

BLESSED ARE THE STRONG

FROM INSIDE A GIANT WOODEN AUDITORIUM

blares the pumping tones of Christian rock, which sounds as if someone distilled everything bad about early '90s music and filtered it through the Virgin Mary's vagina.

As five hulkaasaurii—one of them female—stomp through the rubble onstage, the audience shrieks for them to break more shit.

"Somebody say, 'POWER!'" screams a three-hundred-pound white gorilla named John Jacobs into the microphone.

"POWER!" howls the audience of three hundred or so rural Christians—one for each pound on Jacobs's Samsonlike physique.

In his mid-forties with ruddy skin and suspiciously blond hair, John Jacobs has helmed several incarnations of his musclemen-for-Christ freak show "Power Team" performance troupe since the late 1970s.

Over the course of a bombastically peppy ninety minutes, Jacobs and his current crew of buffed-out God Huns—these 'uns are called the "Next Generation Power Team"—will smash through high stacks of concrete bricks, bend jail-grade steel bars, rip telephone books in half, bite through license plates with their teeth, snap a series of baseball bats like toothpicks, roll a frying pan into a steel burrito, squeeze soda cans until they burst, break through police handcuffs, crack a wrench in half, and—always the crowd favorite—blow up a hot-water bottle until it bursts.

A seasoned showman, Jacobs reminds his audience that it's a "Pennsylvania hot-water bottle."

"Somebody say, POWER!" snarls Jacobs as he introduces tonight's executrix of the hot-water-bottle trick, an uncomfortably muscular woman in a doo-rag named Kathy.

They all scream "POWER!" again.

"This lady stands almost six feet tall," Jacobs pants, "she weighs 175 pounds and [has] six percent body fat. She was Miss Fitness USA. Ladies and gentlemen, she specialized in making bombs, weapons, and missiles. This lady can bench-press over 300 pounds. She loves Jesus with all of her heart."

On Sunday, the opening night of a four-day Power Team crusade out here near Amish country, Kathy did ten "military-style" push-ups while the Sasquatch-sized Jacobs stood on her back.

Tonight, Kathy's having a smidgen more trouble exploding the Pennsylvania hot-water bottle using only the force of her frighteningly butch lungs. As her Mighty-Mouse-shaped compadres begin

taunting the audience to scream louder, cupping their hands to their ears as if to say, I CAN'T HEAR YOU!, she finally pops the giant pink rubber baboon ass, and the crowd goes bonkers!

On Sunday when Kathy gave her testimony, she told us how she found Jesus while confined at an

Okinawa mental hospital after gobbling some pills and slashing her wrists. She told us that as a little girl, she felt "murdered" by her father's incessant meanness. He'd call her a stupid, ugly, fat failure who would never amount to anything. Kathy turned to drugs, alcohol, bulimia, and "secret cutting" to blunt the pain, but it

wasn't until she hit bottom that she "surrendered" to Christ and began basking in his groovy eternal love. After telling us all this, Kathy bent a steel bar and broke a baseball bat.

Tonight when the hot-water bottle finally exploded, part of the rubber stung her face, causing a huge welt to raise above her right eye almost instantly. When Jacobs asks her if she's all right, she smiles and says, "With Jesus, it's all good."

It's my personal belief that Kathy has merely swapped a dysfunctional relationship with her father for an abusive relationship with Jesus, and she needs to stop apologizing for the Lord's inexcusable behavior.

Same goes for the other Power Team muscle-plug who took the mic and explained the difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing him *personally*—like he does.

Hey, Kool-Aid Man, the problem is that you DON'T know Jesus personally. You could snap a *car* in half with your teeth, and you still wouldn't convince me that you've ever met or conversed with Jesus.

Same, too, applies for leader Jacobs and his long sermon about God being a shepherd who goes out of his way to rescue even one stinky sheep from hell's clutches. "How many know there's a desperation in God's heart if you're lost?" Jacobs pleads, stalking the stage. "How many think he doesn't want you to spend eternity in hell?"

Look, Squanto, if God's so fucking WORRIED about it, I think it'd be pretty easy for him to avert the situation, Him being God and all. Otherwise, what sort of weird S&M head games is he playing not only with us, but with Himself?

