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118 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

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ch, no matter your travel companion, on page 100. Models: Mickey and Amelia from H.E. Artist Agency. Styling by Janelle Erlichman Diamond. Photography by David Colwell. Erin Brothers fedora and stretch bracelet at South Moon Under. Jantzen swimsuit from Company.



21st CENTURY MAN
Bob Hieronimus decodes symbols on the "Biodiesel We the People Art Car," his "moving billboard of symbolic instruction."

AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT
The banner held in the eagle's beak says "Limitless Light" in Hebrew to represent the Age of Enlightenment.

AMERICAN EAGLE
The bald eagle with a turtle on its breast "acknowledges Native American influences at the heart of this nation."

TWO TRIBES
Onida and Seneca are names of two of the six tribes that formed the League of Iroquois Nations.

CHEROKEE NATION
The flag of the Cherokee Nation, which was located in what is now called North Carolina (shown on map below the flag).

IROQUOIS NATIONS
The flag of the League of Iroquois Nations, (map below shows upper New York state where the Nation once thrived).

DEGANAWIDA
Portrait of Iroquois prophet Deganawida, who is crowned by an eagle, symbolic of eternal vigilance.

WOODSTOCK
Woodstock logo and "We Are One" sign: "We Are One" was "the Woodstock generation's version of *E Pluribus Unum*."

METEOR FLAG
A 26-starred version of the American flag from 1837 called the "Meteor Flag." The car also features a 48-star version of the flag.

THOMAS JEFFERSON
Thomas Jefferson was "largely responsible for saving America from returning to a monarchy after the Revolution."

MONTICELLO
The neoclassical design of Jefferson's home was "the inspiration for many of the buildings in the nation's capital."

JIMI HENDRIX
Rock superstar Jimi Hendrix in front of the 15-star Fort McHenry flag, included as "a Baltimore touch."

➔ 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 "Zoh") 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 Cortner 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 Telesma—the mikes 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 WCBM, 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 fifty 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 Grinde, 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 a softie 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 Kropp, who's known of Hieronimus for 30 years. "He really" CONTINUED ON PAGE 146

OPPOSITE: (1971) PHOTO AND DRAWING: COURTESY OF BOB HIERONIMUS. ("WOODSTOCK BUS") AP-WIDE WORLD IMAGES



Clockwise from top left, Bob and Zoh Hieronimus in their basement radio studio. Bob painting a pedal car in 1971 with other VW art cars in the background; Bob's early etching of a "man undergoing a transformative experience"; iconic photograph of the "Woodstock bus" Bob painted in the late 1960s; Bob in front of the mural he painted in Waverly.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 121 should dress like Willy Wonka all the time.”

“I always assumed Hieronimus was from out of town,” says former *Sun* columnist Michael Olesker, “or from another planet.”

Actually, he was born Richard Gill on September 16, 1943. His father, Stanley Gill, was a poet, musician, dreamer, and all around layabout who had a tendency to not pay his bills. By 1947, his mother, Florence, had had enough. She gathered up Bob and his sisters and moved in with the man who would eventually adopt him 11 years later, Robert Frederick Hieronimus.

The move changed his life. “We were rich,” says Hieronimus, recalling the move to Northwood, “We must have been rich. We had a milkman.”

In truth, his parents were working-class. His adopted father was a superintendent at the Lord Calvert Laundry, and his mother worked at Lever Brothers.

Bob attended City College, where he became interested in philosophy, art, and books. “I would go to the Jewish kids’ houses for dinner,” he recalls. “It was the first time I ever saw libraries in homes.”

It made a lasting impression; the present day Hieronimus household has no fewer than 12 libraries, containing tens of thousands of titles.

After graduating from City in 1961, Hieronimus went to what was then known as Towson State College and majored in art teacher education. He sported long hair, wore cowboy boots, rode a motor scooter, and cultivated a hippie counter-culture look that was popular with some of the coeds, but less accepted by others. In fact, Hieronimus recalls that some members of Towson’s sports teams once burned him in effigy.

His early art endeavors, like drawing eyeglasses on characters in comic books, blossomed into serious painting and drawing with help from his professors. Riveted by the symbols and archetypes he learned about in a psychology class, he began incorporating those things into his artwork. His work may have looked like the psychedelic art popular at the time, but it was infused with meaning.

“The earliest symbols I used were astronomical and astrological,” he says. “These symbols are universal and are constructed out of geometrical shapes giving them further layers of meanings.”

He recalls an early etching that showed a man with an elongated neck holding an eagle (symbolizing “spiritual or higher vision”) in his left hand (indicating “intuition and reception”). “He is undergoing a transformative experience as indicated by his elongated neck searching the black infinite unknown,” explains Hieronimus. “That’s what was happening to me during my senior year at Towson.”

After graduation, he earned a meager living drawing album covers for Elektra Records. But at only \$100 apiece, he burned out quickly.

So he turned to other outlets and secured a commission from The Johns Hopkins University. Hieronimus was initially asked to create a mural called *The Apocalypse* on one wall of the upper floor of Levering Hall, the Student Union building. But what Hieronimus had in mind far exceeded one wall.

