



# jesco

## **A LIVING JACK TALE OF EPIC PROPORTIONS**

**BY BIANCA SPRIGGS**

*The Devil studied a minute, grabbed up some tongs,  
reached in one of his furnaces and got hold of a hot coal.  
Edged over 'side the gate and handed the tong-handles  
out the bars, says, "Here, old man. You just take this  
chunk of fire and go on off somewhere else—  
and start you a hell of your own.*

—Richard Chase, *American Folk Tales and Songs*

Of all the "Jack Tales" I've ever come across, my favorite has always been "Wicked John and the Devil." There are a myriad of versions of the story, but essentially John (or Jack depending on where you heard it) is a blacksmith who's pretty darn mean except to strangers. In fact, one such stranger turns out to be in disguise and in the wish-granting business. John lands himself three wishes and ends up asking for ways to further his meanness without saving a single wish for his soul.

In the end, the Devil is so worried he's about to lose his reputation to John, he sends for the blacksmith without waiting for him to die first, but John outsmarts all three devils who've been sent to fetch him. Finally, when John does die, he's rejected at both the gates of Heaven and Hell and left to wander around with only a coal of hell-fire to keep him company.

# THE VIRAL JESCO

Last month, Jesco White and company came to Lexington to play a show with regional favorites, Sunday Valley. Several days prior there was a viewing of Jesco's 1991 cult classic documentary, "Dancing Outlaw," and there are plenty of clips floating around on YouTube for a person to get an idea of what they might be in for.

I have to admit, I am, like many folks, captivated by the Jesco White on film. Jesco's an alluring storyteller. You hang onto every word, even if you're not really sure where you're going to end up, whether it's smack dab in the middle of a story about fisticuffs, addiction, or domestic strife (including one of the more well-known bits, the one where he's holding a butcher knife to his woman's throat over "sloppy, slimy eggs").

Maybe it was the full moon. Maybe it was the hundreds of people sweating together in the dark, the nucleus of which was about five hammered guys who were mostly entertained by their own rough-housing. Maybe it was the plastic gallon full of moonshine being passed through the crowd, but the evening was turning a bit nightmarish in terms of atmosphere to go along with what would be the tragic spectacle of Jesco's performance onstage.

Between the lighting, the fog machine, the surreal video of flames and fireworks, the shuffling dance, the garbled ramble, the flicking tongue, the lifted shirt revealing tattoos and scars on an old man's body, it was almost sensory overload. Some people left after ten minutes, some after an hour. Much of the crowd was roaring in approval, egging him on, and Jesco himself appeared to be having a great time when he wasn't being carted off stage by family members or his tour manager (the producer of the more recent documentary which debuted at Sundance in 2009, "The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia"). Someone on Facebook the next day aptly likened paying money to watch Jesco perform to watching a one-man gladiator match, in other words, paying money to watch a man kill himself.

Jesco White, along with the Ayatollah Khomeini, was the original Old Spice Man. They were viral. VHS was the drug of choice for Jesco fans, just as Ayatollah fans mainlined the audiocassette.

Tapes were passed. And legends were built. Like all cults, the road passed through Six Degrees of Tom Arnold.

Here's a guide to the material and the songs about Jesco and his family.

## Video

Jesco is the son of D. R. (Donald Ray) White, the late famed mountain dancer, featured in the film "Talking Feet," who hailed from Boone County, W. Va., and was murdered in 1985.

Featured on the PBS series a "Different Drummer," Jesco is the topic of the first viral smash. Among other scenes, features his classic footing to Ozark Mountain Daredevils "If You Want To Go To Heaven," across a wooden bridge with cassette player hoisted.

1991 "Dancing Outlaw" by Jacob Young released. Passed VHS to VHS to VHS to Tom Arnold. Invited to appear on Roseanne by Tom Arnold 1994 Trip is subject of "Dancing Outlaw II: Jesco Goes To Hollywood" by Jacob Young.

2006 Jescifest a two-day festival to raise money for water and firewood for Jesco for the coming winter, held in Hinton, W. Va. (selected video moments on YouTube).

