

### ***Billy Jack* (T. C. Frank, 1971)**

Extraordinarily successful counter-cultural 1971 film starring Tom Laughlin as the eponymous half-breed former Green Beret who, in the film's infamous tagline, "protects children and other living things," in particular the director (Delores Taylor) and students at an Arizona school for runaways. Made for less than \$800,000 largely outside the studio system and marketed and distributed in unorthodox fashion, it has grossed to date close to \$100 million.

Laughlin (who directed the film under a pseudonym) and Taylor (his wife) modestly called their work "the greatest youth culture picture of our times," and indeed it panders directly to that demographic. "I can't help believing," writes Danny Peary, "that (whatever the Laughlins' politics) this picture was specifically designed to financially exploit the youth market. *That* is why it gives them everything it wants. There is a 'do-your-own-thing' mentality that dominates the film, as well as continuous praise for youthful idealism and independence." Looking sometimes like a home movie, *Billy Jack* is a weird, often pretentious and preachy amalgam of 1960s clichés, completely unaware of its own glaring contradictions. At least twenty minutes of its 112 minute running time is spent in role-playing activities carried on at the Freedom School. Another ten minutes offers real-time coverage of an incoherent city-hall meeting. A film which fully engages the issue of pacifism, *Billy Jack* is never so alive as when its hero is kicking one-dimensional bigots in the face and offers a rape scene that is truly disturbing.

At its heart, of course, is Billy Jack, a Vietnam veteran hapkido karate expert with a slow-to-rile but nevertheless violent temper, able to take on twenty attackers at once but devoted to recovering his soul through the pursuit (at least) of non-violence and the full embrace of Native American beliefs and rituals. (The film credits Rolling Thunder of the Shoshone Nation for assistance with the "Indian Snake Ceremony" in which Billy engages and Andy Vidovich of the Paiute Nation for his assistance with the "Wovoka Friendship Dance" in which he leads the students of the school.) With the spirit of Wovoka, one of the leaders of the Ghost Dance movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, still working through him, he even offers the assembled throng his own blasphemous Sermon on the Mount: "The Indian tradition is now what the young people of the world are looking for. The young whites know there is a supernatural world and a great spirit, and they try to reach the great spirit. They try by drugs. They are made to do this because their religions no longer believe in the other world. Heaven is not out there. The other world is here. The great spirit, the messiah, the Christ, are here. . . ."

*Billy Jack* spawned two sequels: *The Trial of Billy Jack* (1974) and *Billy Jack Goes to Washington* (1977).

### **Further Reading**

Peary, Danny. "Billy Jack." *Cult Movies: The Classics, the Sleepers, the Weird, and the Wonderful*. New York: Delta, 1981. 28-32.