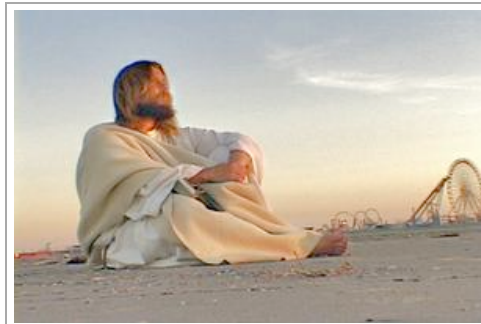
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ON FILM: Film's Jesus Guy not easy to dismiss

By PHILIP MARTIN

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LITTLE ROCK — More than a decade ago, we used to occasionally see a guy walking around downtown Little Rock and in Hillcrest, dressed in Birkenstock sandals and a Franciscan robe belted with a length of rope. He had long hair and a beard, with the obvious intention of looking as much like the iconic depictions of Christ the Redeemer as possible.



Director Sean Tracey's documentary The Jesus Guy takes a close look at a white-robed and bearded man who says his mission is to spread the word of God.

Movie Studio Release
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According to my friend and neighbor Paul Bowen, he kept pretty much to himself and spent a lot of time hanging out in the parking lot of a convenience store on Kavanaugh Boulevard. Once one of the girls from nearby Mount Saint Mary Academy asked him his name.



AUDIO CLIP
Philip Martin's interview with director Sean Tracey.
Director Sean Tracey's movie The Jesus Guy

"Jesus," was his predictable reply.

"Where you from, Jesus?" she followed up.

"Fayetteville," he answered.

He became part of the neighborhood landscape until the day he decided to address the congregants during a weekday noon Mass at Our Lady of the Holy Souls Catholic Church. One of the people in attendance happened to be an off-duty police officer. He escorted Jesus of Fayetteville out of the church and presumably into a battery of psychiatric examinations.

We're still awaiting his return.

It might be fair to say that Jesus of Fayetteville was mentally unwell, but I'm not at all certain you can say that about the subject of Sean Tracey's outstanding directorial debut, the verite-style documentary feature The Jesus Guy, which will screen at 6 p.m. Saturday as part of the Ozark Foothills Filmfest. The screening will be held in Independence Hall at the University of Arkansas Community College at Batesville, and Tracey will be there to answer questions afterward.

(Tickets are \$5 for regular admission, \$4 for adults 55 and over and all students, and \$3 for Foothills Film Society Members. Will O'Loughlen's 27-minute documentary on the noisy art-rock group Sonic Youth, Summer of Youth, is also part of the program. For more information

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see today's Arkansas Weekend section.)



Tracey's film is a throwback to the "direct cinema" style of legendary documentary makers David and Albert Maysles (Albert Maysles served as an adviser on the film), intimate with no narration, that puts us in the company of an enigma but leaves us to form our own opinions about it.

While, like Jesus of Fayetteville, the semi-anonymous preacher costumes himself to resemble the traditional Western image of Jesus - he wears a white tunic and walks barefoot - he most assuredly knows he's not the Son of God. Time and time again during the film people ask him his name and he invariably replies, "I'm known by the question: What's your name?"

Charismatic and thoughtful, What's Your Name comes across as media savvy and a bit of a publicity hound - he obviously relishes the attention he receives, especially from national news shows like 20/20 - but he doesn't appear to be looking to cash in on his burgeoning celebrity. He refuses any offered cash, eats only when food is offered, and sleeps only when provided with shelter.

He also refuses to give out personal information, such as his birth name (we learn it anyway) or details about his life before he began his 16-year walkabout, which reportedly has taken him through 47 states and 13 countries.

His mission, he says, is simple - to spread the word of God by talking to people one on one or in groups. (He prefers large groups.) He likens himself to St. Francis of Assisi, the rich merchant's son who became an ascetic renouncer of worldly things.

In the film, What's Your Name comes across as a gentle and well-spoken soul, with the patient mien of a favorite camp counselor or kindergarten teacher. While little he says could be taken for profound, his equanimity, kindness and appearance seem enough for most people to accept him as harmless, and for some to receive his presence as a blessing.

Only once during the film does What's Your Name appear to become angry, and that's when an admittedly bratty parochial schoolboy suggests his real motivation for walking the earth might be "emotional problems." (Late in the film, What's Your Name is visited by his father, and some hints are dropped that suggest the rude kid's theory might not be that far off.)

That What's Your Name is completely human is never really in doubt. Two women who sheltered him for long periods talk about his off-stage life, and while one declares her disillusionment with him and says he's only saintly for the cameras, the other remains convinced of his spiritual provenance, that for her he was a gift from heaven. (Even if he did leave without saying goodbye.)

Ultimately The Jesus Guy gives us an opportunity to examine our convictions and beliefs. What's Your Name is confounding because he's obviously not a run-of-the-mill Jesus guy. He talks the talk, he walks the walk. In the end it may be that his example is more important than any of the soothing platitudes he utters. You can question his efficacy, but not his commitment.

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