

CONVERSATIONAL BALL

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Feature Article #1

Sean Tracey introduces *The Jesus Guy*

With Conversational Ball, Sean Tracey shares behind-the-scenes info on *The Jesus Guy*. His remarkable documentary tells the story of evangelist James Joseph, known to multitudes of skeptics and believers as simply "What's Your Name?".

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Sean Tracey is certainly no stranger to religion or filmmaking – two items that would greatly assist him with his first feature-length project, *The Jesus Guy* (2007). After majoring in religious studies and philosophy at Brown University, the director crafted

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numerous television commercials. From 1997 – 1999, he helmed advertisements and infomercials for Maysles Films.

With *The Jesus Guy*, Tracey directed a critically acclaimed look at Carl James Joseph, also known as ‘What’s Your Name?’ The filmmaker first noticed the remarkable story of ‘What’s Your Name?’ in a January 2000 *Time Magazine* article. Inspired, Tracey set out



to make a documentary on the mysterious figure, acquiring approximately 70 hours of footage of him.

Sean Tracey and I recently discussed *The Jesus Guy*. During the conversation, Tracey explained his preparation for the feature. Likewise, he elaborated on the title character in *The Jesus Guy*, lending his thoughts on the intriguing subject.

Josh Armstrong: Why did you decide to make *The Jesus Guy*?

Sean Tracey: The film kind of came to me. I had read about the subject in a *Time Magazine* article. I had been involved with a company called Maysles Films in New York, where I was directing TV commercials. Albert Maysles, who owns the company, is a famous documentary filmmaker.

I got the bug that I wanted to make a documentary film. But it took me until I heard and met this subject - who goes by the name ‘What’s Your Name?’ - to realize I had found a

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subject that could sustain your attention for an entire movie. That's what made me decide to do it.

JA: Was it difficult tracking 'What's Your Name?' down?

ST: Yeah, it was very, very peculiar at times, because there was no way to reach him. He doesn't carry a cell phone, and he doesn't have a regular place. You never know how long he's going to stay in any given town or area. Every night, he could be in a different place. He could be at someone's house, or he could be outside. It was a challenge. There were a few occasions in which I had no clue as to where or *if* I would ever see him again.

On the other hand, when he comes into an area, he's pretty conspicuous. We would call police stations and newspapers. Inevitably, if he came into a town, people would know about it. We literally did little pinpoints on a map. Hence, we could see, 'Okay, it looks like he's headed in *this* direction. The police department said they saw him two days ago. So he's probably going *that* way (south, north, whatever).'

JA: How did 'What's Your Name?' feel about your filming him?

ST: He allowed us access. He had a number of people already do pieces on him. Connie Chung was interested in doing something with him. *20/20* did a piece on him. *Good Morning America* did a couple of pieces on him. But they were short pieces – 10 or 20 minutes of coverage.

Then he had a very famous filmmaker approach him, who, I think, had either won or been nominated for an Academy Award. The documentarian began shooting a long film about him. But they didn't get along. 'What's Your Name?' was very concerned that the filmmaker was going to twist his story into something that it wasn't and take him down to an expose-style thing. It wasn't very flattering. I think he was right about that. Knowing this filmmaker's other films, I think that's what the director was interested in. Hence, 'What's Your Name?' didn't give the documentarian the ability to film him any more.

Then when I met him, it took me about six months to gain his trust and convince him that I would be fair. I would give full disclosure but at least be fair. That was our deal.

JA: How do you think your filming 'What's Your Name?' affected how he acted and where he went?

ST: I don't think it affected those things. In fact, one of my goals with the film was not to affect what was going on in his life or even the days that I was shooting with him. I didn't want there to be any impact. Of course, when you have a camera, it has some impact on the encounters that he has with people. They would not be as open with him as they might have been if there weren't a camera around.

But when I started the filming process, I had three or four people with me. Somebody was there with a boom mike, putting lavalier mikes on people. It did interfere with what was going on and his interactions with people on the street. So I dropped them one-by-



one, in the first few weeks of shooting.

I ended up shooting the rest of the movie, for a couple of years. I was shooting off and on with him, just by myself, with a backpack and a very small camera. The backpack was full of batteries, extra video tape and those sorts of things.

I saw what happened when the camera wasn't running or even out. I know from other people that have spent time with 'What's Your Name?' and have seen what he's done and what he does. He wasn't doing anything special when the camera was there. It was always the same thing.

The movie is very authentic to the way 'What's Your Name?' spends his life. At some point, I wondered myself if, when I wasn't there, did he change his clothes and live a whole different lifestyle. But that is not the case.

JA: Speaking of his clothes, why do you think 'What's Your Name?' adopted that certain appearance?

