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## Let There Be Lightness

### Burt Rosenberg Makes 'Em Laugh, Think & Get Buddy-Buddy With God

*By Phil McCombs*

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Leaping and dancing, Burt Rosenberg, a big comedian in a zoot suit, black fedora, red-and-black shoes and colorful "coat of 100 neckties," jumps onstage to exuberant music, cheers and clapping.

"The blessed Virgin Mary was a Jewish mama," he quips. "A lot of people think she was a Catholic nun. [But] she was just like all Jewish mamas: 'My son, he walks on water for the goyim, but does he ever come by to visit me?' "

The crowd at the Son of David Congregation in Montgomery County loves it.

"Psalm 37 says, 'Delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart,' " Rosenberg continues. "The desires of your heart! And see, I wasn't raised in cultural Christ-inanity, so I didn't think it was a trick scripture!

"Some people, if they've been raised in Christ-inanity too long, they go, 'Yeah, but that's only if the desire of your heart is to do something you don't want to do.' "

Laughter, applause.

"I didn't believe in God," he says of his early dating days, "but I found out about prayin' and I'd say, 'O God, if there is a God -- and I don't think there is a God but if I'm wrong and there is a God -- please help me come up with a personality.' "

[enlarge photo](#)

"Joy is the serious business of heaven," says Burt Rosenberg, a comedian with a gift for bringing the sacred and silly together in a profound way. (Photos Sarah L. Voisin -- The Washington Post)

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It's the Burt Rosenberg show, the hottest divine shtick since King David danced into Jerusalem with the ark of God nearly 3,000 years ago,

contemporary two-hour sunburst of "Holy Chutzpah" springing from one of Rosenberg's deepest convictions.

"Joy is the serious business of Heaven."

In two decades of performing edgy, high-energy routines at arts festivals and revivals, churches and prisons ("I'm up there doing my shtick and there's the 'Son of Sam,' David Berkowitz, laughing his head off! -- and I wonder if my high school guidance counselor would be proud of me now"), the 58-year-old Washington native has gained a rep as one of America's premier spiritual humorists -- not that there are slews of them out there.

"It's a different kind of humor -- very funny and very deep," says Belva Hay of the Karitos Arts Conference in Illinois. "I've never met anybody who's had such an impact in such a special way."

"People are still talking about it," says James Watkins, pastor of New Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Hilton Head Island, S.C., where Rosenberg performed a few weeks ago. "Words just can't explain what he did for our church. The Holy Spirit was with him."

"At first you're trying to figure out whether it's legitimate, because it

nondenominational Living Word Christian Center in Chicago, where Rosenberg played to an audience of 3,500 last year. "But it's so biblically accurate, his approach and style so consistent, that he brings you to a place of surrender."

Larry Andes of the annual Fishnet Festival in Front Royal, Va., where Rosenberg has performed before audiences of 5,000 and more, says he "never resorts to off-color humor. Proverbs 17:22 says 'A merry heart doeth good like a medicine,' and Burt brings some very wholesome therapy."

Nor does his act bear any relation to the so-called "Toronto Blessing" --

Canadian church and swept through many congregations before folks figured out it might be less a godly thing than just plain nuts.

Indeed, Rosenberg's performance -- a lighthearted but touching mix of personal testimony, upbeat songs (" 'Only Yooou' -- tell me, who could this be about other than the Creator of the Universe?"), dance, riffs on popular culture and gentle jabs at "religiosity" -- is based in Scripture

In fact, hundreds of pastors have allowed Rosenberg to do just that -- shorter versions of his act -- during services.

"On the surface you're hearing what sounds like humor," says Jack

Scottsdale, Ariz., where Rosenberg performed last month. "But under the surface you realize there is a very powerful spiritual message here about

Congregation, a gathering of Messianic Jews -- okay, okay, so they're Christians -- where, says pastor Scott Brown, Psalm 150's command to praise God with "dance" is enacted in "the very ancient worship form of Davidic praise dance" during Saturday services.

"Burt's laid hold of something that's been missed in most ministries," Brown says, "and that's humor and joy as a vehicle for the life of God. He has a way of uncovering the gnarly love of God . . . the kind that doesn't speak King James, that cuts right through to the kishkas."

performance, folks are dancing in the aisles.

"I love to frolic with God, don't you?" he declares. "A lot of people think that's controversial. They say, 'You're getting a little buddy-buddy with God, aren't you?'"

"They're into the mean-old-man-in-the-sky joy, you know what I mean?" -- then, voice deep -- "'Go ahead, have a good time. Go ahead. I saw that! That'll be enough of that! Don't be doin' that again. Don't make me come down there.'"

In his riff on Psalm 37, he's as nuanced as an Anglican priest. "I said, 'Wow! What are the desires of my heart?' See, it takes a while to know the desires of your heart -- not just your whims and your lusts and what you think, your scattered neurotransmitter-pathway bonfire, but the desires of your *heart*."

