

Peter Popoff Reaches Heaven via 39.17 Megahertz

James Randi

Sooner or later, it had to come. The flim-flam artists were bound to discover the advantages of high technology and step up into the Computer Age. In my investigation of the faith-healing business, I almost immediately came upon some modern twists that rather startled me.

Evangelist/healer Peter Popoff is headquartered in Upland, California, whence he sends out highly fanciful fund-raising literature that is computer-generated to appear as if it were personally typed and signed. Some of the slickly designed mailings are quite clever, but others are extremely juvenile, appealing only to the least sophisticated of those on Popoff's vast mailing list.

Little is known about Popoff except from what he publishes—in great quantity—in a series of booklets about his life. According to Peter, it all began when he went to Heaven on a visit and received Nine Gifts of the Spirit along with a command to preach to the multitudes. And, apparently, he was told at the same time that a little cheating couldn't hurt.

Being on the mailing lists of more than a dozen evangelists—under several different names on each list—I receive an enormous amount of mail from these highly organized businesses. From Popoff, I've received Russian currency, handkerchiefs, and red felt hearts—to be carried or worn, then each to be sent back with a check attached. Special envelopes and endless appeals for the emergency needs of his ministry arrive every week. Each is personalized at the computer, dropping my first name into the text occasionally and using "Brother Randi" as the salutation. Most of us are familiar with these gimmicks, but the effectiveness of such methods can only be judged by those in the field.

A man preparing to enter the Popoff crusade in San Francisco in February was approached by a TV interviewer. "Why are you coming to see Reverend Popoff?" he was asked. "Peter wrote to me," replied the man, "and wanted me to come here

today for a special message God has for me." He was blissfully unaware that *thousands* of persons in the Bay area received identical letters—identical, that is, except for the personalized effect generated by Popoff's computer.

Seeing the elegant laser-printed mailings and the expensive props used by Popoff, I knew that he was using computer technology prosperously. But I was unprepared for witnessing a spectacular show-biz technique when I attended his crusade in Houston, Texas. Members of H-STOP, the Houston Society to Oppose Pseudoscience, were also in attendance.

With me was Steve Shaw, a young man who was half of the team in the Alpha Project. (See *Skeptical Inquirer*, Summer and Fall issues, 1983.) Steve is very active as a "psychic" entertainer, and he proved invaluable in this investigation.

We arrived two hours before the show began in order to observe any "pumping" of the victims—such as that done by the Reverend and Mrs. W. V. Grant (see FI, Spring 1986). Each H-STOP member was instructed to fill out any "healing cards" that might be given to them and to put down only false information, except for the address. This was so that they could get on the mailing list but might be "called out" by Popoff under the false name and ailment.

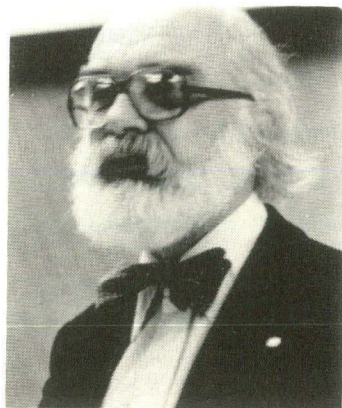
Indeed, that is just what happened. Steve Schafersman, chairman of H-STOP, was approached by Mrs. Elizabeth Popoff and interviewed extensively. Curiously enough, as he gave her each detail, she repeated it *out loud*, slowly and clearly. Others reported the same procedure. Steve Shaw had volunteered as an usher and was observing everything from a different and more auspicious vantage point, but he came back with the same report.

At exactly 2:30 P.M., the time set for the beginning of the service, Mrs. Popoff left the floor of the Coliseum and retired behind the curtain.

Finally following a spirited address and pep-talk by his front man, the Reverend Reeford Shirrell, Popoff himself came screeching onstage amid Hallelujahs aplenty. He stormed about and screamed warnings of Hell and Damnation for thirty minutes. Then he began a remarkable demonstration that made W. V. Grant's show look pretty thin. He "called out" people from the audience fast and accurately. He named them, gave their ailments, named relatives, and even threw in an occasional street address for good measure.

But, after Popoff had dealt with twenty or so people, it became obvious that he was not using W. V. Grant's mnemonic methods, unless he was *very* good at that art. Steve and I looked at each other as the same idea came to both of us.

"He's got something else going for him," said Steve, "and I think I know what I have to do."



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"You're going to get up close to Reverend Popoff and get a look—"

"In his ear," Steve finished for me. And off he went to "usher" next to the Man of God.

Moments later, having practically knocked Popoff down to get close to him, Steve Shaw was back, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "He's wearing a *hearing aid!*" chortled Steve. "You can see the shiny plastic in there, clear as can be!"

Now what, you may ask, might Peter Popoff be doing with a hearing aid? We concluded that he *had* to be getting this wealth of information via some such device. Though we were unprepared to investigate that angle during the Houston meeting, in San Francisco we enlisted Bob Steiner, a magician and former chairman of the Bay Area Skeptics, who supplied us with technician and security consultant Alec Jason. This enthusiastic chap was equipped with highly sophisticated electronic "scanners" that would prove the undoing of Peter Popoff.

