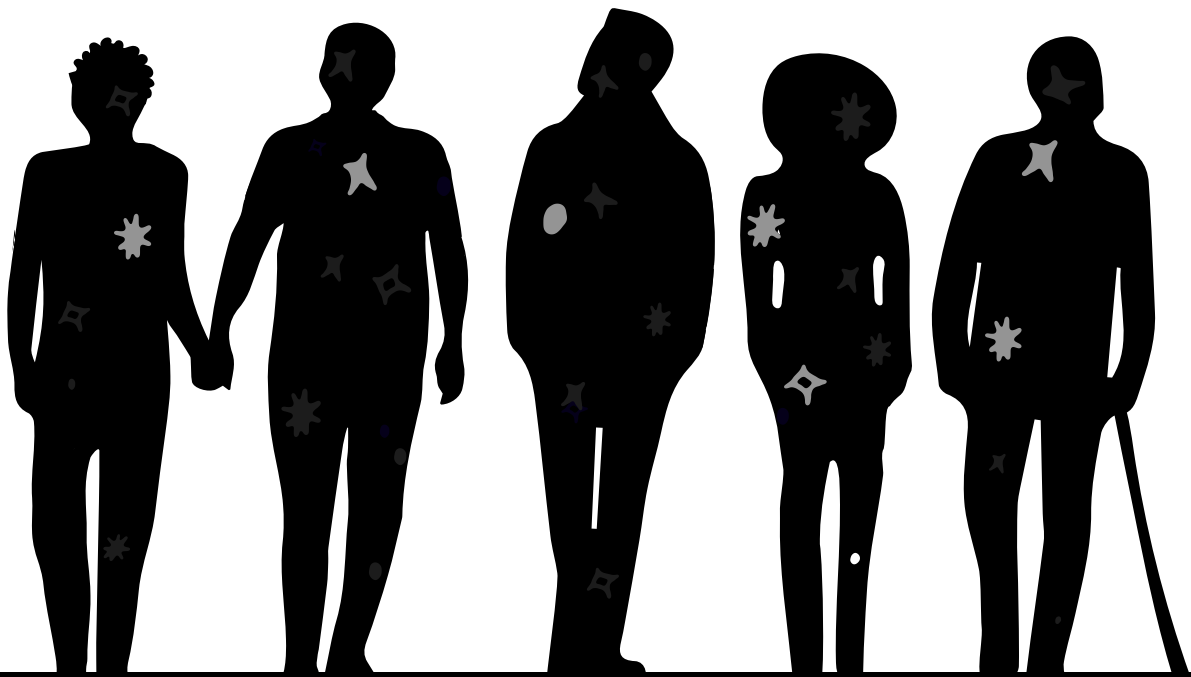


THE COSMIC WE

Episode 5:
Experimental Liturgies
with Billy Mark



from the CENTER FOR ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION

Billy Mark: Even though we allow our bodies to be rendered each day through these technological means, I didn't intend for this to be a finger wagging session at anybody. That doesn't get me very far. Instead it was what in the world does offer your body as a living sacrifice to God, not just mean, but what does it do? So coming back to this theme of surrender, it's like there will be these places or these texts or these scriptures that I don't understand. And instead of thinking about them more, my mode as an artist seems to be placing my body and my heart and my mind and my spirit within the mystery.

Barbara Holmes: This podcast explores the mystery of relatedness as an organizing principle of the universe and of our lives.

Donny Bryant: We are trying to catch a glimpse of connections beyond color continent, country, or kinship through science, mysticism, spirituality, and the creative arts. I'm Donny Bryant.

Barbara Holmes: I'm Barbara Holmes. And this is The Cosmic We

Donny Bryant: Today, our guest is none other than Billy Mark. Billy is an interdisciplinary artist who lives and works in the great city of Detroit. His areas of exploration lately have been embodied poetics, experimental liturgies, site specific music, and poetry and also the creative and spiritual interpretations found in monasticism. Billy, welcome.

Billy Mark: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Donny Bryant: There's so many different directions that we can actually take this conversation, Billy. But first, I want to invite you to share about your origin story, tell us who Billy Mark is. And one of the things that I think will be interesting for our audience and also for us to ponder is, was there a religious or spiritual influence that also influenced your journey?

