

Art & Soul

A Church in Search of SubGenius or How to Lose Yourself in Religion

by Robert Hough

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When J.R. Bob Dobbs, self-proclaimed leader of the Church of the SubGenius, hosts his radio show, he is a man possessed, a man out of control.

Seated in front of his microphone, his legs bouncing in a nervous frenzy, his arms gesturing through the air, he is capable of anything, "I am the most perfect realization of evolution!" he constantly tells his listeners. "A deity for the mass man! An electric Esperanto sent to save the world!" Whatever flashes through his mind, no matter how lunatic, is spewed over the airwaves, producing a complex mixture of McLuhanism, paranoia, numerology and Joycean references. But this is the fodder of BOB, Toronto's rebel media prophet.

It is a chilly Wednesday evening, just after midnight, and BOB is in the basement studio of CKLN, a Toronto community radio station. On the other side of a pane of glass sits BOB's deadpan co-host, Mike Dyer. After a brief introduction from BOB, Dyer opens up the phone lines. The switchboard ignites. The first call is from a woman offering testimony: she praises BOB for helping her attain "slack," the sub-genius term for enlightenment. "What you've done for me is a miracle," she says, "a true miracle." The second caller is a devoted sub-genii named Shawn, wishing to discuss a Finnegan's Wake character named the Prank Queen. The third caller is interested in a claim BOB made on an earlier show: during the latter days of the Carter administration, Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter were replaced with androids. Later in the show, a different caller asks about another of BOB's suspicions: that George Bush ordered the bombing of PAN AM 103. BOB's voice rises in excitement; he loves conspiracies, many of them inspired by a late California

theorist Mae Russell. He has claimed that the EXXON oil spill was intentional, designed to detract attention from the Oliver North trial. He also insists that AIDS is a manufactured virus, produced by the American government to keep the world's population in check. (A full year after BOB first announced his AIDS theory, a convention of AIDS workers met in Philadelphia to examine such a possibility.)

But, BOB hastens to add, PAN AM 103, the EXXON spill and AIDS are like "accidents in the kitchen." compared to The Conspiracy. According to the first principle of BOBism, the entire world has been dehumanized by electronic media, an event known in McLuhanist terms as the discarnate effect. As the only person still "alive," it is BOB's quest to inform his followers of the devastating ramifications of electronic culture, and thereby help them deal with it.

"Imagine you're on the telephone with someone in New York," BOB will tell you, patiently explaining discarnacy. "Part of your being is in Toronto and in New York at the same time. In fact, in an electric environment, you can be in New York and Toronto and Los Angeles, Moscow and Paris—you can be in all those places at once via satellite hookup. You can exert action through time and space in all those places at once. Electrically, whether on the telephone or on the radio or on the television or on the computer, you are everywhere." The problem is that we're all beaming little bits of ourselves around the globe, bumping and colliding with each other. Because this "tactility" is so uncomfortable, we withdraw, emotionally insulating ourselves until we become lifeless, post-body shells. According to BOB, we have been rendered zombies by those who oversaw the instigation of the global village, known collectively as The Secret Council of Ten. (He does know who the council members are. But, he says, you'll have to listen to his radio show for that information.)

Given such hyperbolic mania, many consider BOB either a prankster or schizophrenic. Some maintain he is a combination of both. Why then, are the phone lines jammed calls during the Church of the SubGenius Hour? Why is his show now being broadcast by a Los Angeles radio station? Why do people attend his lectures on communication theory? Why do listeners buy

his cassette tapes (entitled *BOB Dogma and Fragments with BOB*)? Why do they read his newsletter, *The Perfect Pitch*? Perhaps it is for pure entertainment value. But maybe, just maybe, there is something about BOB's apocalyptic warnings that people relate to, if only on a metaphoric level.

Sometime in the late-seventies, a Dallas-based graphic artist named Ivan Stang swallowed a tab of acid and wrote a book entitled *The Book of the SubGenius*. A mock bible, *The Book of the SubGenius* preached the virtues of nonconformity and warned of the evils of the status quo. Anyone bowing to the pressures of normality was deemed a dupe of The Conspiracy, a sinister collective that maintains the general population's willingness to live banal, tedious lives. In the book, a mythical, pipe-smoking savior named J.R. "Bob" Dobbs was identified. Those who recognized the existence of BOB — SubGenii — had attained slack and thereby escaped the dictates of The Conspiracy. (Conspiracy dupes, meanwhile, were referred to as Pinks or Normals.) The book was eventually published by Simon and Schuster in New York, and can be found in the humour sections of many book stores.

The plot thickened in June of 1987. At the time, a Toronto disc jockey using the pseudonym "Bob Marshall" was hosting a Sunday morning show on CKLN dealing with conspiracy theory. Marshall was approached by a fellow announcer, Mike Dyer, who was planning a show devoted to Stang's Church of the SubGenius. Marshall agreed, and sometime during the early days of the program, which now airs every second Wednesday at midnight, he made a startling announcement. "I am J.R. Bob Dobbs," he told his listeners. "I am your BOB."

Most importantly, BOB divulged exactly how The Conspiracy operated: through the discarnate effect. "We are all electrified!" he raged. "We are all discarnate! It doesn't matter where you are on the planet, or how poor or wealthy you are! Electrically, on the telephone or on the television or on the computer, you are the screen! You are everywhere! You have access to the whole planet! We're all in the middle, and we're pressing against each other; the world has become an incredibly claustrophobic, erogenous zone! And so, we have physically been aborted! It is a planet of the dead! We have been disconnected!"

