

Southern Discomfort

The interactive, multi-media musical 'Taking the Jesus Pill' is an easy act to swallow.

BY Katherine Turman

Standing atop King King's bar in an ice-cream white suit, the Preacher is haranguing Johnny 3:16 over the Jack Daniels bottles: "We're here to question god, the devil and how it all fits together," he shouts across the bar. "Remember, the devil was once an angel too."

"Sounds like walking the fence to me," spews Johnny from his vantage point on the opposite side of the room. "You better get hot or cold, preacher, because lukewarm water is something that Jesus spit right out of his mouth."

Audience members perched on barstools hang on to their cocktails as the razor-stubbed actor playing Johnny (Brandon Kerrar) jumps down from his pulpit/bar. It's one of the more potent moments in more than an hour of engaging storytelling that is "Taking the Jesus Pill," a non-traditional, interactive multi-media musical that tells a tragic and sometimes-amusing over-the-top Southern Gothic tale about an evangelical preacher and his family.

The brainchild of Alabama-born, Hollywood-based musician/Renaissance man Charlie Terrell, it's a production full of sound and fury, mostly Terrell's own.

"I wrote a short story, then a soundtrack to the short story, hoping to release a special CD with a booklet," says Terrell, dragging on a ever-present cigarette. "It had my original art in it too. I had all these ideas of cross-marketing, but my record label at the time [Virgin] said, 'you're out of your fucking mind.'"

But that didn't stop him. He recorded the 11-song "Taking the Jesus Pill" CD with one mic, combining old gospel samples and acoustic music. His then-manager suggested he write a play from it, which Terrell did, and it was accepted at the Berkshires, a prestigious East Coast theatre workshop.

"It was a disaster," relates Terrell of that workshopping misadventure. "The director told me there was no way I could do a play with dramatic scenes and a band playing a song, because 'you break the dramatic arc,' as he said. I argued, saying, 'I don't care about your theories. Fuck 'Oklahoma' and 'Westside Story,' I hate those fucking things, I don't know anything about theatre, but I know it can be done. There's a thing called a Greek Chorus, and I don't see a difference.'"

Cut to several years later, and what some have termed an "anti-musical" is at the King King every Sunday night, followed by two sets from the play's band (led by Terrell) in a musical journey known as Southern Revival. Guests including Mike Stinson have joined them onstage for post-play sets of covers, and in what must be the ultimate irony, the actor who plays Billy Joel at the Pantages' "Movin' Out" often joins the band onstage for some real musical fun.

The show has garnered numerous supporters, including Polly Parsons, who, in addition to mounting a successful tribute to her father this summer at the Universal Amphitheatre (“Return to Sin City: A Tribute to Gram Parsons”), is “Taking the Jesus Pill’s” producer. It’s neither strictly a play nor a traditional musical — the actors don’t sing and the band performs live throughout, advancing the plot and mood.

No problem, right?

“Well, theater people don’t take it seriously because we do it at a bar, and music people don’t want to go see plays, so it’s a weird thing to try to sell,” Terrell muses. “But my whole career has been that way. I think that’s a good thing, when you can’t categorize something.”

Parsons, who saw the first run of “Taking the Jesus Pill” in February and jokes that she would have “scrubbed floors to be in the show,” is a dancer in the performance. She also revels in its interactive aspects and how all corners of King King are used to stage scenes. “I love that the actors get in your personal space, but don’t drag you in with them,” she says. “But you don’t know that, so I love that there’s some discomfort and there’s that peripheral challenge.”

Coincidentally, the character of Tina, the sweetly tragic Preacher’s daughter, deftly rendered by Nikki McCauley, draws inspiration from Polly’s father. The actress was given Gram Parson’s music and photo and was told, for her character’s development, that “this is your artist.”

Still, Terrell reveals, “every character in the play — they’re all parts of myself. The original short story is about a guy who picks up a girl at a fireworks stand and takes her back to his motel room. They have sex, and when he wakes up, she’s gone. He goes to the window and starts fantasizing about her, and he imagines this life of where she came from and what happened to her and what will happen to her. At the same time, he’s looking inside himself and projecting himself into what she would be.”

The beginning of that story is the first song, “Motel Monologue” on the “Taking the Jesus Pill” CD, and in the seven records Terrell has made in his career-to-date, most deal with religious themes and the South. It’s understandable, as he was raised Baptist and Episcopalian in Sand Mountain, Alabama, and wanted to be a preacher as a young teen. “I would go to school and hand out [religious] tracts.”

But Terrell, who moved to L.A. in 1988 with rock star dreams, is hardly a zealot. Though he comes from a “normal, great family,” he’s logged time as a hard-living, hardscrabble, drinkin’ and chain-smokin’ guy. “All the madness and turmoil in my life has come from myself,” he admits. Yet he’s also very literate and literary, drawing inspiration from Southern writers including Flannery O’Connor, and reading intensively on a plethora of spiritual ideas and religions, including Gnosticism.

Terrell believes that “America is in a weird place with spirituality, but people are rediscovering spirituality, which I’ve been doing my whole life, so I think it’s a timely play for that. Questioning Christianity and what you believe — that’s what this play is about.”

And he channels those questions, along with his talents and turmoil, into “Taking the Jesus Pill.” His lifestyle, too, has helped the play. Terrell doesn’t have a car (his last one was stolen), preferring to walk around Hollywood and absorb its myths and magic. He threw out his TV two years ago, leaving him more motivated to write, make music and paint (much of his original artwork is used as screen projections in the play). And after many frustrating auditions for his main characters, it was drinking at Vine Street bar Daddy’s that Terrell found two of his leading actors in the club’s bartender (Kerrar) and waitress (McCauley). While some aspects of the play — from snake handling to a mansion fire to levitation and — have been creatively handled due to budget and practical restrictions (i.e., live snakes are dangerous), “Taking the Jesus Pill” doesn’t suffer for it. “I like the way it is now,” says Terrell, who tapes performances and has done more than 100 rewrites. “It has a certain rawness to it.”

Terrell, of course, has suffered through the usual peaks and valleys of honest bohemian creativity and self-doubt, but remains, as Casey Kasem would say, “reaching for the stars.” As the tattoo of the “Jesus Pill” logo on the inside of his left arm attests, Terrell takes his work to heart — and flesh — and this opus is proof positive.

[close window](#)