Billy Mark: Absolutely. Well, I think it's fitting for a podcast about relatedness to say that my origin story, I feel like it starts in the Navy. My dad was in the Navy, so we moved around a lot. I went to 14 different schools throughout my educational career. And I think just being from all those different places really formed me, formed the way that I see the world. My spiritual upbringing has to be rooted in my mom. She was 19 when she had me, she was in Wisconsin, she was a white woman, a white 19 year old single. And people were like, "No, no, do not keep that baby." So I guess my spiritual beginning and my life beginning starts with her yes to my life, of which I'm eternally grateful.

Billy Mark: So she raised me for a while. She married my stepdad, he joined the Navy. We saw the world, Virginia, Georgia, Connecticut, Iceland, Washington State, California, beginnings in the Midwest. And people say, "Was that hard? Was that difficult moving around so much?" And I say, "I don't know. It's how I got here, it's who I am." And I am super thankful for the perspectives of being able to know what the South is like, what the Midwest is like, what the West Coast is like, what the East Coast is like, what overseas is like. I think that helps me.

Billy Mark: So that the spiritual side of things has been equally broad. I guess we started in a non-

denominational background and I went to churches. And then I went to college and I was like, "Please, God, just let me do college the way I want to, I'll be back, I promise. Just let me do this." And God let me do that for a little while until a Baptist preacher came knocking at the door on one of his rounds. I was like, while everybody else was hung over in the apartment, I was like, "Maybe I will go to church." And then helped set up chairs when I went on Sunday, everybody was at least 40 years older than me. And he would say a bunch of things that I didn't agree with. And then he would say, Jesus, and I'd be like, "Yes." And he'd say a bunch of other things that I don't agree with.

Billy Mark: And it wasn't until when I was about 21, and I had moved to Los Angeles and I was in Hollywood and I went to a Presbyterian church and there were a bunch of people my age. By a bunch I mean 10 or so. I was like, "This is strange. People my age who are super smart, super caring and warm, this is amazing." So that went on and then I'll just give you the end of this story. Is where then churches go through things, church split, which is really tough. There's no hurt like church hurt. And then I remember we stayed at the church.

Billy Mark: And then I went to the pastor at one point, the interim pastor, and I said, "I have an idea." He's like, "Yes." I said, "How much do you think we could get for this building?" I said, "It's right in the middle of Hollywood. Like 10, 20 million. I think we should sell the church, give every neighborhood a stipend of \$100,000 a year to be able to pour into their neighborhoods. And then we should do that. Then we should take out a full page ad in the Los Angeles Times that says, 'We are sorry for being an obstruction to God.'"

Donny Bryant: Wow.

Billy Mark: He's like, "Well, this is the Presbyterian Church, that's not how things work. I can't make that decision." I was like, "Okay, cool, cool, cool, cool, sure." And we stuck around for another year or so, but it was time for us to go. So my wife and I got, what's it called? A map of Los Angeles and it's gridded back in the days before Google maps. We gridded out the word numbers, and then we spent several months inside each letter just randomly go into places. And that was our way of seeing the ligaments of the body of Christ in Los Angeles. So I think that desire, that way of using creativity and wonder and not knowing where we're going is deeply a part of my spiritual journey.

Barbara Holmes: That really helps me to fill in some of the things I was reading about you that I didn't know. I don't know whether you still live in this place, but one of the interviews included a description of your living space with a performance space and a stage and a prayer room. So I was trying to figure out how the prayer room fit in with the stage and the performance. So that helps a lot. So your faith is very in community.

Billy Mark: Absolutely, absolutely. That relationship between the individual and the community and that dynamic and that tension is where so much growth happens spiritually and in all kinds of ways for me.

Barbara Holmes: That's wonderful. As I was reading also, I was learning about your first artistic performance, was it the wrestler?

Billy Mark: Wrestle, yes. Yes, that was-

Barbara Holmes: Okay. And you said you dreamed seeing yourself wrestling. Tell me a little bit more about how your concepts come to you.

