



Photo by Nancy Wickham

Malachi Warns the World

BY TIM FORKES

This unusual musician tells his audience of the seven plagues of humankind. Is he a prophet or a 'pseudo-Christian weirdo'?

Dressed in a dark shroud with his face painted into a skeletal grimace, Malachi immediately captures the attention of his audience. Incense burns, and props either hang or stand around him on the stage as he sits waiting for the right time to begin. Not knowing what to expect, the small crowd waits for him to start. This apparition eyes with well-placed precision the apprehensive audience.

The show has begun. But the audience, waiting for the music, doesn't know he's started. Catch his gaze and you're likely to turn away. Malachi uses the power of the audience's minds to create a blanket of fear.

Then he begins to play from his latest recording, *Plagues*. It hardly seems entertaining, although it can be quite riveting. People can't tap their feet to the music, and there aren't many lyrics to sing along with. The point can be summed up in the name: Malachi, an early biblical word for messenger. "Oh, so he's a pseudo-Christian weirdo?" Hardly.

"The reason I use the name Malachi [is] because it was the name of an anonymous prophet of the Old Testament. I figured by using that as a name, I could free a symbolic attachment in people's minds to either biblical or archetypal things: ancient things, symbolic things, religious things."

Malachi tries to create a distance between his real, anonymous personality and that of his stage presence. His aim is to make the audience attach the message presented to them with the character. Playing in the 8th Note Coffeehouse (at UWM) offers Malachi the opportunity to break down some of the basic conventions of theater that sometimes draw attention away from the message. The stage is about a foot off the ground, and the seats, nice deep comfortable ones, curl around the performer. People who sit in the first rows are no more than three feet from Malachi's temporary pulpit.

"I break down the convention of stage boundaries by passing through them, and going out into the audience and giving things to members of the audience. The reactions I get are everything from, 'Yeah man, that's cool,' to 'Jesus Lord, Jesus Lord. Accept Jesus as your savior' to a complete dogmatist throwing out what he's been taught because he's so scared that he doesn't know what I'm doing, where I'm coming from. I find that so intriguing that a theatre can have that much impact."

One poor fellow at a performance last spring, who had been genuinely interested in what was going on, began to leave. Malachi yelled into the microphone, "Where are you going?" The student stood and looked at Malachi, the audience looked at him, and almost apologetically the man said he had to go to class. Malachi knows how to grab the attention of the audience. "I believe that crisis is the only thing that creates a mass consciousness," Malachi said. "I use that in the theatre by creating an internal crisis, a pseudo-fear."

Malachi uses one of the oldest parlor tricks known in religious circles to achieve this collective participation: ritual and its applications. His upbringing in a Catholic household taught him the importance of what ritual can do subliminally to the people in the audience.

On *Plagues*, the message deals with the "seven plagues of man," as Malachi calls them. "I use the number seven...it's a mythical number, it goes way back in poetry in ancient days, in whatever language you want to say it in, seven has always been the perfection of things. Rather than the 12 or 13 in the Bible, I present them seven. And they're all really bad things."

While we sat in the Coffee Trader, he illuminated the seven plagues with living examples. Malachi believes our society is controlled by the corporate world. We buy fast-food from companies that are

destroying the Amazon rain forests; a woman waiting to buy coffee is wearing an expensive fur coat, the product of sodas farmed and slaughtered for their beautiful skins—all for the corporate profit margin.

The first plague in Malachi's show is government. We elect people to run our country, and we believe anything they tell us. "Take that Bork nomination. Bork is someone who should be taken off the planet. But people think if the president says he's good, then he must be."

We depend on the government to fix things that are wrong in our world, but government is run indirectly by the corporations. This leads to the second plague, money.

Money, Malachi claims, is the reason blue whales are on the verge of extinction and people west of the Milwaukee River won't be assimilated into the clientele of the Coffee Trader.

Moneychangers were chased out of the temple in Jerusalem by Jesus Christ. Now, televangelists bring in millions of dollars to pad their own pockets or to fund colleges that teach ideologies that go against the teachings of Christ.

Malachi's third plague is institutional religion. He believes that Christianity lost its mysticism when the early church leaders started using rituals to replace the personal experience. "Religion is an individual thing. The Catholic Church lost its power when it started adding ritual to experience. When you start approaching it with other people it loses its impact."

"One-fourth of the New Testament, by volume, was written by Paul. There was a lot of conflict in the early church between Paul and the church leaders in Jerusalem." This is the time when much of today's present Christian ideology was incorporated into the religion; when ownership of land became as important to the church as the teachings of Christ.

Fourth on the list of plagues is scientific optimism. "So many people hail science as the big thing, and it is all dependent on Cartesian-Newtonian mind sets. A lot of history has shaped the way people think nowadays. Newtonian ideas of science, cause and effect...it's so embedded in society. Nothing can be irrational...it has to be logically explained."

Malachi uses UFOs as an example. We can't explain many of the sightings reported in the past 40 years, but the scientific community isn't willing to think or admit that there is other intelligent life in this universe. "If it's not material, it's philosophy," Malachi said. "I just think that's a ball of shit. The irrational is just as much a part of things as the rational if not more so."

Technology, the fifth plague. While much of technology is useful in our daily lives, it comes at the expense of our natural environment. One need only look at the use of fluorocarbons (in aerosol cans), which are depleting the earth's atmosphere, or exhaust fumes from our vehicles, or the ultimate technological night-

mare, the weapons of war.

"Technology is going so fast humanity cannot keep up with it. Culture cannot keep up with technology," he went on to say.

The pursuit of technology isn't necessarily bad if the right things are built and used. Alternatives to fossil and nuclear fuels would greatly enhance the quality of life on earth if we poured our technology toward this end.

Hypocrisy, Malachi claims, is the next plague unraveling our world. "People don't want to talk about what's wrong with our world. They want some harmony in their lives; they expect the government to fix the wrongs."

All the ills of the world aren't going to go away if we turn our backs to them, he says. "We don't even have to dwell on them to make an impact, we just need to talk about them...spur some action." It's this plague, this one, almost universal plague that leads to the last and is the worst of the seven plagues of man: apathy.

"As long as the [people] have their VCRs, they're happy," sums up Malachi's appraisal of today's new breed of American. They feel content in their assumed helplessness. Nothing one person does will change anything; the new right Christian leaders all claim the world is heading toward a nuclear Armageddon anyway, so why bother with saving the Amazon rain forests and the almost extinct blue whales.

There is apathy toward our dwindling Bill of Rights, as we are increasingly legislated into an Orwellian society—a social order where those who are different are usually on the bottom. Individuality will only be tolerated in movies and television, and then only when it is within the boundaries established to promote loyalty to the state.

Can Malachi raise the consciousness of the world by playing to 50 people in a small room four times a year? "No, but if I make one person begin to think about what's wrong with our society, then I've succeeded."

How should people respond to this show, if there is to be a proper response at all?

"At first people were taking the theater so personally that the people who knew who I was were calling me a schizo, and a psycho-fanatic. It affected them so much, and I thought that was an interesting reaction." He wants reactions and hecklers in his audience, because part of what he does depends on audience participation.

Plagues is for sale in the 8th Note Coffeehouse and at Atomic Records. Pick it up for your next social gathering; send one to your parents and the parish priest; to your congressman and senator; to the White House and Kremlin. Above all, take heed of the message; the whales and the rain forests don't have much time left, and when they go, time may have run out on the human race.

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