Dyer then sent tapes of the first eight shows to Ivan Stang, who hosts his own radio show in Dallas. Dyer also included a note informing Stang of the good news: J.R. Bob Dobbs had taken an earthly form in Toronto. Stang was not amused. He sent Dyer's letter back with this message scrawled in the margin: "This 'Bob' you have is a FAKE 'Bob' — not the anti-'Bob', just a FAKE — BEWARE. He doesn't sound ANYTHING like that. You're playing with FIRE, man! 'Bob' himself NEVER speaks on tape. Your evil fake 'Bob' is spreading horror and lies. Seeing as how I have a weekly show and have been editing tapes for 8 years, you should henceforth come to the source; the real 'Bob', re-arisen, will fist-fuck you for eternity if you don't! (Pardon my language, but it's literally true.)"

In "real life," J.R. Bob Dobbs is a bespectacled, brown-haired male named Rob Dean who lives in a large, renovated home in Toronto with his wife, a doctor named Caroline. (Granted, she is usually referred to as Connie, BOB's bride in *The Book of the SubGenius*.) Beyond that, it is difficult to give specifics about Dean's life, other than to report his claims. Although he looks to be in his mid-thirties, he will tell you that BOB is much older than he looks, and is, in fact, in his sixties. He will tell you that BOB doesn't have to work, because he made a fortune during the war; the *Catch 22* character, Milo Minderbender, was patterned after him. But one thing is certain. At some point, BOB worked as an archivist at the McLuhan programme at the University of Toronto. "He was a candle-burner," says Derrick deKerckhove, a professor with the program. "He was obsessed with the great man — McLuhan — and he studied him day in and day out. He lived, ate and breathed McLuhanism."

It was presumably during this period that BOB developed his theory that the planet has been deadened by electronic communication. The academic establishment, meanwhile, maintains that BOB's ultra-nihilistic extrapolations are at best questionable. According to deKerckhove, electronic communication has actually sensitized the planet by graphically displaying history as it unfolds. "Wars are no longer started over things like the invasion of Panama, or the Soviet bombardment of a Korean jetliner," deKerckhove maintains. "People now realize that wars are unpleasant, and it's because they

see the horror on TV. The global village is a pacifying environment, and has to be that way." BOB, meanwhile, has this to say about deKerckhove: "He's a dupe! He's worse...he's PINK!" Interestingly, BOB's ideas have been endorsed by pop culture, particularly in the world of film. For instance, last year's winner at the Cannes Film Festival, *sex, lies and videotape*, depicted four discarnate characters who could not relate to others on an emotional level unless they had a distancing device called a videocamera in their hands. But nowhere is discarnacy better portrayed than in the films of Canadian Atom Egoyan. In his most recent movie, *Speaking Parts*, every scene is flooded with electronic media.

People with camcorders record every movement. Entire lives are stored on computer discs. Characters have sex with each other via videophones. Mounted in every room is a monitor, a television, a screen of some sort. Accordingly, every character is flattened, emotionally barren. They are zombies, cast-members of *Night of the Living Dead* transplanted to the modern every-city.

"The most extraordinary feature of electric communication," Egoyan says, "is that it contains emotion." He explains what he means by containment; we constantly deal with visual images of people on TV, movies, telemonitors, high-resolution videotape and the like. Because the technology is so realistic, we are duped into believing a person's visual projection is the person. Thus, when interacting with people in real life, we act as though we're talking to a screen. Our emotional content is edited out, deemed unnecessary.

"Egoyan," says BOB, "got all his ideas from me. He has listened extensively to my show, and has visited me on occasion." Egoyan says he has never heard of J.R. Bob Dobbs or the Church of the SubGenius.

It is 1:30 in the morning, and the Church of the SubGenius Hour is drawing to a close. It has been a busy night. BOB has held court with ten callers in all, not including the person who, throughout the evening, repeatedly phoned to play a recording of a wailing child into the telephone receiver. For his final call, BOB is talking with a man named Dublin, who has found a numeral pattern to winning PICK 3 lottery tickets. For BOB and Mike Dyer, it is a

typical night on the radio.

"I have come up with concepts that express the discarnate state," BOB says of his radio persona. "BOB is the most perfect, psychotic and fanciful projection — in other words, the most nihilistic, the most happy and drugged-out and most ecstatic person in the world! The discarnate state is a psychotic, neurotic, really a psychopathic state! So I have to act like a psychotic just as a form of content that other people can identify with!"

In other words, if BOB is out of his mind, he is purposefully that way. And if a seeming madman such as BOB can access the airwaves, maybe he can trick listeners into thinking twice about all media content, including commercials, prime ministerial addresses and newscasts. This is another central tenet of the church; if you do not instinctively doubt BOB — or anyone else — you are not sub-genius material. Learn to question me, BOB decrees, and maybe you'll question the rest of the mass-media psychobabble that's broadcast 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in the modern, electronic village.

With prompting from Dyer, BOB tells Dublin that the show's over, but please phone again. Dyer then offers a quick "praise BOB," segues into the church's closing theme, and the show is over. Once off the air, BOB yells: "That was a good one, eh Mike!" He then slaps his right knee, leans back, and laughs like a hyena.

“Robert Hough took the first interview, made a factually confused article out of it (see "Mabe Russell" for Mae Brussell, for example) and sold it to THIS MAGAZINE, September 1990 issue. This is where the journalistically-founded, mistaken notion of ‘Bob Dean’ began.”

Bob Dobbs