



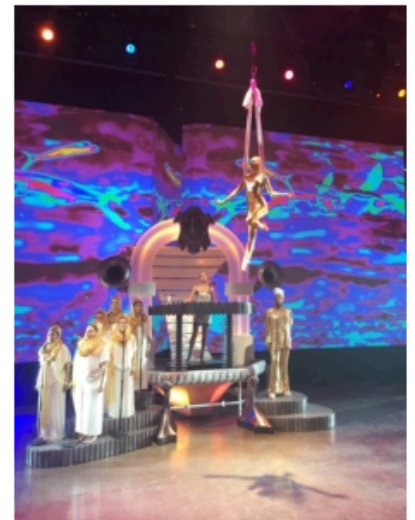
## “EMPATHY IS AN INFINITE RESOURCE.” ELEVEN QUESTIONS AND A STORY WITH BILL BARTOLOTTA.

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, INTERVIEW

The events Bill creates are legendary for those who have the good fortune to be invited. I asked some guests what they recalled from the events they had attended:

*“I can tell you who some of the main acts were, Aretha Franklin, Bette Midler, The Eagles, Elton John, Fleetwood Mac, James Brown, James Taylor, Paul Simon, Ziggy Marley.”*

*“I can not describe the place, where it was, what was there, what happened, the food, the sensation, but when it happens again I want be there, you want be there.”*



**Floyd:** How did you first get into show business?

**Bill:** I played the accordion for anyone that would hear me and that's really how I started. At a young age, I was playing all over the place. Then somewhere around 1968, I was a senior in high school...I went...accordion? Girls weren't too impressed with accordion players. I switched to guitar and played solo, played in bands, toured the living rooms of America, as well as some nice clubs and festivals.

By the '70s and '80s, I was doing industrial films, a jingle now and then and I needed more work so I figured out a way to get into the meetings business and became a creative director. This was the turn. I now had something to say about the entire experience.



**Floyd:** What type of projects are you best known for?

**Bill:** Live private events, though over the years we've refined the right model for presenting art, and that's really what we do.

Our ability to put as many as 20 artists in the same room and get everyone to walk away as if we're telling one story has become, let's say, an expectation. After we do all that, we have to put everything all together and deliver an enjoyable experience.

I use a diversity of artists each engaged for their specialty, using narrative tales to birth complex organisms who promise to marvel each and every guest as individuals, and as collectives.

It's all qualified by the inability on next morning of the guests to describe what happened last night to their friends who weren't there.

Outside live experiences my intent is to expose the wonder of the specific, exploring the individual and combined abilities of various art forms. Since 1994 I have designed automata works which reside around the globe as treasured personal possessions. They have been covered by every form of media.

**Floyd:** Do you strive to create the indescribable?

**Bill:** We attempt to deliver wonder. We specifically engage the room, to offer a sense of the familiar from which a wonder at the unfamiliar can be safely taken. Everything in the room is created for the one evening. Not a thing can have a past. When guests walk in and I get 15 or 20 seconds...and 25 is crazy of them not picking up their phone, I should say their camera, we are successfully working the mojo.



I do not consider raising the bar for each event but rather to be better at who I am. There is always another you to bring forward, another perception to explore. This evolves our process and unfolds content charging us with expressing aspirations worthy of our guests' attention. I set the "where what why" in an effort to provide everyone the freedom of developing their "how" within context. It stands exclusive to each individual at the same time inclusive to everyone involved. Whether or not the guests care or understand the underlying symbolisms and conceits, they sense the spirit of our intention to include them – each one of them and our wish for them to celebrate with us as fellow travelers.



**Floyd:** When I explain your events to people, I tell them it's like an art film shot in a single take where the audience travels through a party scene, seeing things they've never seen before and maybe don't quite understand. It takes them out of their realm.

**Bill:** I always look to our guests and I consider whomever I am attempting to reach as a guest. I break down the guest to 3 parts equally distributed throughout the course of an event, installation, print, or anything else we create. For this event the guests take turns, the role they play, depending on whether they're reacting to the music or the food or a specific installation or perhaps a performance.

Guest One comes in for the big name act and for the food. That is why they're there. We must deliver the big act and the food as easily accessible, intellectually engaging, part and parcel of the overall evening.

Guest Two comes in for the big act and the food but they're looking for something that they can cull out, that they can share when they tell their story. A Two in 2014 might say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, Fleetwood Mac rocked. But there was this amazing cave that was made out of 30,000 books." These are the alternatives we offer.

Guest Three is certain each and every stroke of the brush is of value to the overall story. The first 45 minutes or so we have 800 or more guests walking about, rekindling relationships amidst 50,000 square feet of wall to wall installations, James Beard award chefs standing by to serve, and performance artists in motion. Then it is time to open with a Gregorian chant version of Blondie's "Rapture" acapella with choir, drum line, and more. There is a barker staged as a preacher standing within a piano pulpit to prepare the guests minds. The barker must not only garner attention but his words his content must be thick enough that upon inspection it rewards with insight.



**Floyd:** How do you go about coming up with those concepts for the narrative for each event?





**Bill:** I rely on what interests me. Not being much of a social animal, when in a crowd I seek a conversation with someone who is passionately involved in something; anything, stamp collecting, neural science. Depending on how long I have to stay may have 2 or 3 such conversations. The best of which bring me closer to another as I embrace the energy of their tale and recognize our shared patterns of exploration. My intention is to provide our guests with expressions leading to joy of a shared experience.

Empathy is an infinite resource for creative. It fosters insight to what it is we share no matter how diverse we are. It is empathy that brings the creative to a transcendental dimension. As we walk the line between being a part of and apart from others, it is empathy that provides us comfort with our selves and confidence in our desire to share.