Billy Mark: Absolutely. I had been in a room with a bunch of other artists who were talking. And the tensions surrounding racial dynamics was deep, it was palpable, it was very real. And where does that tension go? For me, it goes somewhere inside. And I had a dream a couple nights later in which I was dressed in a wrestling singlet, the little tight onesie. It was at night and I was wrestling and there was a light shining so you could see a little bit of it. Then I woke up the next morning and I thought, "Oh, I think I have to go wrestle." And the guiding text that was surrounding that feeling was, we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against powers and principalities and it works its way up from there.

Billy Mark: So I remember armed only with the vague confidence of a dream that I started to tell people, I was like, "Yeah, I think I'm going to go wrestle spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places on 8 mile." And the first time I told somebody and I didn't die, and they were like, "Really." I was like, "Rally, you're saying really?" And I was like, "Okay, this is something to go towards." So I bought the wrestling singlet, bought some gold shoes, I bought the head piece, and I went to go live into the image that had appeared to me in the dream. So whereas I started off in poetry, so I'd write a poetic image down on a piece of paper. Great, there it is, now it's in our mind. Then I was in MC, so I started to say these poetic images out loud. Great, so through the body, through the mouth, people hear it in the mind.

Billy Mark: And then there was a shift where I started to move towards embodied images. Where instead of just saying them, I can live inside of them. So I moved into this image of the wrestler and it wasn't my name, it was something that was open so that other people could access it in their own bodies and in their own minds and in their own ways. But the end of that story is I was pumped up, I was like, "Oh, I think I can use this as an art piece." And man, that is where God started shifting things in my art practice. So it's funny you say this is my first art thing, it's actually probably my last, it's the beginning of the end. Because I didn't call it an art piece because I didn't want to go out there and be cute. If I'm going to say spiritual forces, wickedness in heavenly places, I'm going to...

Billy Mark: And when I told a friend, she was like, I was like, "Yeah, I'm going to go do this in October." She was like, "Wait, that's like a month and a half from now." I was like, "Yeah, before the weather gets cold." And the look in her face, I don't know if she said it specifically, she's like, "Dude, you're going to get hurt." So what I did is I was like, "Oh you're right. This stuff is real, it's not just cute.

So I reached out to a couple friends who I trusted I was like, “Well, if this is a wrestling match, I need to be trained because I want to win.” So one of the friends was a trainer for my mind, one of the friends was a trainer for my heart, one of the friends was a trainer for my spirit, and one was a trainer for my body.

Billy Mark: And over the next six months, we created a website and we moved forward. And I’ll tell you, people started to follow the process. And this transmedia process started to develop, it wasn’t in one specific medium. And I’ll tell you, the end of this story, the wrestling match was in on a median in between Detroit and Detroit suburbs. And if you’re not familiar with that, that is a deep line of division. And that’s what the wrestling was at the beginning. It was looking at this line called 8 Mile, which divides the predominantly white suburbs and the predominantly black, the Detroit.

Billy Mark: The median was an overlap of outskirts, it’s not quite Detroit and it’s not quite the suburbs. And we often talk about a line, but you can’t exist on a line. So this median was a land. So when we went there, I’ll tell you the short version of the story because I’m just now starting to tell it. I had a jump rope which was a part of the practice the entire time, and the jump rope itself is a line. The practice of training my body, but also the practice of transgressing this line over and over and over and over again became this deep, deep image. So I went out there and I trained to get my endurance up.

Barbara Holmes: Wait a minute, Billy. When I first heard you say this, I’m thinking to myself, this is all going to be metaphorical, you’re going to be dancing around on a map by yourself. So what you’re saying is you’re wrestling somebody.

Billy Mark: Oh, yeah.

Barbara Holmes: Well that’s a whole nother thing.

Donny Bryant: So Billy, is this what you mean by embodiment? So specifically as you use the term embodiment of the art, you’re physically becoming?

Billy Mark: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. The lie in itself, 8 Mile, you could point to it and you could say that’s a geographic line. If you travel up to a place, you can find it. But when you talk to an elder who when they crossed that line back in the ‘60s, they knew that they had no reason to be up in the suburbs unless “they were doing somebody’s lawn,” and they would hold their breath until they came back down.