As with the Houston group, the Bay Area Skeptics were instructed to attend the San Francisco meeting prepared to give false data to any interviewer and/or write in the same fictitious data on the healing cards. True to form, supremely confident that her gimmick was impossible to detect, Elizabeth Popoff waltzed around the audience asking questions—and carefully *repeating* all the details given to her by the unsuspecting victims. Hanging from her arm was a huge handbag—from which every word was being transmitted upstairs to Peter Popoff! Then, as in Houston, at 2:30 sharp, Mrs. Popoff left the floor to join her husband in the announcer's booth overlooking the arena. There they discussed details about the members of the congregation below—*leaving the transmitter switched on!*

High in the back area of the Coliseum, using an electronic scanner receiver, Bob Steiner and Alec Jason had quickly located the frequency used by the Popoffs—39.17 Megahertz. A tape recorder was attached to the receiver, and every word was heard. When Popoff made his entrance, we heard Mrs. Popoff testing the communications channel: "Hello, Petey. I love you! I'm talking to you. Can you hear me? If you can't, you're in trouble. . . . I'm looking up names, right now."

Transcribing the tape later on, we heard such commentary as: "I have a hot one for you. Robert Kaywood. He's got a chest condition that needs surgery. Robert Kaywood. Kaywood. Kaywood. He needs surgery. His veins aren't formed. He prays that God will heal him today."

Later on, we heard: "Dean. She . . . no, she should be there on your right side. *Right* side. No, that's not her! No, that's *not* her! In the blue. . . . Oh! That—that might be her. Okay. She lives at 4267 Masterson, and she's praying for her daughter Joy, who's allergic to food." This was followed by laughter from Elizabeth and Pam, the wife of Reeford Shirrell.

But the one that really pleased us was: "Tom Hendry. He's praying for restoration of his family, but he's got a drinking problem that's gotten out of control."

"Tom Hendry" was one of the Bay Area Skeptics, Don Henvick, who was also called out by Peter Popoff two weeks later in Anaheim, under a different name and with a different disease, and later on in Detroit, dressed as a woman named

Bernice Manicoff! Both Steve Schafersman and Don Henvick were used in the next Popoff TV broadcast.

How could God, speaking directly to Peter Popoff through one of the Nine Gifts of the Spirit—the Gift of Knowledge—have made such errors?

Popoff, at one point in the Houston meeting, asked his audience to "break free of the Devil" by throwing their medications up onto the stage. What followed surprised even him. Dozens of people came forward and tossed bottles onto the platform. Popoff was ecstatic. But when Steve and I examined the debris after the audience had departed, we were shocked. Prescriptions for digitalis, nitroglycerine tablets, oral diabetes medication, and many unidentified pills had been discarded by people who might well have needed such substances to stay alive! Steve Shaw, who has had experience working in hospitals, was familiar with these emergency medications.

It was even more amazing that Popoff actually included the pill-throwing episode in Houston in his television broadcast! One would think that he would have recognized the seriousness of this stunt and that he would de-emphasize it, but he broadcast it for all to see.

The old days of the tent-show healers are gone, but their replacements are among us, filling coliseums with many times the people the tents used to hold. They are louder, slicker, and richer by far, assisted as they are by technology that their predecessors would not have imagined. Now, reaching millions via television and radio, they flourish under the protection of the Constitution.

It would be well for you to know about one more aspect of the Popoff ministry. The callous atmosphere that exists backstage at this pathological Mystery Play is amply demonstrated by the following transmission to Peter Popoff as he ministered to his adoring flock. It was recorded in Anaheim, following an obvious interruption of the radio broadcast from the trailer:

(Elizabeth Popoff speaks.) "Reeford's got a *hot* one!" (Laughter.) "Reeford's so excited! He came running in back here and scared us half to death! You ready for a *hot* one? Okay! Want a hot one? *Hot* one! Hot off the press! Ruby Lee Harris. Ruby Lee. She is standing in the far back where there's no chairs." (Long pause.) "Reeford got a hot one. Hot one! Reeford's got a hot one, Ruby Lee Harris. She's against the back wall. Ruby Lee Harris. She's against the back wall. She's got lumps in her breast. You might want to whisper it—Have her walk down— Have her *run* up there. *Run*. Oh! Look at her *run!*" (Loud laughter.) "She's got knots in her breast." (Laughter and giggles.) "A home run! A home run!"

(Then, later on, giggles are heard, and Pam speaks.) "At any rate, she should kick him in the face!" (Laughter.)

(Elizabeth speaks.) "Pam says to make her— Pam thinks that you should have *her* kick *him* in the face!" (Giggles.)

I suggest that the heartless exploitation of the elderly, the ailing, and the emotionally unstable citizens of this country will continue until someone in government decides that these "faith-healers" have abused, deceived, and milked enough people. Perhaps a St. George, rather than a Don Quixote, is waiting in the wings. Let us hope so.