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Bob Hieronimus obsesses over symbols, esoteric teachings, and the paranormal. Is he the one who doesn't get it—or are we? BY JIM BURGER
THE HIERONIMUS CODE
Bob Hieronimus obsesses over symbols, esoteric teachings, and the paranormal. Is he the one who doesn’t get it—or are we?

BY JIM BURGER, PHOTOGRAPHY DANIEL BEDELL.
IT’S NEARLY 8 P.M.
ON A SUNDAY NIGHT, AND BOB HIERONIMUS IS SCURRYING AROUND THE BASEMENT RADIO STUDIO OF HIS OWINGS MILLS HOME.

As he has for the past 22 years, he’ll be broadcasting his unconventional take on the world. He settles into his chair and places headphones over his ears; his wife Zohara (or “Zoli”) enters the room surrounded by three barking dogs. She sits down at a second microphone and, almost on cue, the dogs fall silent, curl up at her feet, and go to sleep.

Behind the soundproof glass, executive producer Laura Curtner works frenetically setting sound levels. At the top of the hour, following a recorded introduction by reggae musician Ziggy Marley and the show’s theme music—“Egyptian Sun” by the local band Tesla—a—the ships go live. Dr. Bob Hieronimus and 21st Century Radio are on the air.

The duo’s conversation bounces from subject to subject. First, Bob notes that the radio show, broadcast on WCRN, is “the longest running radio show on the paranormal, UFOs, alternative healing, and alternative energies in America and, perhaps, the western world.”

Next, they speculate about a passage in Alice Bailey’s book *Esoteric Healing* (published more than half a century ago), which cites four U.S. cities as “areas of light shining forth upon the physical plane.” The cities are Chicago, Cleveland, Rochester, and Baltimore.

From there, talk jumps to the possibility of starting a bus tour of local occult sites such as the Battle Monument that appears on the city seal. Then, they wonder aloud about a possible relationship between underground nuclear tests and earthquakes. And that’s just the first 10 minutes. There’s still one hour and 50 minutes to go.

To the 66-year-old Hieronimus, this is what radio should be. “Most radio isn’t set up to have an intelligent conversation,” he says.

Hieronimus’s brand of intelligent conversation may sound like crazy talk to some, but his views have become increasingly mainstream. The blockbuster success of Dan Brown’s novels and films—which are steeped in esoteric symbolism and cryptic intrigue—helped pave the way. “Brown plays fast and loose with history,” says Hieronimus, who prides himself on factual accuracy. “But that doesn’t bother me. He’s built a bridge to a greater audience.”

To a lesser degree, so has Hieronimus, who’s been popping up on TV screens with some frequency these days. Since 2006, he’s appeared on the National Geographic Channel (Secrets of the Freemasons), the Discovery Channel (a three-part series on the Freemasons), and The History Channel (*Decoding the Past: Secrets of the Dollar Bill*). Guy Ritchie (Sherlock Holmes director and former Madonna husband) also filmed Bob and Zoh for a documentary he’s doing on spirituality and secrets. Bob even turned up on a Fox News segment talking about Dan Brown and the Illuminati.

And that’s the key to Hieronimus’s success. It’s hard to really pigeonhole him. Is he extreme left? Extreme right? Just plain extreme?

His latest book, *The United Symbolism of America*, won praise from the likes of Willie Nelson and Donald Grindel, Jr., chair of American studies at SUNY Buffalo, who called it “a must read.” A recent talk by Hieronimus on our nation’s symbols at New York’s School for the Visual Arts drew praise from film professor Gene Stavis, who rated the presentation “up there with other guest lecturers such as Sean Penn, Oliver Stone, and Meryl Streep.”

There’s more to Hieronimus than meets the eye (Egyptian, Masonic, or otherwise). He’s an accomplished painter—with commissioned murals in high-profile locations around the city—an art car pioneer, an expert on Negro League baseball and The Beatles, a rabid fan of Tolkien and Hank Williams, and something of asei-ter to boot.

Get to know him and you might notice a coherent philosophy connecting his far-ranging, seemingly random interests. He’s more down to earth than one might think, and, as it turns out, there’s something of a method to his madness. Call it The Hieronimus Code.

ASK AROUND ABOUT HIERONIMUS and opinions generally range from whimsical to wacky. “Bob Hieronimus is like a little kid,” says Eastern Shore architect and painter Chuck Knopp, who’s known of Hieronimus for 20 years. “He really

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murals in Hampden, Woodberry, and inside Lexington Market and the War Memorial Building. Forecast magazine called him "one of the country's best muralists," and William Donald Schaefer put him in charge of the art committee for the city's bicentennial celebration. "Mayor Schaefer gave me the best advice I ever received," says Hieronymus. "He told me, 'Surround yourself with women smarter than you are.'"

