

# Things Get Ugly in the World of Underground Art

by Robert Everett-Green  
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A 'sacred scribe' and an acolyte of McLuhan are in a dispute over a messiah that may be no more substantial than an advertising logo

Rev. Ivan Stang is in a fury. It's hard enough trying find slack in a world controlled by pinks, without someone coming along and pinching your messiah.

Stang, a film editor and satirical media artist who lives in Dallas, is battling a Toronto artist for the right to take his personal saviour's name in vain. The dispute, about a messiah that may be no more substantial than an advertising logo, has stirred up some ugly feelings in the world of underground media art.

Rev. Stang is the self-styled 'sacred scribe' of the Church of the SubGenius, a Texas-based organization that he and a few like-minded friends founded in the late seventies. SubGenius is an extensive practical satire of organized religion, commercial society and political hokum, carried on through books, comics, magazines and mass meetings called "devivals." For thousands of SubGenius followers. J. R. "Bob" Dobbs's grinning, pipe-smoking face — registered as a legal trademark — symbolizes a faith that is also an anti-faith, a mass movement that is also, as one of them says, "a media virus."

But now, a Toronto artist with a wealthy backer is claiming to be the "real" Bob Dobbs, a move one Sub-Genius maven says is "like claiming you're the real Santa Claus." It's a step too far for Stang, who has been slugging it out with his opponent in a battle of letters and press releases.

"Once a year somebody shows up who thinks he's Jesus Christ and Bob wrapped up together," Stang says in an irritated Texas drawl. "This time, the guy found a sugar daddy."

The guy is Bob Dean, otherwise known as Bob Marshall, an eccentric acolyte of Marshall McLuhan and Lyndon LaRouche. Dean's programs on conspiracy theory counted among the more bizarre offerings of Toronto college radio in the late eighties. His backer is Nelson Thall, son of TorStar director Burnett Thall, and an associate of Mary McLuhan, the late thinker's daughter. Thall provided the money for two compact discs of chatter by Dean, who now calls himself Bob Dobbs, about world conspiracy, or "top-down structure." The discs, entitled Bob, Media Ecology (BME), are laced with Dobbsian buzzwords, including "subgenius" (a knowing outsider) and "pink" (anyone who has been drafted or duped by the establishment).

Normally, that wouldn't be a problem for the Church of the SubGenius, a notably liberal group that has appropriated all kinds of material with happy abandon. SubGenius publications are full of images and ideas cribbed from main-stream sources, including the central image of Dobbs, which was lifted from postwar advertisements. Its frequent "devivals" encourage anyone to improvise on Dobbsian themes. all in pursuit of 'slack,' a kind of free-thinking distance from the established order.

"We've always encouraged people to take the ball and run with it," says Stang, whose real name is Doug Smith. "But nobody's ever come along and said, 'I am the ball, run with me.' "

Dean is so involved with being the ball that he claims to have only a scant acquaintance with anyone named Bob Dean. He remembers his former alter ego, Bob Marshall, only as a "colleague," and claims that Stang's *The Book of the SubGenius*, which has sold some 35,000 copies since its publication in 1983, is merely "an interpretation of my life. Thall is emphatic but confusing about the two Bobs, first claiming that any overlap with Stang's messiah and terminology is "coincidental and serendipitous," then insisting that Stang scalped his ideas from Dean.

Actually, the solemn conspiracy patter on the BME discs is quite far removed from the Church of the SubGenius, which is mainly about finding amusing ways to escape normalcy and group-think. Stang says he would have been content to coexist with BME, had stickers been attached to the discs to prevent confusion about the source of the material. But his sticker request was "flatly refused" by Dean and Thall, according to the album's producer, David Newfeld.

"I'm upset that Stang's concerns weren't addressed," says Newfeld, though he also suggests that stealing other people's thunder is central to the SubGenius idea. In some ways, Bob Dean is exposing them as a bit inconsistent in their philosophy."

Could be. In *Arise, The SubGenius Video*, a 1989 collage of words and images about the cult of Bob, one SubGenius minister proclaims: "Bob is — fill in the blank." Another describes Bob as a "disposable saviour" who "embodies practically all the failings of mortal man." Including, perhaps, borrowing other people's ideas without giving full credit. In this light, the issue of the two Bobs may come down to a matter of hoaxing the hoaxers.

Stang disagrees, and tries to distinguish between "fair appropriation" and unattributed. The difference has bedeviled media artists and musicians of late, and resulted in serial court cases. Negativland, one of the bands whose music appears on BME 2, is locked in a legal battle with its former record company over an album that satirized the Irish band U2. But Negativland's Mike Hosier says the band has dissociated itself from the *Media Ecology* discs, because of Dean and Thall's "mean-spirited" treatment of Stang.

Thall claims he is under no obligation to the Church of the SubGenius, and scoffs at Stang's published threats of legal action. "You can't copyright a name," he says. However, Thall isn't a stranger to legal wranglings over nomenclature. His lawyers once sent threatening letters to the University of Toronto's McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology, claiming that the Program's use of the word "Centre" was compromising the identity of Thall's business-oriented Marshall McLuhan Centre on Global Communications. Derrick de Kerckhove, head of the McLuhan Program, says that his

organization neither did nor could have called itself a centre, because of university regulations.

Others on the scene view the Bob fracas with divided sentiments. "I have sympathy both for the random appropriation of things and also for those who get upset when their stuff is appropriated," says R. U. Sirius, editor of the glossy underground magazine *Mondo 2000*. Toronto composer John Oswald, copies of whose 1989 recording *Plunderithonic* were destroyed after singer Michael Jackson's business agents objected to his use of Jackson material, says he's no longer sure that proper attribution is the main issue. It's not what you steal that matters, he says, it's the creativity with which you handle it.

In the end, Stang may prevail, if only because time appears to be on his side. SubGenius mythology teaches that on July 5, 1998, Xists from outer space will bring the world to an end, reward the subgenii and punish the pinks. If, as Bob Dean says, "a pink is anyone who bugs you," the sacred scribe of SubGenius may get his revenge.

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“Once BOB'S MEDIA ECOLOGY (1992) was released and Connie and I had moved to NYC, much controversy spread throughout North America's indy-culture media. I was subsequently interviewed many times over the next 2 years about a scandal that I had hilariously no connection nor involvement with creating. This Toronto Globe and Mail article (March 30, 1993) was typical as the spectre of "Bob Dean" grew like the pterodactyl I had predicted I would become.”

**Bob Dobbs**