



Reverend Vince Anderson rips up a new, dirty kind of glory at the Amsterdam Gospel Festival.

I GOT JESUS IN MY HEAD AND MY HEART

By Nanci Tangeman

I went to the church house, after a night at the bar / Had this little shot of communion wine, didn't help me get very far / The preacher was a preachin' words I did not understand / And I think I should get out of there, but I don't know if I can / Cuz I'm tryin' to be an asshole, but I got Jesus in my head...

You have to wish more people had the same problem as Reverend Vince Anderson, no matter what you believe in. As he sits here talking tough and slick, and sounding fresh-out-of-the-bars-of-Brooklyn, it's not difficult to see that not so far underneath, he's just a really nice guy from Fresno. And he's got Jesus in his head.

When we talk, Reverend Vince is just beginning a short European tour that will

culminate at the Gospel Festival on the first two days of September at the Pepsi Stage. There, he'll share the line-up with gospel staples such as the Maranatha Gospel Choir, soul diva Candi Staton and Grammy Award-winner Kurt Carr.

But Reverend Vince's show will be a lot grittier, if not just as spiritual, because the Reverend (yes, he really is ordained) is the man who invented 'dirty gospel'. Just the name tells you this is going to be different.

'That label's not meant to offend at all,' he explains. 'But it is meant to put people off guard. The meaning behind it is that it's not all cut-and-dried: it's murkier than a lot of Christians make it out to be. To me it's called "faith", it's not called "proof."

Reverend Vince and his music are in the precarious position of having the

potential to rile both the godless and the God-fearing. 'Being an "out" Christian, a public Christian, puts you on the apologetic right away,' he explains. 'Especially being an American Christian right now carries a huge stigma—as it well should.'

His role as an apologist is captured in 'I Don't Think Jesus Would Have Done it That Way', a song he says he sends to US President George W Bush weekly, as a reminder. The lyrics include: 'He's a friend to the sinners, not an enemy / And I don't think Jesus would have done it that way.' Obviously the 'he' in question is Jesus, not George.

'That song, to me, is addressed directly to the religious right. It's more political in a way,' says Reverend Vince. 'All through that song I address George Bush directly—so that song says a lot. Some people are always going to have a problem with my methods and the fact that I'm unabashedly human,' he adds.

At the concert in Paradiso that kicked off his tour—a sort of after party to Angie Stone's sold-out gig in the Grote Zaal—Reverend Vince manages to get a handful of Stone fans to join him in a singalong reminiscent of summer Bible camp: 'Get outta my way! Get outta my way! I'm gonna praise the Lord today!'

'There's kind of a human brashness to that song, an NYC get out-of-my-way

Jesus is my homeboy, Hallelujah!

thing,' he says. 'There's that upfront, street-smart, human get-out-of-my-way. But the inverse is that you get out of my way and I'll get out of yours. And if I run into you, maybe I'll hug you instead of hit you. That song has kind of a theological impact, a kind of gritty Christianity.'

Reverend Vince likes to invert Christian staples: his 'Satan Hates Me' makes the standard Jesus Loves Me just that much more interesting, and more appropriate to the venues he plays, like the Black Betty club in Brooklyn where he holds weekly 'services' along with his Love Choir. Still, he doesn't shy away from trying to get bar patrons—his congregation—to sing songs straight out of a mainstream hymnal.

'Anytime you're doing church in bars you're going to have resistance. But it can be really beautiful and inspiring, too. When I see a Hasidic Jew, a Catholic Puerto Rican and a godless hipster sitting there holding hands, singing 'This Little Light of Mine'... There's not many places where that can happen,' he says.

And the concept of singing together, it means both more and less to Reverend Vince than worship: 'A big part of what I do on stage and a big part of what I like about church is this idea of singing together. I think it's really hard to hate someone when you're singing with them. I know it sounds really idealistic, but I think there's something to it.'

He rails against mainstream churches and the 'heavy membership fee' they impose. 'There shouldn't have to be a philosophical membership fee to be with a group of people with a spiritual intent,' he says. 'It's like the church has hijacked spirituality and said you can't have it unless you believe this. And I think that's just really wrong.'

Still, Reverend Vince does have roots in those same churches. He spent about three months at the Union Theological Seminary, intending to become a Methodist minister. 'I loved seminary, but I felt like God was calling me out of seminary almost more strongly than He called me into it,' he explains.

'My intent was always to have a church of misfits, a kind of church for the rest of us. It became clear to me in seminary that wasn't going to happen within the bonds of the organised church. Now I view my church as the people who come to my shows.' For that community, Reverend Vince has performed almost 100 weddings, a handful of baptisms and one funeral. '[These people] are never going to set foot in a church, and I don't want them to because they are what they are. And if I can provide some clergy-related duties, then that's where they're supposed to be.'

'I'm not an evangelist. I'm not one to impose my beliefs on other people. What I try to do is reflect my heart and my faith in my life in a way that is honest. And my intent is that if I do that and that rings true to people, it can inspire them to live a life that's true to themselves.' **W**

Reverend Vince Anderson plays the Gospel Festival Amsterdam on 1 September at 22.25, Pepsi Stage, Arena Boulevard 1, 0900 0194, €10-€25, www.gospelfestival.nl.