Billy Mark: And you see people from North of the line saying, “We would go to a Tiger’s game and hold our breath until we came back up.” But then you talk to a new person, they have a different experience of that line. So that line is at different points in time as well. So somebody’s experience of that line is from the ‘60s, somebody is from 2010, somebody’s experience of that line is with them in their heart and in their mind and in their body someplace else right now than it is in mind. And so this line is very deep and to go in there and to access it,

not just as a thought, but with the flesh, with all of the different dimensions is super important.

Barbara Holmes: Did you win?

Billy Mark: That's a great question. So I remember I planned on jumping rope because my trainer was like, "When I was a wrestler, our coach would have us jump rope in between sessions just to intimidate them." I was like, "I want to do that too." So I trained on cement. We got out there on the median, jumping on grass is a whole different story. I was like, "Oh no, I'm not going to be able to do this as planned." And I started around the third round, I started to fail, my body was about to be done. I couldn't do it, I couldn't make it the next two minutes. All the tricks, just count to 10 seconds and try to do it. It was done.

Billy Mark: It was 85 degrees out there and I thought, "Well failure's a cool art idea too. Sometimes you win sometimes you lose, this is something." And then with the art community and all the folks on the left side and other folks on the right side of the median, my last ditch effort, and this is on video, was to say, I go, out of somewhere deep down inside I go, "Thank you Lord, thank you Lord, thank you Lord." I said that three times, and I'm not kidding you, the leather jump rope with wood handles that had become this symbol broke, the line broke. And I threw it and then continued along the way. I didn't tell that story for two years because it didn't fit in my worldview, I didn't know how to process it. So I didn't tell anybody that story for two years. So I would say yes, we won.

Donny Bryant: So today, as you reflect, how do you process that moment, that breaking? What does that mean to you?

Billy Mark: Well, I think I'm still processing it, I'm still trying to live in a world in which that is real. There's so many books that I read, there's so many influences that I take in and invited that says that that can't happen. And honestly, I'm just trying, I just keep trying to live in that world. So the different projects that I do, it's tough to call them projects these days, the different ways that I seek God through art and through life is just trying to get to that place of surrender, where I head out in a direction of wrestling spiritual forces of wickedness in heavenly places, what in the world does that mean? I don't even know what that means. But to put myself in that place of surrender where I don't know the answer. And instead of demonstrating my ability, it's just depending on God. And God keeps meeting me even through the arts in these deeply profound and mystical ways, I would even say. I would even say that it's beyond my description. So I just try to keep living in that world.

Donny Bryant: You use the term surrender a lot. And it's one of the things that really impress me about you. There was a very unique way that I observed you surrender, seemed scary to me at times, the way you submit and surrender. Is that a theme that resonates in every aspect of your life, not just your work? But is that a core value, a core belief that sits with Billy Mark?

Billy Mark: Well, if it was a core theme or core value, that means that I would like it. But I guess it

is, it is. I just see that as the path, that's the way, not just forward, but the way deeper. Something needs to die, something needs to be let go of in order for me or for my friends or for this world to have anything deeper. Otherwise, we're just recycling the things that we already have and know. And I would say that surrender is the way, it just seems to be the way deeper for me.

Barbara Holmes: It's good message to a generation that is wrestling and has been wrestling with issues of race, gender, sexuality, and a predominant view of what life is like, which truncates and cuts off mystery. So it's almost as if we are pioneers again, seeking out the mysteries that are, and welcoming them back into our lives. We can wrestle with pandemics and environmental issues, is that really going to changing things? Unless we also include the mystery of God's presence in unexpected ways. Thank God for the rope breaking.

Billy Mark: Amen.

Barbara Holmes: God knows when to show up.

Donny Bryant: That metaphor of the rope, really so many applications on so many different levels. When you spoke about 8 Mile, growing up here in Detroit in the '80s, that line had a very specific, very significant meaning to many people who lived on the Detroit side of 8 Mile. And for some people, crossing 8 Mile gave them a sense of meaning, belonging, a sense of arriving. That line in so many ways it was artificial, but also deceptive because it gave the indication that you had to move or relocate in order to have value or to be accepted in our culture. And so, as you shared that story about it breaking, I reflected back to my initial understanding of 8 Mile and how the rope breaking. It also meant that understanding my, initial origin of understanding of what that line also breaks. How the stories or the narratives that we are taught oftentimes are not completely accurate. So that breaking really speaks to that. So I just thank you for that.