"I said, 'I'd like to travel around the country and have some laughs.' I didn't know it was a stupid thing to pray for. 'Have some laughs, and invite people to come into the *is* who are not already in the *is*.' And God said: Okay."

Irving Israel Rosenberg, a gentle, hard-working man with a wonderful sense of humor ("He lived life with a wink; he was always able to find that sunbeam -- because he was looking for it"), was managing a Mr. Car

Dec. 10, 1968.

An uncle took Rosenberg to the scene. "There were cops all over the place," he recalls now, sitting in the stillness of his sparsely furnished Arlington home. "'Are you the son?' one of them asked. 'Yeah.' Then he didn't say anything, and I said, 'Where's my dad?'"

" 'You don't want to see him,' the cop said. It was like a punch in the stomach. I asked, 'Is he alive?' The cop looks away, and goes, 'No.' "

"I just lost it. I started crying, screaming. It was the worst possible thing, horrific. They'd bashed his brains out with a lead pipe. I thought of the horror of his last hour." Later, a witness died. Nobody was ever convicted.

"I really kind of fell off the Earth," Rosenberg says. " 'What are we doing here,' I asked myself. 'If this can happen, where is the hope?' " "

His had been the bright world of a large Jewish family with plenty of humor and endearing emotional clutter. "We were like 'Fiddler on the Roof.' My father was one of seven brothers and sisters and they had businesses around town. When they'd get together it was like the Marx Brothers. "When my father had owned a little grocery store, and we lived above it, one of my uncles would come in and they'd joke around. He'd go through the lettuce bin, looking for the perfect head of lettuce and throwing the others over his head onto the floor.

"My grandfather, Morris Rosenberg, was a character, too. He was a shoemaker. Sometimes when I was a little kid he'd come over and bring us two hats and two canes so my brother and I could do vaudeville shows in the living room."

He shakes his head. He's crying. "My Dad," he says softly, "was a joy-bringer."

After that, Rosenberg began a painful spiritual quest. A University of Maryland graduate, he was managing bands and doing nightclub acts. Now he began taking drugs, looking for an answer.

Washington.' I was looking for the source of that energy and power that exploded onstage, so I'd hang around backstage with James Brown and Jackie Wilson and the Supremes and Gladys Knight and the Pips. I'd ask questions.

"And I found out they were just people, sitting around waiting for the next show."

He became a monk in a Hindu ashram, but it didn't satisfy. Back in the

cartoons on the place mat, and a kid said, "Draw me."

"I felt an energy -- ugly, demonic, hateful, intense. There was a ghastliness and a viciousness in what I was drawing. These kids looked at it and got scared. 'Let's get the hell out of here,' they said.

"So I'm sitting there asking myself, 'Where am I at? What spirit am I living from?' And I realized I must choose the spirit that I'm operating from."

He kept running into "the Jesus people. Once in New York, in the Port Authority terminal, there was this woman with a big sign that said, 'Jesus Saves.' She comes over to me and says, 'Are you doing the will of God in your life?'

" 'I'm trying to, sister,' I said. 'Don't try,' she said. 'Surrender!' That got in. Three words. I heard it."

Washington in February, 1978.

"Now what?" he wondered.

An agent had booked him for a lucrative nightclub act -- the standard profanity-and-sex routine. Wondering if he should still do it, he called a Christian pal. "He says, 'The Lord is presently living and you can ask Him a question and He'll give you an answer. It's called prayer.'"

"So I said my first audible prayer: 'Lord, let me know whether or not you want me to do this gig -- not my will, but thine be done.' And I just sensed there was no life coming up under this gig.

"It was my first answer to prayer."

With more prayer and meditation, "I began to get ideas. I was tapped into the creative spirit of the universe, and He gave me the 'Holy Chutzpah' idea."

Now it's his life. Rosenberg was engaged a few years back, but realized that "if you're single you can be about some crazy things you can't pull off if you're married.

"I love what I'm doing, it's my fondest desire. I mean, what better than traipsing the planet, making people laugh?

"What better?"

In his act tonight, Rosenberg humorously recounts painful elements of his personal quest. Everybody's laughing.

Then, gently: "Life is scientifically designed by the Creator not to work, apart from Him. It's a setup! Everything you have to go through -- the what-it-ain't -- is just to get to the what-it-is. He leads us to what-it-is by the default of what-it-ain't.

what-it-ain't. We go to Him and say, 'I'm depleted, tell me what it *is*.' And He says, 'I am the *is*. I AM THAT I AM.' " As God put it to Moses in Exodus 3:14.

By the end, everyone's dancing, including pastor Brown, who likes to explain that God's a "passionate lover. That's where the whole dance

routine comes in. God is actively pursuing a romance with humankind.

"You read the Psalms, and you see the passion of King David -- almost like reading someone's love letters. Thank God he raised up such a man as that to show us the heart of worship."

And so it is, too, with Burt Rosenberg -- this W.C. Fields of the Holy Spirit, this cheerful strutting Groucho of the soul, this Fiddler on the Roof of spiritual nuance.

This son of David.

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