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Jesusmania!: The Bootleg Superstar of Gettysburg College

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Jesusmania!: The Bootleg Superstar of Gettysburg College

Description

In 1971, an illegal performance of the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar was staged at Gettysburg College. It was the spontaneous project of students, professors and a renegade seminarian. Performance rights were being negotiated, when suddenly legal action was threatened against any group staging the work before its Broadway premiere. The cast and crew put the show on anyway, and many hundreds attended. But the outlaw production drew the college administration and the Lutheran church into controversy. Drawing from original documents, recordings, and interviews with the cast, this book tells the behind-the-scenes story of the production.

Keywords

Jesus Christ Superstar, Gettysburg College, musical theater, counterculture, radical theater, 1970s

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Comments

The book's introduction is available by clicking the download link above.

INTRO

It's always the specific that helps us to understand the general.
– One of the performers

A number of people asked why I'd chosen to write a book on this subject. Trying to think it out, for them and for myself, I usually fumbled the answer. But I might have it now.

I think any historian is drawn to reconstruct an event for two reasons: one, it is unique; two, it is typical. Both fact and metaphor; both itself and something else. Though probably any event can be seen both ways, not all will repay the effort. So if you're lucky enough to discover an event that is compelling on both levels, you've struck gold. Thus, my interest in the *Jesus Christ Superstar* that was performed at Christ Chapel on the campus of Gettysburg College in the spring of 1971.

Most basically, what follows is the story of a modest musical production mounted by a handful of students, a few faculty members, and a seminarian at a small, mid-Atlantic liberal arts college forty-five years ago. More expansively, it is an attempt to examine, from what I hope is a novel perspective, a richly documented and heavily analyzed era the stimulations and pressures of which drew a multitude of responses from different people. It would be pompous, not to mention simply false, to claim epochal significance for the Gettysburg *Superstar*—a risk I'm keenly aware of this very day, which happens to be the anniversary of the Kent State massacre. But to view it in a historical vacuum would divest it of many well-earned meanings, while to ignore it altogether would be perverse: it is too good a story to let fall into oblivion.

At its best, the experimentation that occurred at Gettysburg College and places like it in the late 1960s and early 1970s resulted in a more robust relationship to the world beyond the campus; an enlarged sense of college life as community life; and a renewed conception of the academy as meeting ground of culture and history, creativity and rigor, the real and the ideal. At its *very* best—collaborative, alchemical, unrepeatable—it resulted in something like the Gettysburg *Superstar*. In one way, this production had nothing to do with the Vietnam War, with feminism, or with the end of the Sixties. In another way, it had much to do with them.

The individuals in this book, because they lived in a certain time, amid certain influences and events, faced a set of imperatives—of action,

energy, creativity, commitment—that were historic in scope and all but unprecedented in synchronicity. To a degree, their privileged placement on a fairly isolated, high-priced college campus buffered them from such imperatives; to a degree, it was exactly because of where they were that they felt the imperatives more forcefully and immediately than did other citizens. It was a time uniquely demanding of American youth, a time when even to “drop out” was to make a personal choice with social implications. The individuals in this book chose to make their *Superstar* in ways and for reasons that were entirely personal; but in so acting, all became, whether they sought to or not, peripheral players in a much larger drama.

If that doesn't answer the question of why I wanted to write a book, let me attempt this sideways approach. A favorite painting of mine since childhood is Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*. Painted about 1475, it shows the Holy Family under a shelter of stones, the Star of Jerusalem overhead. In the foreground has gathered a small group of people. “The figures,” wrote art historian Frederick Hartt, “are scattered loosely through this informal composition as if actually gathered before a family altar. Profiles and foreshortened views of faces are juxtaposed so as to create a ripple of activity throughout the crowd. Some figures are lost in contemplation of the mystery, some engaged in disputation about its meaning, some gazing outward toward the observer.” In the style of Renaissance painting, some of the faces in the crowd were those of actual people. One of them, Hartt speculated, belonged to the recently deceased Cosimo de' Medici, while another—off to the side, its gaze turned not to the magi but to the viewer—belonged to Botticelli himself.

Clearly one didn't need to be a Christian, or have any religious belief, to be haunted by this tableau, the power of which, it always seemed to me, lay not in the content but in the arrangement. I loved the painting not for what was at its center, but for its promise that if one looked *away* from the center—into the backgrounds, margins, peripheries—one might find a lifetime's worth of sustaining surprises. A king among commoners, say, or the artist looking at you as you looked at him. Or simply a sense of the life that has always teemed around those centrifugal forces which for most of history have been considered, in the narrowness of our vision, to be the only history that matters.

So, a long-winded answer to the original question. This book is a natural outgrowth from Botticelli. While the Sixties are at its center, its focus is on a piece of the life that existed in the background, at the margin, on the periphery, yet without which there would have been no center. I began this research because I was interested in an event. I continued it because I kept being surprised by what I found. Finally I wrote a book because in following the story I found a face looking back at me, and the face was mine.



I thank my wife, Kathy Berenson, for her unconditional support of my labors and fancies, which is to say my often digressive pursuit of an eccentric happiness.

This book is directly attributable to Professor Michael Birkner, alumnus of Gettysburg College and pillar of its History Department. At every stage, he has been the project's advisor and champion. To say it would be poorer without him is pointless: without him, it wouldn't exist.

It's been my great fortune these five years to work in Musselman Library, specifically the Special Collections and College Archives division. Director Carolyn Sautter, Digital Projects Director Catherine Perry, and Archivist Amy Lucadamo all encouraged and enabled me whenever and however they could. Robin Wagner, Dean of the Library, was a supporter from the beginning, and is directly responsible for getting this book into print. Her assistant, Miranda Wisor, was invaluable at key points, as was Melanie Fernandes, 2016 Gettysburg graduate and Barbara Holley Library Intern.

For the creativity and expertise she brought to this book's design, I thank Kate Brautigam. For affording me the use of crucial images, I thank Sheila Joy, Archives Assistant at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg; Ron and Howard Mandelbaum at Photofest in New York; and Peter Sando. For his critique of the text, I thank John Shaw. For his offstage support, I thank Ted Gilbert, Gettysburg College Class of 1967.

Among those who created and documented the Gettysburg *Superstar*, I must single out Mark Teich, Clay Sutton, and Larry Recla. Each was generous with time, memories, and artifacts; none ever sought to impose a proprietary interpretation of the events. The story might have gotten told without them, but it wouldn't have been nearly as much of a story. Most of the others who made *Superstar* happen consented to be interviewed, but those who didn't are no less to be thanked. The chief responsibilities I've felt have been to the facts as I found them, and to the realities of those who shared their memories with a stranger, trusting that he'd use them honestly and with some sensitivity.

To the reader, I offer the faith that you will come away understanding why I found it easy to become entranced by these people, this story. To the cast, band, and crew, I offer these words, from an Elton John song that was in the Top 20 the week the first planning session occurred: "I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do."

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