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Jerry Garcia on *I Believe*

MILES O'BRIEN RILEY

In January 1976, I interviewed Jerry Garcia for the show *I Believe*, broadcast on San Francisco's KPIX-TV. We taped the interview on January 19 and the final, edited show first aired at the end of the month. Talking to Jerry was such an enjoyable experience. I'm not a Grateful Dead follower but I am a fan. And I knew that Jerry would be a great person for the show. The whole motivation of *I Believe* was that things like music are inherently spiritual. And people who do music—or theater or drama or literature—very often have a motivation that is deeply and wonderfully humanizing and spiritual. The show was a way to explore that with a variety of interesting people.

That was a view I learned in my training. When I finished seminary in California, they sent me to Rome for four years and I studied under some fabulous theologians who went way beyond the Bible and the basics of what we think of as religion or spirituality or the supernatural. I spent four magical years under Bernard Lonergan¹, who explained spirituality as intelligible emanations, the very action of our minds to think about something and judge it, bless it, and see that it is good. His analogy is that theology is just searching for language. We can get stuck on the language but the reality supersedes and precedes language. Music fits with that view, to my way of thinking.

Music has always been an important part of my life. In 1952, when I entered the seminary to begin studying for the priesthood, there was a big double bass that nobody could play. And we had a very industrious of class with several musicians, but no one played bass, so I took it up. We

used jamming to let off steam. And then by the time I got to Rome, there were tons of musicians. I have a deep voice, so I sang second bass in the church choirs. And so the bass kind of reflected my life for twelve years in the seminary, and then into priesthood.

One of my classmates in Rome was David Tracy.² He's a top theologian who taught for many years at the University of Chicago. And we used to talk late at night and dream about bringing media, especially television, together with scholarship, particularly theological reflection.

When I became a parish priest, the '60s were just beginning. It was San Francisco, and none of the kids were going to church. So I used sports to reach the kids, but that was only twelve to twenty at a time. Then in my second year, I hit on the idea of music: I love to write music, I love to sing, and I began writing. There was a statewide competition at that time that rewarded the best youth musical group performance. And so I started doing that as a way to reach the kids. A wonderful Methodist pastor, who was very prominent in San Francisco, taught me that the only chance I had with teenagers who were battling drugs and so forth was to provide positive alternatives. It's not going to work to tell them they're going to go to jail or flunk out of school. But if I could say to them, how would you like to be in a musical group or production, that was your draw.

And very shortly thereafter, Don Curran was appointed as general manager of ABC Channel 7 and he gave a talk at the Sierra Club to a Catholic group that sponsored vocations to ministry. He said, "You guys should be more involved in the mass media." One of the guys at the talk came home from that luncheon and called me and that started the Communications Office for the diocese.

Nobody knew what it was or what it should do, but the idea was that we might get a show on Channel 7, KGO, which was one of the very top stations in our market, if not the top station. So I called KGO and they invited me down. Don Curran welcomed me, introduced me to the program director, Herb Victor, and they became two of my best friends for the next thirty years.

That was the beginning. They said, "We've got a public service, community affairs show, half an hour a week, replayed on Saturday afternoon; would you like that?" And I said, great. Herb said, "What are you

going to call the program?” We had just done a youth retreat, and they called it, “What on earth are you doing, for heaven’s sake?” I said, “That’s the name of our program: ‘What On Earth Are You Doing For Heaven’s Sake?’” And we were off and running.

That was the precursor to *I Believe*. The show ran from 1974 to 1979, starting as a KPIX Public Affairs show before getting picked up for local syndication. We interviewed dozens and dozens of interesting people, from musicians and entertainers to politicians, sports stars, and religious figures. It was a lot of work but it was rewarding and also just great fun. Looking back, I can’t believe how big a part of my own life—my ministry and priesthood—music and media became. It shouldn’t be surprising, but it kind of is. And *I Believe* was a major part of that, for which I’m grateful.

Note

This transcription of a May 11, 2022, telephone interview with Miles O’Brien Riley has been edited for clarity and flow.

1. Considered one of the foremost theologians of the twentieth century, Bernard Joseph Francis Lonergan (1904–1984) was a Canadian Jesuit priest and philosopher especially known for his work on Thomas Aquinas.

2. David W. Tracy (b. 1939) is Andrew Thomas Greeley and Grace McNichols Greeley Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Catholic Studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

MILES O’BRIEN RILEY earned doctorates in theology and communications from Gregorian University in Rome and UC Berkeley. He served as priest at several parishes in the Bay Area and was assigned to Mission Dolores in San Francisco when this show was taped. The founder of the Communications Center for the Archdiocese of San Francisco, he published fourteen books and hundreds of articles and reviews. He also produced twelve films and 1,500 television shows, and hosted 4,000 radio programs. He received three Emmys and ten national Gabriel Awards for outstanding radio and television productions.