**Floyd:** How do you go about curating artists or collaborators for these events?

**Bill:** I am not a collaborator in the true sense of the word. Before we start, I've already decided what we're going to do, usually where we're going to do it, what it's going to feel like, what we're going to talk about.

People send me interesting works all the time and I am always looking at stuff. Artists are brought in by what I feel they can contribute to the story. What are they bringing that adds depth and breath? They are given "This is what I am thinking,"... "This is the placement."... "Are you inspired?"

Following a "Yes, I am inspired", I am believing in the artist, allowing them ultimate freedom within the context of my vision. I receive 3 bangs for our dollar:

#1 Comes from empathy. I usually get my ask of an artist to be something they have been wishing to do. Now provided with this opportunity this dream moves to a new level of excitement.

#2 Being in the room with other artists of equal power stirs a notion of wishing to be worthy of surroundings.

#3 The space between artists' work elevates as the works ebb and flow sometimes birthing opportunity for a new work. These new works often are picked up by myself with producers or technical directors providing outlets for creative energy beyond necessary logistics.



**Floyd:** How would you describe your leadership style?

**Bill:** My style is very much one-on-one. I have a very broad understanding of the importance of everyone in the event and I lead to that. I try and lead by example.

Once we are at it, I shift heavy in to service mode. I understand my job. There was a time I struggled with being defined as the leader. I finally embraced that my work happens to be the service of creating the big picture, then keeping it strong enough to inspire good working thoughts, flexible enough to grow in to the promise of our enthusiasm.



**Floyd:** What do you like best and least about what you do?

**Bill:** The work, I love to work. Long ago I decided to not separate my work from my life. Work is the best way I know to spend time with someone. I would say, to me, that's a great gift. There's an exchange there and that's

what I like best about it.

**Floyd:** What do you like the least about what you do?

**Bill:** Strike. [laughs] I don't have a better answer.....I do not participate in it.

**Floyd:** What are you fascinated with lately?

**Bill:** Public performance. I am looking for opportunities to employ a few different looks. I have a feeling public performance including concerts and festivals might be improved. I believe there is a divide between what is being presented and what guests are capable of enjoying. Further I wish to express respect for the importance of each individual. For the sake of your guests, I'll shut down the rant behind this.

**Floyd:** What gives you hope?

**Bill:** Waking up. I expect great things and I don't mean that in a trite way...I like being alive and, so the fact that I wake up the next morning gives me hope. I'm here. Let's go.



**Floyd:** We've had some conversations about how you do your best to live in what Tony Robbins calls a beautiful state. Can you speak to that at all?

**Bill:** Each morning I have my prayers tied to some slow movements. Write the same exact words in my book with a different drawing of the same characters. To remind me of who I am. How I wish to live.

I enjoy life. I do my best to spread joy. I am all for working at a beautiful world.

You have been with me thru these events. I am reasonably even keel whatever comes at us. I respect everyone and what we are doing allowing me to deliver timely decisions based on what serves our client best, which in turn serves our purpose and our selves.

### Story

**Bill:** 2006, we were working on our show "Magic" aka Beautiful Actions and one of the magic things we decided to build was a structure. We had seen this structure by Shigeru Ban for a photography exhibit and it was shipping containers on a pier in New York. When I spoke with him to see if he was interested in working with us, he replied he never wished to see another container. We did not stack the containers in similar fashion but we did take his inspiration. He had done one a certain way, we decided to do them in another way.



We were creating a 150 foot by 300 foot clear span building, and we made the walls by stacking shipping containers for the whole structure. On the sides, the containers were stacked about five high. That got us up a little bit above 40 feet.

We needed it to be a temporary structure, so we could not attach a roof to it. That meant that we were creating these 40' tall legs to support the tensile roof. They were 40' and then, we had an apex that went across and took the roof up to a peak at 80'.

We got to the point where all the containers were up, but we were not getting the steel to support the roof on schedule. There were a lot of conversations with the person that was supposed to be delivering the steel, but it wasn't getting any better.

We were at Labor Day weekend, one week away from the show and the last 5 apexes, 10 legs, were to be delivered Sunday morning.

Our vendor hadn't managed to do anything according to schedule and we were probably about three weeks behind. And we were paying for the largest crane in the United States to be there.

Saturday night at 7PM, my steel guy walks into the trailer. I looked at him and I said, "The legs aren't coming tomorrow morning, right?" He said, "No, they're not." He said, "We'll have them for you by Tuesday." The problem was that the crane had to leave Sunday, without a doubt. I had already kept it three weeks beyond and it didn't matter how much money I had, they were leaving.



I said, "Here's the deal. We're going to figure this out and whatever it costs me to figure this out, the bill is yours." We had a little gentleman's agreement. He was not a bad guy, he was just not a good deliverer of steel. It was OK.



I had been preaching to my team, who had been looking for a contingency plan, that we were going to have a roof. What are we going to do? What are we going to do? I was determined. "We're not going to have a contingency plan. We have a whole bunch of really smart people in this room and I'm not going to give up on the roof."

7PM Labor Day weekend on Saturday night, we got on the phone. We smiled. We dialed. We got a hold of a security guard at a local steel mill. He got us in touch with the owner. We opened up the steel mill. We got trucks to the steel mill. We got the steel to two different places, one on the south side, and on the north side. It got prepped.

It came piece-by-piece to the site on Sunday morning and we got it all up before the crane had to go home. There's no reason that should have worked. But, it did. I do believe that's a lesson. I know the gods favor me - I prepare as if they do not exist. [laughs]

**Floyd:** When failure is not an option...

**Bill:** Sometimes, somebody has to be the boss or whatever you want to call it. There are things like that where I do not choose a democratic solution if we would have had a contingency plan a month before we might have put it in place that night and we might not have achieved what we ultimately did.