He became obsessed with the project, and the mural—a sprawling representation of history’s cyclical nature—spread to another wall and another, before finally covering all four walls, the ceiling, and a staircase. “I practically moved into the building so I could paint all the time,” recalls Hieronimus. “I lived on 22-ounce cups of coffee and tuna fish sandwiches.”

But as the mural neared completion, a troubled student, fearing its message was too strong, splashed blue paint over much of the piece before he could be restrained. It took months to repair the damage, and a judge eventually sentenced the vandal to a stint in the psychiatric hospital in Crownsville.

Years later, the court asked Hieronimus to weigh in on the vandal’s potential release, which he did. “I couldn’t just leave him there,” says Hieronimus, who eventually became friends with the guy.

Hieronimus went on to paint other high profile, symbol-laden

MAYBE AN ODDBALL IN BALTIMORE IS JUST AN ORDINARY PLANETARY CITIZEN ELSE- WHERE.

murals in Hampden, Waverly, 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 Hieronimus. “He told me, ‘Surround yourself with women smarter than you are.’”

HIERONIMUS MET ZOHARA MEYERHOFF in 1975. Rebecca Hoffberger, founder of the American Visionary Art Museum, knew both of them. Hoffberger remembers Hieronimus as “a brilliant young muralist impassioned by the vision of the Founding Fathers. It was a rarity to see someone his age who was so knowledgeable and enthused 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. Hieronimus 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 home of strong personalities,” she recalls. “My mother used to say I was ‘one of her 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 Ruscombe Mansion, just north of the city. According to Ruscombe’s website, AUM “offered certificates in Religious Metaphysics, Occult Sciences, and the Mystical Arts” at that time and continues “supporting altruistic endeavors which unite mankind.”

Zoh became one of Bob’s students in 1978 and graduated with flying colors. They were married in 1980 and have a daughter Anna, 23. (Bob also has two children from a previous marriage: Plato, 38, and Maré, 35). In 1984, Zoh founded The Ruscombe Mansion Community Health Center devoted to holistic healing. She remains its executive director today.

“I’d never met anyone like Bob,” says Zoh. “He has the will to do, and we both have a dictum to serve.”

And Bob learned things from his new bride as well. “From Zohara and her family, I have learned that serving the city, state, nation, and planet must be done without resentment,” says Bob, “and it must be continued even if one’s society refuses to listen. You just continue on and wish everyone the best.”

That sense of service—whether it’s spreading the word about esoteric and arcane knowledge, or helping in more tangible ways, which tends to get obscured by all the chattering about conspiracy theories—is what informs his work. That point gets driven home during the radio show, when Bob and Zoh talk about the importance of donating books to libraries around the country. They donate books specifically to prison libraries and tell incarcerated listeners (who’ve written in) what titles they can expect in the mail. It’s certainly not your typical radio show giveaway.

A little later, a caller from Baltimore asks, “Why does this universe make no sense? Why must we all die?”

Bob leans close to his microphone. “All the suffering is how the soul learns,” he tells the caller. “The earth is a school, and we are learning how to treat people.”

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

HIERONIMUS LOADS A WICKER BASKET full of large brown eggs—collected from free-range chickens he keeps—into the back seat of his 1976, two-tone (powder blue/dark blue) 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.

One of the mailboxes bears the name “Day,” and Hieronimus knocks on the door. A smiling, African-American woman answers, and, before Hieronimus 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 good on a pledge he gave to Leon Day in 1994.

Leon, suffering from serious heart trouble, asked Hieronimus: “See that lady going in the kitchen? I love her. Promise me you’ll look after her.”

Hieronimus, 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 Hieronimus who held Day’s hand on March 7, 1995, and told him he’d been elected into the Hall. Day died within the week, and Hieronimus 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.’”

Hieronimus and Geraldine sit and talk about the Orioles’ prospects for the upcoming season. Day quotes her late husband, “Good pitchers stop good hitters.”

Before leaving, Hieronimus wonders about going to 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 Hieronimus and thanking him for the eggs.

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

The car draws considerably less attention than Hieronimus’s 1984 bio-diesel fueled Mercedes-Benz, which he’s painted from bumper to bumper with images and symbols associated with the founding of this country. Over the years, 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 1960s when Hieronimus 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 me to roll down my window, then they yell, ‘You ruined that car!’”

But Hieronimus considers his painted cars to be “moving billboards of symbolic instruction,” a description that could apply to himself as well.

He seems unfazed that some folks might find that sort of thing peculiar, noting “the East Coast has consistently lagged behind the self-transformational movement established decades ago on the West Coast, where there is more acceptance of differences and more enjoyment of those differences. Maybe an oddball or an eccentric in Baltimore is just an ordinary planetary citizen elsewhere.”

Getting closer to Harbor East, he talks about concentrating on finding one of the scarce parking spaces near the bar. He makes the turn onto President Street and there, directly in front of the pub, is a large parking space.

When it’s suggested that he’d gotten lucky, Hieronimus smiles. “That wasn’t luck,” he says, “that was magic.”

Knowing Hieronimus, it probably was. ■

Freelancer JIM BURGER is an occasional contributor to Baltimore.

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Hieronimus: Artist and Philosopher of the Occult

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