Donny Bryant: It's amazing that you were unable to share that for two years. I think it was about a year, maybe it was a year and a half ago, it was before, Billy, right at the beginning of the pandemic, it was right at the beginning of the pandemic, you and I met. And you shared with me one of your upcoming collabs, one of upcoming projects, the ways a suit can move. Speak a little bit more about what that project meant to you and some of the results of that project, some of the outcomes of that project. I just want our listeners in the world around us to really hear your willingness to surrender for a period of time to travel the country, to share a story. So tell us a little bit more about-

Billy Mark: Absolutely.

Donny Bryant: ... that collab and that project.

Billy Mark: We have to think back to October 2020, remember way back then, way back then. The tension in the country was at such a deep level, such a high point. And Dr. B talked about surrendering towards the mystery. And that includes the mystery in ourselves, that includes the mystery in the other, that includes the mystery of some of these huge, complicated social pains that we don't fully understand. And Donny,

you also talked about redefining the stories that we've received. I think that sometimes there's a story, but we can re-look at that story. That's the ones that get passed down, they're not something set in stone, there's something that we can re-look at. So in October 2020, I got a suit and I got a \$400 suit, which is for me a lot of money. I got a nice blue tie and a red tie and I went on a listening tour of the United States, starting in Northern California going down to LA, across the South, over to Louisiana, and then up back towards Detroit.

Barbara Holmes: What were you listening for, Billy?

Billy Mark: Oh, man. I don't know. I think that I was just listening and I think sometimes I don't know what I'm listening for until I hear it. So that process was, again, this process, which seems to be a thing that I find myself in, for lack of a better term transmedia story, a transmedia prayer. I'm still wrestling with this, in which the story is told through different mediums along the way. So yes, there's videos, there's writing, there's a bunch of things, there's performances. But I'll share one of the stops ON that. Was at the Googleplex in Mountain View, California. And this was more of an idea, actually this was more of a project. So I had gotten the surveillance capitalism blues.

Barbara Holmes: You've all had those.

Billy Mark: When you're like, "what am I supposed to do? Am I going to throw away my phone? That's not going to happen? Am I going to let my entire identity be sold virtually? Probably." So what we did is we created a sound map which uses a Google map, and it creates these different points, like pins on a map in which normally you could just find out how you go to the grocery store, and it'll tell you the map route there. But these pins are used to, you can attach audio files. So if you have an app, you can walk there. And then once you go into that specific location, it plays the music, it's a long description.

Billy Mark: so we created a sound map, a friend of mine did a composer. And this piece that we were going to do along my journey of ways a suit can move was called offering. I was going to offer my body as a living sacrifice to God next to the Googleplex. And this story is overwhelming. Even though we allow our bodies to be rendered each day through these technological means, I didn't intend for this to be a finger wagging session at anybody. That doesn't get me very far instead, it was what in the world does offer your body as a living sacrifice to God, not just mean, but what does it do?

Billy Mark: So coming back to this theme of surrender, it's like there will be these places or these texts or these scriptures that I don't understand. And instead of thinking about them more, my mode as an artist seems to be placing my body and my heart and mind and my spirit within the mystery. The map was seven different sites. And they were set at seven different times throughout the day. I am deeply influenced by the liturgy of the hours and monasticism and how that is this huge, beautiful, poetic structure. This poetry is architectural form, I love it, life moves in and out of it. So that helps me place my body inside of a poetic space. But I'm going to try to... There's a long story of this, so I'm trying to figure out. Do you want me to tell you a little bit of it or-

Donny Bryant: keep going, this is wonderful.

Billy Mark: Oh, man. We started at five o'clock in the morning and I told the composer, "Don't tell me what any of the is. Don't tell me what any of the music is. I just want to go out there, press play, and offer my body." I just said, "Just tell me the amounts of times, just tell me how long the pieces are." He said, "Well, the first one is 26 minutes, the rest are around eight minutes." I was like, "Done, I trust you." At five o'clock in the morning, it needs to be 26 minutes long. And at five o'clock in the morning, up on this grassy hill, North of the Googleplex, it was pitch black, the photographer who joined me was there.

