

Films

Portrait of the Con Artist as a Young Man

BY THOMAS MEEHAN

Marjoe, a sleazy but fascinating documentary about a twenty-eight-year-old, smalltime evangelist named Marjoe Gortner, is like one of those as-told-to Hollywood confession books that were making the best-seller lists a few years ago. Instead of to Gerold Frank and his tape recorder, however, Marjoe has told his story into the lens of a 35 mm. movie camera, and he and the directors of the picture, Howard Smith and Sarah Kernochan, may indeed have stumbled upon a new genre of film—the *True Confessions* movie. Next year: Eva Gabor.

What Marjoe has to confess is that he's been a hypocritical rat fink who hasn't for a moment believed in the fire-and-brimstone, "thank you, Jesus" sermons that he's preached for years to holy-roller audiences around the Bible Belt. And that, overcome with guilt and a yearning to break into Las Vegas-style show business, he's now getting forever out of the evangelist racket. For Marjoe Gortner, there will be no more hustling money out of the black and poor-white dupes.

He's two-faced, Marjoe admits with a boyish grin, and in the film, which was made last year during his six-week farewell tour around the circuit, we get to see both of his faces. That is, the picture is mostly made up of *cinéma-vérité* footage of revival meetings—at which Marjoe, preaching into a microphone while strutting and wriggling about like Mick Jagger, cons the crowds not only into accepting Jesus in their hearts but also into parting with up to \$20 for red-checked "prayer scarves" that look as though they might have cost a quarter apiece in Woolworth's—intercut with straight-on shots of Marjoe telling the truth about himself ("I'm bad, but not evil") while lounging about in motel rooms between performances.

The motel-room moments would appear to make it certain that he'll never be tempted to go back into preaching—once word about *Marjoe* gets around

in holy-roller circles, he'll clearly be *persona non grata* forever under every revivalist tent from the Florida panhandle to Los Angeles. Which is one of the most fascinating things about *Marjoe*—it's a portrait of a con artist who is burning his bridges permanently behind him.

Coming onto the stage in a hip, Italian-cut suit, a flashy black-and-white sports shirt, and an American-flag tie, Marjoe seems to be so obviously a con man that it's difficult at first for us to believe that anybody could possibly be taken in by him. But, we gradually realize, this is part of the point of the picture—for those whose religion forbids them to go to the movies or even to watch TV, the revival meeting is a spirit-lifting form of entertainment, and at some level of consciousness the holy rollers are aware of the fact that they're being conned. They don't really mind, so long as they get to see a good show. It's hard to say whether or not Marjoe would have put on the same act or the revivalists would have behaved so hysterically (fainting, rolling on the ground, etc.) if the cameras hadn't been on them. This is the built-in Catch-22 of all *cinéma-vérité* films—one never knows how much the cameras influence the actions of those being filmed.

Perhaps the best moments in the picture come at its beginning when we see old 16 mm. clips of Marjoe as "a boy evangelist" on the revivalist circuit in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He is the son of a pair of broken-down, tent-show preachers who named him Marjoe, a Desilu-like combination of Mary and Joseph they'd dreamed up, and who then proclaimed to the world at large that their son had been personally called by Christ to spread the word of the Lord. In short, they used Marjoe, who began preaching at the age of four, as a come-on to attract crowds to their tent meetings. And he preached on the circuit for ten years, during which time, Marjoe claims in the picture, his parents made \$3 million out of him.

The film's most poignant bit is a clip of Marjoe, at the age of four and a half, serving as the minister at the marriage of a nervous, red-faced sailor and his heartbreakingly ugly bride. Tiny, frail, curly-haired, and jug-eared, Marjoe recites the wedding ceremony

in a piping, mechanical voice, and he looks visibly relieved when he gets to the end of it without having made a mistake. It had taken him months to memorize the ceremony, the grown-up Marjoe now explains into the camera—his mother had drilled him for hour after hour. And when he'd get it wrong, Marjoe tells us, she would hold his head under a water faucet or smother his face with a pillow—any sort of punishment that wouldn't leave marks on him for the holy rollers to notice.

Boy evangelists, like boy sopranos, are evidently pretty much washed up once puberty comes along, and at the age of fifteen Marjoe ran away from his parents to take up residence with "an older woman" in Southern California. He hung around Los Angeles for a couple of years, went briefly to college, dropped out, and then at twenty went back into evangelism, apparently because he didn't know of any other way to make a living. And, despite all of his guilt about not believing in the old-time religion he preached (even as a child, he hadn't believed in it), he might still be working the revival circuit if he hadn't run into Smith and Kernochan, whose idea it was to make the film we're now seeing. Marjoe immediately agreed—the movie, he realized, would at once destroy his career as a bush-league Oral Roberts and be a full-length showcase for his acting and singing talents. His consuming ambition, Marjoe tells us, is to be a pop singer like Mick Jagger, who is his idol, and on the evidence of *Marjoe*, in which he does some gospel singing, he certainly seems at least as talented as, say, Englebert Humperdinck.

Marjoe, by the way, is fairly short—only eighty-eight minutes long—and so you can go out for an evening, see the picture, have a couple of cheeseburgers at McDonald's, and still get home in time to catch the last half of the Billy Graham Crusade on TV. Anyway, though the picture is itself something of a con job, a promotional hype for Marjoe's prospective show-biz career, it's worth seeing. □

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1i & 4j, *Paradise Lost*; 2g & 6h, *Passage to India*; 3k & 7l, *Winter's Tale*; 5b & 12a, *Portrait of a Lady*; 8d & 10c, *Invisible Man*; 9e & 11f, *Marble Faun*.