2009 "The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia," by Johnny Knoxville, screens at the Tribeca Film Festival.

2009 "White Lightnin'" a film based on (but really, "inspired by") the Jesco White story, written by "Vice" magazine creators Eddy Moretti and Shane Smith, and directed by Dominic Murphy premiered at Sundance.

## Music

Atomic Bitchwax "Shitkicker" (quotes Jesco White)

Beck "Loser" (music video features

short

Jesco White dancing clip)

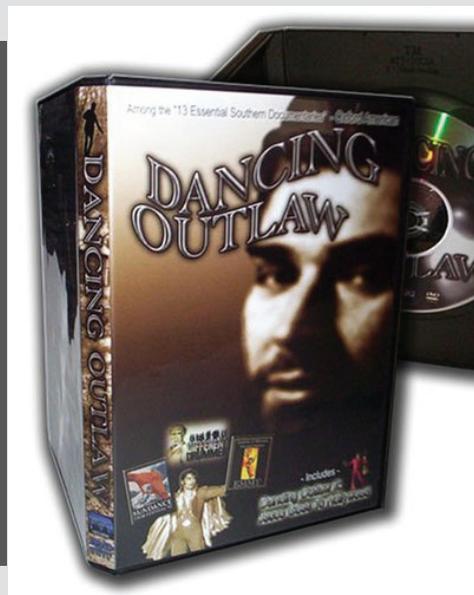
Big and Rich "Comin' To Your City"

Ekoostik Hookah "Dancin' Outlaw"

Hank Williams III "The Legend of D. Ray White"

Kentucky Headhunters "Jessico"

Live "Rattlesnake"



Sam Black Church "Jesco The Dancing Outlaw"



Jim Shelley "Jesco White" Trailer Bride "Jesco"

--Kakie Urch

Jesco's show brought about an opportunity for discourse about what passes for entertainment and artistry. For those of us who'd anticipated some real genuine mountain dancing and some real good stories, it felt a little like we were set up. On the one hand, artists and entertainers are praised when we are fearless, when we 'go there' and put our most intimate selves under a spotlight. But when does the art supersede the artist? When do qualities meant to entertain become spectacle? When does the intensity of the spectators gaze become a license to capitalize upon it?

Keith Wilson says, "Spectacle is not designed for, nor does it result in, any kind of worthwhile education. The social relevance of something like this is precisely in this kind of conversation, but I wouldn't mistake that as being the point of the concert, or a common takeaway from the crowd watching. Public Enemy kept Flava Flav around because he was entertaining, not because his antics were making him some sort of anti-poster-child of the way one should act...Stereotypes are almost always based on some sort of perceived truth. It doesn't really matter if it's an actor portraying a stereotype or if they plucked a real person out from their home; because it doesn't make the stereotype any less damaging. Right, he's just one man, and he can do whatever he wants. But there seems to be some sort of justification of the way he acts because of where he comes from."

Beth W says, "Only Jesco can answer if this is his art... or has he been so deeply manipulated that he no longer is capable of answering that question? What if we are limiting ourselves and him by putting a defined label on what Jesco White does?"

I get the sense that despite the fact that offstage, Jesco seems fairly personable, when he's on, it feels more like somebody's making a living off of a caricature. Because lampooning Appalachians is still not taboo in America, seeing Jesco perform felt very much like watching modern day minstrelsy, and while most likely unintentionally political or malicious unlike the minstrel acts of yore, the effect was the same. It reminded me of how I feel whenever I see Flava Flav (now) or Tyler Perry's Madea character, a simultaneous repulsion and mystifying inability to look completely away...almost like if you saw someone masturbating in public, like, is this really happening?

It was embarrassing to anyone with half a heart especially when you felt like you were watching someone performing their way through their own sort of private purgatory. But now I have this nagging thought. I wonder, if Jesco had come across as more cogent, more in control of himself, would we have been more willing to go along with

the show? Seeing a bit behind the veil that night shattered, for many people, the 'sus-



pension of disbelief' an audience is supposed to maintain.