ST: That was one of my other big questions as I began filming him and learning more about him. Originally, I was convinced that this must be some sort of gimmick for him. But I think he really believes that this is a practical way for him to dress, because he only has that one set of clothing. It's easier for him to wash it out in a river, in a sink or wherever he has to wash it. It'll dry much quicker than you or I having a shirt and a pair of jeans.

I think he's well aware that how he dresses and how he looks gains a lot of attention for him. His appearance enables him a certain amount of deference or respect or curiosity even that causes people to want to come up to him and talk to him.

Ultimately, he does want to talk to people. He doesn't want to just disappear and have no impact. I think his mission is to talk to as many people as he can and have as much an impact on people about their spirituality and their relationship with God. That's what he's trying to do in his mission – point people toward God.

JA: When 'What's Your Name' adopted his lifestyle, what did he do with all of his possessions? Did he sell them? Or does 'What's Your Name?' still have a house somewhere, but he simply doesn't visit it?

ST: About his possessions, I have no idea. 'What's Your Name?' said he began his ministry as an evangelist wearing a regular suit and carrying a briefcase, satchel or backpack. He told me that in his backpack, he would have ten or twenty bucks, a toothbrush and some other things.

But the backpack kept getting stolen, left behind or lost. That irritated 'What's Your Name?' a lot. He stopped carrying it, because it was just causing grief in his life.

Then there was the same story with the clothing. I guess 'What's Your Name?' eventually felt that he couldn't really live the life that he wanted to live. It would be more practical for him to wear a looser fit of clothing.

I know 'What's Your Name?' doesn't have a house or possessions anymore. But I have no idea what happened to those things.

Connie in *The Jesus Guy* is said to have what she considers to be 'relics' of his, meaning his old robe, hair clippings and some other things. The filmmaker that 'What's Your Name?' didn't allow to video him told me that Connie had gotten them. That's all I know.

JA: That's creepy.

ST: Yeah, it is. I didn't get into any details about that.

JA: I've read 'What's Your Name?' is so mysterious that he will do a deed for someone and then leave without even saying goodbye. Is that correct?

ST: Yeah, he comes and goes pretty regularly. He doesn't carry on what we would call 'normal' conversations or relationships, like you or everyone else you know would expect. He's a bit mysterious about how he appears and disappears out of towns and peoples' lives. He just doesn't operate like most of us.

JA: Do you think that's a result of his personality? Or is that how he feels servants of God should act?

ST: No, I know he has great respect for Mother Teresa and other servants of God. I don't think he thinks that he's got the answer on how to conduct himself. I think it's just a part of his personality. I think that's who he is.

JA: Why does he call himself 'What's Your Name?'?

ST: In the Old Testament of the Bible, Moses asked a question similar to 'What is your name?' at the burning bush. It's a very powerful story about the identity or the mystery of God.



[Exodus 3:13-14 (King James Version): “And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.”]

‘What’s Your Name?’ described that section as what he meant by using the question as his name. It has to do with the interaction between Moses and God, not literally with what the words are in the Bible.

Here is also what I think is going on:

I have a degree in religious study. I studied a lot of Eastern religion. There are a few Eastern religions - especially certain types of Buddhists - that have a habit of asking koans - questions or riddles that can’t be answered. They are the questions like ‘What is the sound of a tree falling in the woods if nobody is there to hear it?’ or ‘What is the sound of one hand clapping?’ Things like that.

They ask monks or other people to contemplate those unanswerable questions in a way to break their normal pattern of thinking and place them in a more meditative or spiritual state. You think intensely about something that you can’t answer, can’t see or can’t understand. It breaks the normal thinking pattern.

When somebody says to this documentary's subject, 'What's your name?', and he says, 'What's Your Name?' or 'What's *your* name?' it really confuses people. It's like the 'Who's on first?' thing from Abbot and Costello. It gets people a bit off-guard.

I think the brilliance in his response is that he doesn't want to converse with you in the normal way. If you say to somebody, 'What's your name?', and he tells you his name is James, the next question is going to be, 'Where did you go to school?' or 'What were your parents like?' or 'Where were you born?' All of those questions are things we spend our time with each other asking.

In some ways, I think what he wants to say is that the questions are all very meaningless. Who cares where you were born - and, almost, who cares what your name is? Who cares where you went to school and what you do for a living? Let's get to the meat of it. The meat of it is: How is your relationship with God?

'What's Your Name?' wants to break the normal cycle of his talks with people. He does it through that technique.

JA: I hadn't thought of that. But that is clever!

ST: It is, and it works too! It annoys people. At times, it annoyed me, because I just became used to hearing it so many times. On the other hand, I saw it working in a very interesting way. It really put people back on their heels.

JA: Where did the title of the film, *The Jesus Guy*, come from?