Music

Soul at the Center

BY CARMAN MOORE

The fascinating thing about Soul at the Center was that it was something special without being anything too much out of the ordinary. I am speaking about a fourteen-day, sixteen-event parade of quite typical professional black performing art that virtually blew the roofs off Lincoln Center in much the same way as it rocks the Apollo Theatre on 125th Street, whips tornadoes through Latin dance halls from Boston to Tierra del Fuego, and routs entire armies of Satan in almost every Afro-American church each Sunday. The special aspects were that somebody—Ellis Haizlip, producer of the TV show *Soul* with New York deejay Gerry Bledsoe—decided to present some of those art forms and artists in tandem; that the presentation was sought by and aided by that mighty fortress and port in the storm of ancient European music, Lincoln Center; and that the hopes both of the soul and of the center seem to have been so well realized.

I would hazard the guess that the soul hoped for some official downtown recognition of black art-making as a fine and serious (without the wrinkles) American cultural force. Lincoln Center, on the other hand—with no Mahlers apparent on the classical music horizon, uneasy about the European museum image grumbled about by blacks and whites alike, and with the summer implicitly a time when New York's poor (you know who) are left in town—must have hoped to make image points, to tap a new audience in an unspecific sense, and—let's face it—both to learn something and to behave relevantly toward a stage of cultural history that is turning black and/or Spanish, little by little. With halls at least two-thirds filled and with audiences that looked to me to be two-thirds black (and one-third young whites), the very first blush of a new friendship seems possible.

Among the performers only Nina Simone was a name that you might consider a household word—and even

this may be a careless statement. There was no Aretha, Ray Charles, Leontyne, Duke, Count, James Brown, or even (chancy again) Alvin Ailey Dance Company. But gospel superstars James Cleveland, Shirley Caesar, and Marion Williams were there. Poets Nikki Giovanni and Felipe Luciano, well known to that growing number of those who care, were there. Latin conga-playing legend Mongo Santamaria, rhythm 'n' blues stars Donny Hathaway, Esther Phillips, and Jerry Butler, and the extraordinary category defiers Roland Kirk and Taj Mahal were all at the center, giving a best that kept the critics diving deep for new superlatives.

To be sure, there were low points, such as the show headed by the Chairmen of the Board, who have recorded hits but who just didn't show the richness of voice or the imagination that was the norm of the series. There was a fair-to-promising performance by Linda Hopkins, gospel-trained Broadway star of *Inner City*, whose strong, straight mezzo voice and dramatic sense saw her through *Inner City's* hit "Deep in the Night" but left some choruses of "Send Me Some Lov'ing" and "Birth of the Blues" rather aimlessly embellished. There were other mid-career groups of the rhythm 'n' blues variety that never got into flight. But the general artistic level was extremely high, and Soul at the Center's main message to the outside world seemed to be that black art is dynamic relationships between artists and audiences, whether caustic, such as when a bored element got vocal about its dislike of some of the complex but fine percussion work of the M'Boom ensemble, or in perfect sync, such as when James Cleveland and the New York Community Choir had hit about the tenth time through the gospel classic "How I Got Over," the choir was disarrayed all over the Tully Hall stage, Cleveland was beaming, and the audience was on its feet swaying.

Artistically, there were few surprises. Nina Simone—the popular singer of songs with perhaps the greatest scope of anyone before the public today outside of Sarah Vaughn and Ray Charles—kept rising to unreasonable heights of expression, past song to the point in "The King of Love Is Dead" where an angry speech right in the middle of the third chorus became an esthetic necessity, one that only continued the

music on another plane just as music continues real lives within the daily black world.

It should start becoming clear to folks by now that black performing arts are experiencing some kind of golden age. Poetry, dance, clothing design, hairstyling, some ritual theater from Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theater, and music from many areas were all covered, not always brilliantly but characteristically with style (e.g., gospel concerts were presented as church services complete with prayers and the chance of souls being saved). It may be a permanent state; it may not. It always seems to me that church is the key and that, should the fundamentalist churches pass into history, black performing art would eventually experience some kind of crisis. At each of the Soul at the Center events I was continually impressed by how much church-ritual esthetic was being tapped by even the most complex performers and by how totally congregationlike the audience behavior was for almost every event. All those gospel-trained gymnastic voices (one male soloist hit an E above high C), some of them singing rhythm 'n' blues style; all of those "preacheresque" snorts and squeals out of Kirk's horns; the perfect sense of repetition's spiritual power; and the flow of energies from stage to audience and back to stage in the community interest of getting electricity into everybody's body—all point, at this date at any rate, back to the old rugged cross. Haizlip and Bledsoe were hip to all this and brought gospel music right up front in the series.

I keep imagining in stranger moods that the center might find itself stuck someday with an army of soul devotees. I hear involved audiences cheering the "Liebestod" music on to its mightiest climax with cries of "amen." I dimly see audiences joining in on the choral movement of the Ninth Symphony and an entranced blood member jump up on stage and add a vocal variation to those written. Or might they check out the orchestra's repertory and, bored, leave the Center's Finest to dry up like a raisin in the sun? Who knows? What is not just musing is the fact that the real soul thing came into its center and had a rich time there digging art that they have been used to for a long time. □