On the other hand, how is what we saw on a Saturday night, especially given that Jesco seemed to be enjoying himself, any different than the work of say, an artist famous for their depth despite a piece's shocking nature? Think of someone like Andres Serrano. Isn't that what we say we want as an audience? Grit? Authenticity? To be moved? Well what is more gritty and authentic and moving than real tragedy in real time without the luxury of edited clips serving as a buffer? So that begs the question, what of context, skill, and intent? As

## We exorcise our demons through our work. Many of us create because of these same demons and just as many of us create despite them.

an audience, can we forgive a taboo concept for the sake of what vehicle is used, who's doing the driving, and how well the work is executed?

But let's be honest. Audiences have been attracted to pain and ugliness for ages. We are attracted to public displays of what we are not. As spectators, we crave emotional and psychological stimulation. Most of us, dredged down by our day jobs or relationships or families, want to feel something else. Anything else. And in an increasingly socially dysfunctional society, where our senses are continually battered by image and sound, the more shocking it is, the more likely an act is to penetrate us to our core.

We remember we're alive then. To quote a friend of mine, "If it didn't hurt, it didn't

happen."

The more an artist or entertainer guns for the spectators' gaze and less for the art-form, well it's no holds barred, isn't it? The bar drops in terms of creative integrity and rises in creative license. Even as the one becomes an impediment, the other will eventually become a crutch, and ultimately a crucifix.

I like "Jack Tales" in general because they so often include a pivotal crossroads moment. Usually, for the protagonist, whether we're calling him Jack or John, impending doom is worth finding out what's down the road less traveled, despite personal risk.

According to Charlie Daniels, Johnny's gifts earned him a gold fiddle. But in Wicked John, it got him an eternity of wandering around alone and uninspired, at the mercy of his own regrets.

In general, creatives use our gifts to express ourselves, to reflect the spectrum of our experiences. More often than not, while pleasure will leave fairly lasting impressions, it is to navigate through pain where creativity often becomes most useful. Artists and entertainers are compelled to create in a negative space in an attempt to conjure fire from dead ash. We exorcise our demons through our work. Many of us create because of these same demons and just as

many of us create despite them.

But then there are those innately gifted entertainers, like Jesco White, who are in their own class of self-destruction. Given that the original documentary was filmed almost twenty years ago, the night Jesco came to Lexington, perhaps it's our own fault for expecting to see something onstage left of the handsome devil in "Dancing Outlaw" thrilling us with his gift of gab, his knack for trouble and his restless feet. Instead we were given the disintegrating, unedited version of the man, who time and hard living clearly has not been kind to; this Jesco will run onstage, dodging his handlers in the middle of another band's act and hijack the mic, coated in sweat, eyes wild and unfocused, his vocals utterly unintelligible.

To be sure touring probably has some perks for Jesco, the least of which the tour gets him out of his town for a spell...but here is ultimately my point in writing this. Would you pay to see a man kill himself literally by cutting off a hand, then a foot, then an ear, half his nose, etc., and slowly bleed to death...would it make it better if he were laughing the entire time and playing harmonica and hoofin' with his one good foot?

This essay was largely written to explore the notion of spectacle, what audiences will pay to see and why, and what certain people do with their gifts in the name of crowd-pleasing. Jesco's performance is just a way in to talk about a much larger issue. The man could smoke crack on stage and call it entertainment for all I care, it's his God-given right to do as he pleases, but that doesn't mean I have to pay \$18 at the door to watch, even if hundreds of others do. Especially if I've been led to believe he's gonna actually put on a show worth \$18. Maybe what he did that night was worth that much to some, but it wasn't to me.

I can't think of this just as a member in the crowd, because ultimately, Jesco and I are in the same line of work. We're both storytellers, which is essentially the kernel of all art-forms. Also, in a way I can't help but think of his performance as though it were a living installation, a la Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," in terms of someone who in the end confesses he can't help what he is, so he makes a living off of his own nature and sells it as art. In the end it kills him.

Maybe having Jesco perform does bring attention to the desperate conditions that produced his version of entertainment and lifestyle in the same way that the earthquakes brought attention to Haiti, and a hurricane brought attention to New Orleans, but I doubt it. I seriously doubt that's what's happening. ■