HIERONYMUS MET ZOHARA MEYERHOPF in 1975. Rebecca Hoffberger, founder of the American Visionary Art Museum, knew both of them. Hoffberger remembers Hieronymus as "a brilliant young muralist impressed by the vision of the Founding Fathers. It was a rarity to see someone his age who was so knowledgeable and so enthusiastic about the Founding Fathers' life and death commitment to revolution and real change."

His interest in the Founders wasn't some passing, Bicentennial-inspired fancy. Hoffberger had been studying the Founders for a decade and admired their "intellect, spiritual openness, courage, insight, diplomacy, and inventiveness."

Zoh was a kindred spirit and came from a prominent and philanthropic Baltimore family; the symphony hall is named after her grandfather, Joseph. "I grew up in a house of strong personalities," she recently said. "My mother used to say I was 'one of four only children.' I also grew up with a love of America and its symbols, so my life before I met Bob was in preparation for meeting Bob."

By that time, he'd furthered his studies and founded the Aquarian University of Maryland (AUM), a state-approved school of esoteric learning at Roscombe Mansion, just north of the city. According to Roscombe's website, AUM "offered certiﬁcates in Religious Metaphysics, Occult Sciences, and the Mystical Arts" at that time and continues "supporting alchemical endeavors which unite mankind."

Zoh became one of Bob's students in 1979 and graduated with flying colors. "They only married in 1980 and have a daughter, Anna. 23. (Bob also has two children from a previous marriage: Plato, 38, and Maris, 35.) In 1984, Zoh founded The Roscombe Mansion Community Health Center devoted to holistic healing. She worked to raise money, and even wonders about a future game together and suggests seats where she might catch a foul ball. Day shakes her head. "If I want a ball, I just go down to the dugout and take one," she says, before hugging Hieronymus and thanking him for the eggs.

AFTER SAYING GOODBYE TO GERALDINE, Hieronymus wants an Irish coffee and a hamburger from The James Joyce Pub in Harbor East. He points the Rolls downtown and turns up Dylan's "Desolation Row."

The car drives considerably less attention than Hieronymus's 1984 bio-fueled Mercedes-Benz, which he painted from bumper to bumper with images and symbols associated with the founding of the United States. A year later, he's painted seven vehicles, including a Volkswagen bus called the "Woodstock bus," because it was part of an iconic photo from the festival. (Last year, a toy company produced a die-cast metal replica of the bus that sells for $250.)

Such "art cars" may be more accepted today than in the 1950s when Hieronymus started painting vehicles, but he says the Mercedes never fails to turn heads and, on occasion, raise ire. "Blue-haired ladies from Baltimore County seem to get particularly upset," he says, laughing. "They get to roll down my window and say 'You moron, you paint your car!'"

He looks at Zoh, and she smiles and nods in agreement.

HIERONYMUS LOADS A WICKER BASKET full of large brown eggs in the back of the car before he keeps—into the back of the car. rolls Royce. Steering the car down Park Heights Avenue, he listens to a Bob Dylan CD and smokes a Victor Sinclair cigar. He parks in front of a red brick apartment building in West Baltimore.

He emerges with the name "Day," a nickname Hieronymus knocks on the door. A smiling, African-American woman answers, and, before Hieronymus can hand her the eggs, she hugs and kisses him, and pulls him inside. She is Geraldine Day, widow of famed Negro League pitcher Leon Day. He's making a good play to have joined the Rockies in 1994. Leon, suffering from serious heart trouble, asked Hieronymus: "See that lady going in the kitchen? I love her. Promise you'll look after her."

Hieronymus, who served on the Negro League Baseball Players Association board of directors and had been a tireless advocate for Day's inclusion in the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, promised he would.

It was Hieronymus who held Day's hand on March 7, 1996, and told him he'd been elected into the Hall. Day died within the week, and Hieronymus and Geraldine have been close ever since. Geraldine recalls the hours after her husband's death, with funeral expenses looming. "Bob took care of everything, everything," she says. "He insisted. He is the kindest man. He has the kindest heart. Leon told me, 'Baby, he's a good man."

Hieronymus and Geraldine sit and talk about the Orioles prospects for the upcoming season. Day quotes her late husband, "Good pitchers stop good hitters." She looks wistful and wonders about a future game together and suggests seats where she might catch a foul ball. Day shakes her head. "If I want a ball, I just go down to the dugout and take one," she says, before hugging Hieronymus and thanking him for the eggs.

Freelancer Jim Burger is an occasional contributor to Baltimore.
Hieronymus: Artist and Philosopher of the Occult

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