ST: Inevitably, whenever 'What's Your Name?' walks into a town, and you drive by or talk to him, you then go home and say to your relative or friend, 'Hey, did you see 'the Jesus guy' downtown?' He's got a beard, long hair and a robe, and he walks barefoot. Everybody calls him 'the Jesus guy.' It's easier to remember than 'What's Your Name?' *[laughs]*

Three or four times in the movie, somebody says, 'Hey, it's 'the Jesus guy'!' He's referred to that often. He doesn't have a problem with it. But he doesn't call himself that nor does he encourage that.



JA: How do you think religious people respond to him? Do you think they may be more accepting of him than non-religious people?

ST: I think, in general, people who are more religious accept him better. I screened the film at Harvard University Divinity School, where we had a lot of clergy, rabbis, etc. I've also screened it with a group of clergy – a bunch of priests on a retreat. They got an awful lot out of the film. They delve more deeply into the issues of evangelism than the average person.

From what I've been gathering from our screenings at film festivals, the average person who is not that religious sees the film as a really interesting observation of an unusual person's life, commitment and mission. But people who are highly religious and on their own spiritual journeys get more, perhaps, out of it. They see it on a bunch of different levels, if they've ever tried to do anything like that themselves.

JA: In an [interview with Fox News affiliate WBRC 6](#) in Alabama, you said, 'I was waiting for the big Hollywood ending. I was waiting for 'the Jesus guy' to do something different.' What were you hoping or expecting he might do?

ST: Most movies have an ending. People expect an ending. So I guess what I meant was that I thought people would be looking for a certain ending.

For instance, maybe 'What's Your Name?' would give up his mission and take a regular job. Maybe he'd become a priest or a monk. There was even some rumor of him going

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to see the Pope, because he was being sort of investigated by the Vatican. I thought that could be a big ending, where he has a meeting with the Pope and somehow gets some recognition for what he's done. Any of those things would have been an ending.

But at the very first public screening for *The Jesus Guy*, at Washington University, there was an opportunity for the filmmaker to ask questions to the audience, as opposed to the opposite. That was the premise of this screening, called *Docs in Progress*. You do it usually before you finish your editing. I got that opportunity. When I asked the people that were there, 'Where do you want this film to go and how do you want it to end?' they said, 'We don't! We love it the way it is!'

You sort of jump on the train ride with this guy, so to speak, and are on his journey. You come and go. You know how it started before you got there, and you know how it will continue after you leave.

People said it was appropriate that there really isn't an ending. You know that it's just going to keep going. I've now seen the film with enough audiences to know that works.

What's really fascinating about it is that when people come out of the film, it's not over for them. Many times, I get e-mails and phone calls from people who have seen *The Jesus Guy* weeks or even months ahead of when they contact me. They can't stop thinking about that movie. They can't stop thinking about that guy.



By not putting an ending on the film – by not finishing it, to some extent, or saying, 'Okay, this is how it all ended' – I think it gives people an opportunity to visualize or

imagine their own continuation. It leaves it open-ended. It's a cliffhanger, leaving you wanting to see what's going to happen the next time.

JA: Absolutely! When doing research for this interview, I kept noticing that *The Jesus Guy* has been getting tremendous reviews.

ST: I'm blown away by the thoughtfulness of people who have seen the movie. We haven't gotten one bad review. Nobody has torn apart this movie or said anything other than good things about it. I'm very thankful for that.

I wouldn't have put so much time and energy into the film if I didn't feel that we were on to something and that the film was going to be meaningful to people. But I'm humbled by some of the responses we've gotten by everyday people viewing the movie and how they say it has affected them in their own lives. It's not the movie as much as it is this man's saga, his trials and his triumphs.

JA: I read that 'What's Your Name?' now prefers to be called 'James Joseph.' Why did he change his name?

ST: His full name is 'Carl James Joseph.' He's just using his middle and last name. I don't know why he doesn't seem to be fond of the name 'Carl.' *[laughs]*

He told me that he was having a lot of problems with the law in the South by not giving his real name. So he thought it would make his life easier by referring to himself as 'James Joseph.' The law can now look him up, find there is a James Joseph and know that he is him.

JA: What is next for you? More documentaries?

ST: Yes, I'm in LA now, at its United Film Festival. I just met with a producer's rep who wants to take on *The Jesus Guy*, to find a place for it here in the U.S., whether that be theatrical distribution or something like PBS or HBO. We're hoping that it sees all of those things. So that's what is next immediately.

But I have another documentary I'm going to jump into. I'm looking for some funding for that film.

I'm also in preliminary discussions on some scripts. That project would be not a documentary but a scripted dramatic film for me to direct.

I'm keeping very busy. I have an advertising business, but I would like to spend significantly more of my time making feature films. I hope I'm lucky enough to have that opportunity.

For more information on *The Jesus Guy*, please visit its official website at TheJesusGuy.com.