Billy Mark: I didn't even know if this process was going to work. You know how technology goes. Like, oh man, I've flown all the way over here, this is the only shot we got, is it going to work? I press play and it was this low tone, it sounded like a buried saxophone plate at 40 hertz for 26 minutes. I just let go of everything, my face went down into the hill and the whole earth took the weight of my body. And yada, yada, yada, 26 minutes later, I came up, and we can talk about that some other time, I came up. And you know when you're in the presence of God, I was in the presence of God for those 26 minutes. And when I came up, somewhere deep inside of me, I said, "I don't want to leave." As I was overlooking the lights of the Googleplex and this construction zone that they're creating this wild, new architectural thing. As I looked over, I said, "I don't want to leave."

Billy Mark: And there was two times where I heard the voice of God that day. And the first one at that moment said, "You don't have to." I was filled with an unspeakable joy and also this melancholy. Is because I felt that continually pressing in love of God, this unconditional love, that just comes from that mystery. Because how can something be unconditional? So I could feel it pressing in on my body, in on all my heart, in on everything. I could feel it in that moment, and that's what gave me joy. And I said, "Oh, I don't want to leave this." And God was like, "You don't have to." But I knew I was like, "Oh, you are not going to leave, but I will, but I will." And I'll share some more stories of that at some other point. But it just progressively got more intense as the day went on.

Donny Bryant: Typically, we end with a reflection of every episode. However, Billy Mark led us in a practice of silent reflection. So today we're going to leave you with that reflection in this episode.

Barbara Holmes: A lot of your art is so contemplative, there is this... You said you wrote poetry and I've heard some of your poetry, but it looks like a lot that is all so silent. What is it about silence that amplifies your art?

Billy Mark: What a great question. For me, poetry isn't something that is just written down on the page, it is a language act, it is a life act, and it is a musical act. And there is no music, there is no sound without silence. Actually it was two years ago where I started to improvise not words, but silences. I just turned it around. So instead of, I would say yaking, yaking is not a nice term. But it's instead of talking for a long time, I started to shape the experience with silences. And for me, that's what really opened up

something else. And should I do some? Should we do some right now? Can we just do?

Barbara Holmes: Sure.

Billy Mark: Okay, great. So can you guys do it with me?

Donny Bryant: Sure.

Barbara Holmes: Sure.

Billy Mark: So we'll all work with the silences together. So just to put it into context, I'll do a small silence, a small silence, a long silence. A small silence, a small silence, a long silence. So I'll start to play with that, and if you guys just want to bring in a word or even a phrase or if you feel like you need to go longer than a phrase, do that as well. But we'll just go forward and we'll just use silences as the form. Okay, whenever you guys are ready. We begin to hear children, there's small steps. The hallway, the meaning of closeness, the touch of the skin, the remembrance of death, something so close that all the silences wrap around the body of our youthful desire.

Barbara Holmes: Don't be afraid. I am with you always.

Billy Mark: You sculpt us with a hard edge, sometimes soft, sometimes clear, and we reach out.

Donny Bryant: Wind. Flowing wind.

Barbara Holmes: Sometimes it hurts.

Billy Mark: The cup bangs openly and all the music, all of it, all of it, all of it, all of it, all of it, all of it, all of it comes tumbling out like the juice of an orange squeezed into the overlap of common voices.

Barbara Holmes: All my life, been grinding all my life, finally free.

Donny Bryant: Wholeness, a return to wholeness.

Donny Bryant: (silence)

Billy Mark: And then there's a point of a sigh that sneaks out like the ending, like the beginning of a breath, let there be light.

Barbara Holmes: Wonderful. That feels like being in the presence of spirit. Is there any of your poetry that you'd like to share as we close out?

Billy Mark: I think that was it.

Barbara Holmes: Oh my goodness yes, it was. Such poetry and silence and your ability to inhabit it so fully is healing to people who come toting their brokenness. Blessing Billy Mark. And thank you for being with us.

Billy Mark: Thank you guys so much.

Donny Bryant: Thank you, Billy. Thank you. Thank you for your time and thank you for the experience.

Billy Mark: Thank you guys for putting on this podcast, it's going to mean so much to so many people. I know your guys' work has meant so much to me, so thank you.

Barbara Holmes: Blessings.