"I STARTED THIS WHOLE 'FEATS MINISTRY' CONCEPT IN 1978 OR 1979,"

an earnest and more soft-spoken John Jacobs tells me via telephone from his hurricane-battered Florida home a week after his Pennsylvania crusade ended. Jacobs says that before the late 1970s there were isolated cases of traveling preachers who engaged in feats of derring-do for the Lord—"One was a karate guy who chopped watermelons

off people with a sword"—but it wasn't until he devised the Musclebound Xtian Strike Force he labeled the Power Team that crushing bricks for God became a multi-million-dollar enterprise with international exposure.

At its peak, Jacobs and his original Power Team toured the world and starred in a weekly TV program called *Power Connection* on the Trinity Broadcasting Network. It was not unusual for John and the boys to pack ten-thousand-seat stadiums. As the millennium rolled around, they were forty-five performers strong, and the Power Team organization was banking an estimated four million bucks yearly.

But then the Lord tested Jacobs with a slew of misfortunes which at one point had him declaring bankruptcy while living in an apartment and driving a decidedly déclassé Ford Taurus. After divorcing his wife in 2000, his Power Team fell apart amid allegations of "sin issues," a hasty remarriage (and hastier annulment) to a new woman, and an assault charge (later dropped) against Jacobs by one Power Team member. Nearly all of the Power Team defected into new cypocatic groups calling themselves things such as "Omega Force" and "Team Impact." After Jacobs declared bankruptcy in 2002, a state-appointed trustee took over stewardship of the Power Team. The trustee now heads yet another group of brick-smashing Christian musclemen, these ones confusingly calling themselves...The Power Team.

Even more bizarre than the Power Team concept itself is the degree to which it has successfully mutated and replicated.

Down in Mississippi, a team called "Break-Force" describes their shtick as a "PRESENTATION OF DIFFERENT MARTIAL ARTS TECHNIQUES AND SKILLS, TUMBLING, ACROBATICS, MUSICAL FORMS, WEAPONS DEMONSTRATIONS, AND FEATS OF STRENGTH SUCH AS BOARD BRAKING, [sic] SMASHING OF 2' - 3' OF CONCRETE BLOCKS, BENDING STEEL BARS, TEARING OF METRO PHONE BOOKS, EXPLODING CANS OF 7-UP, BLOWING UP HOT WATER BOTTLES UNTIL THEY EXPLODE, BREAKING OF BATS AND DRIVING 16 PENNY NAILS WITH OUR BARE HANDS.... PROGRAM IS PRESENTED WITH FAST PACED UP-BEAT CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC." According to one writer, a "highlight" of any Break-Force show "is the team member who breaks his way out from behind a wall of concrete blocks doused in gasoline and set afire."

In Alabama, the "Truth Force" brags that "We put on a demonstration of strength that includes crushing walls of concrete blocks with our arms, hands and heads, snapping baseball bats,

ripping phonebooks in half, bending steel bars, squeezing soda cans until they explode, and lifts with heavy weights (one of my team members can bench press 600lbs!)....At the end of the program, I bring a challenging message and end with an altar call."

Virginia's "Power Source" puts on a show that highlights "Feats Of Strength... Breaking Boards...Bending STEEL Bars... Smashing Baseballs...Crushing Soda Cans... Snapping Baseball Bats...Showing... GOD'S...Power!"

"It's foolish trying to put your head through concrete," Marc Wilkes of Florida's Omega Force once claimed, "but it's a way to spread the gospel."

In 2003, granddaddy of 'em all John Jacobs announced his retirement, issuing a statement that he wanted to "focus on identifying, clarifying, and letting the Lord refresh and purify him in several key areas." After an apparently brief spiritual bidet, Jacobs is now back with what for legal reasons is called the Next Generation Power Team—a smaller group playing smaller crowds for smaller donations, yet still big in bulk and on fire with the conviction that bending steel bars as if they were paper clips is an effective way to save souls from hell.

Personally, I'm still having trouble with such gladiatorial stunts in the name of a meek-shall-inherit-the-earth creed whose

original zealots were easily fed to the lions.

On the final night in Pennsylvania, Jacobs summoned the local church's spindly pastor to come onstage and attempt to drive his forearm through nine concrete bricks. Immediately after successfully crushing through the blocks and the crowd erupted like Thunderdome, the pastor's face assumed a triumphantly violent scowl that would have

been more at home at a pagan blood sacrifice than in a wooden makeshift church.

As much as they all tried to get me closer to Jesus, I wound up feeling as if Odin was breathing down my neck.



the POWER TEAM smashes things to pieces...for JESUS!