



Losing, my religion

*In the beginning, there was an incomprehensible film about a guy called “The Dude” who is unemployed, goes to the supermarket in his bathrobe, smokes joints and drinks cocktails. Its title: **The Big Lebowski**. Directors: Joel and Ethan Coen. Release date: 1998. Fifteen years later, the fictional character has become a role model for a global mass of superfans. Welcome to the world of **“Dudeism”**.*

By Jean-Vic Chapus ~ Photos : Dom Holt

FROM A DISTANCE, it looks like Woodstock, or a reconstruction of the flower power sit-ins at American campuses where students protested against sending troops to Vietnam. Unruly beards are everywhere; cool or assimilated hippies smile with beatific innocence. The most well-groomed wear beige bathrobes, Ray-Bans, sometimes even worn leather sandals. The most politicised softly wave placards with slogans such as: “Just take it easy, mankind!” “Fuck it dude! Let’s go bowling!” “Bonks not bombs”. As protests go, all they really seem to be trying to do is channel the lifestyle incarnated by The Dude, a fictional character invented by the Coen brothers in their 1998 film *The Big Lebowski*. Unforgettably played by Jeff Bridges, Jeffrey Lebowski aka The Dude goes grocery shopping in his bathrobe, Bermuda shorts and flip flops, is unemployed, loves pot, spends his time bowling, drinks White Russians, and starts his sentences with phrases such as “It’s just like... you know man...”. Basically, he’s a character frozen in time, a product of psychedelic 1970s California. Both alternative and pacifist, he’s half Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, half Dennis Hopper from *Easy Rider*.

Those familiar with the Dude’s followers generally tell of an amusing pastiche mixing pop-culture, mysticism and debauchery between friends. Richey, a 24-year-old student at the University of Glasgow, remembers a Dudeist event. It was August 2011, on the fringes of the Edinburgh Film Festival. The event’s code name was “The Sermon on the Hill”. “In Edinburgh, I had seen some of

these guys shoot bowling balls down the middle of the road. They all seemed to be stoned. I was with my girlfriend, and suddenly a guy wearing a robe and Ray-Bans came over and started talking to us. He was an American. He asked me: “Hey man! Do you put respect for your friends before all other values? Have you seen *The Big Lebowski*? Do you ever go bowling?” Then this guy handed me an invitation for a drink in a local pub!” Then the bathrobe-clad stranger got going, telling Richey and his girlfriend that his life became much simpler after he began to follow the principles The Dude. Proselytised? Not even. Richey continues: “When our conversation ended, the guy just smiled at me. “Cool man, take it easy! See things positively; take a regular bath, not a shower; do yoga; and observe your bowling ball as it rolls, this will eliminate stress from your life!” and that was it, he walked away.”

“The meaning of life explained at last”

That laid back stranger was Oliver Benjamin. Tanned and in his 40s, with the glazed eyes of a true marijuana enthusiast, those who meet him on the margins of a Dudeist event would find it difficult to guess where he comes from. On the telephone, the Sherman Oaks, California native now living in Thailand, explains in a soft voice: “Actually, they also call me the “Dudely Lama”. Lama, because I’m Zen and I’ve studied Buddhism and Taoism, two paths to the understanding of Dudeism.” The initiation route followed by this freelance journalist – a specialist, not





coincidentally, in exotic tourism and tea – went through various stages. The first came in a shabby cinema in Santa Monica: “It was the year the film came out, in 1998. There were no more than fifteen of us pigging out on popcorn. When *The Big Lebowski* was released, the reviews weren’t really horrible, but I found them intriguing. You don’t often see a story at the movies about a hippy who goes bowling and becomes the hero of a mystery story just because someone stole his carpet.” And then? “I’m going to tell you the truth, I didn’t get much the first time. There was a huge fog. It took five, six, maybe even seven years for that cloud to lift.” The Dudely Lama isn’t too sure of the details, but what is clear is that at the beginning of 2000, Oliver Benjamin decided to leave the US for Chiang Mai, Thailand. There, among the Buddhist temples, with their pastel coloured facades and white sandy beaches, he decided to put into practice his aspirations for a life made continuously easy. Making a detour into Zen Buddhism, he began to try a little yoga, and read a wide variety of philosophical texts. And in Thailand, he received the enlightenment he was looking for: Jeff Lebowski, alias “The Dude”, is more than a movie character. “I was in a bar with some guys, we were all wasted. We started talking about everything and nothing; the meaning of life in this aggressive, modern world. And there, leaning my elbows on the bar, I say to them: “Guys, the lifestyle we’re looking for, it’s right there in my laptop!” I take out my Mac and I show them *The Big Lebowski*. That was my epiphany. The meaning of life explained at last.”

That represents the birth of a crazy religion, which, despite its worldwide reach has a particularly American quality. In 2005, with the assistance of some friends also based in Thailand, Benjamin created a website - www.dudeism.com - to share the good news. The first thing to do once you visit it is to read the following manifesto: “Life is short and complicated and nobody knows what to do about it. So don’t do anything about it. Just take it easy, man. Stop worrying so much whether you’ll make it into

the finals. Kick back with some friends and some oat soda and whether you roll strikes or gutters, do your best to be true to yourself and others – that is to say, abide”. After which, you can actually register and join the order of Dudeist priests: it takes no more than two minutes. Just reply online with your basic information and vow that you will ‘Uphold the principles of Dudeism: To just take it easy, to be *dude* (easygoing) to everyone I meet, and to keep my mind limber’. If you can say “yes” to the latter, the doors of Dudeism will open. Now that’s what you call selective religion.

Dwayne Eustey, jovial and ruddy cheeked, co-wrote the Dudeist reference manual *The Dude Abides! Living like Lebowski*. He’s also responsible for the Southeastern Diocese of The Church of the Latter-Day Dude, and is therefore a convincing man of faith: “If I run into people who know *The Big Lebowski*, I tell them to take things easy, like the Dude does in the film. If they’re Christian, then I tell them that Dudeism advocates what Jesus of Nazareth – not the pederast Jesus from *The Big Lebowski* – said: “Live simply like a lily in the field!” Well, I think that’s what he said. I’m sorry, but my first memory of religion is from when I was six years old and I saw a cartoon on TV about Hercules and the Gods of Mount Olympus. It was cool!” Like his fellow believers, when Dwayne Eustey speaks, he is constantly making references to his favourite film. “Me, I’m a working class guy. I had to work part time to pay for my education” he says, speaking of his youth in Maryland. “You know that scene in *The Big Lebowski* where the hoodlums attack the Dude to get the money he owes? Well, it’s the same for me, at the end of each quarter, the owner of the local bar always calls me to say: “Where’s the money, Eustey? Where’s the money?” And his philosophy? “I believe in Yin and Yang. Perfect! I can flip my lid like the Walter Sobchak character [the testy Vietnam vet played by John Goodman in the film] and stay cool like The Dude. Everything has to be learned from a balance between the two!”



“To see things positively, take a bath regularly, not a shower, and observe your bowling ball as it rolls.”

Dudeist slogan

“I was taking a nap, man!”

Even if Dudeism is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, it constitutes a significant cultural movement. However, few could have seen it coming in 1998, when *The Big Lebowski* was released to a notably lukewarm response. With a fairly meagre gross of \$14m at the US box office, one could even say that it bombed, even though that amount allowed the Coen brothers to cover the costs of making the film. It only became a cult film later. Steve Palopoli, a journalist for the weekly *Santa Cruz Metro*, was the first to write an article about the film’s underground rehabilitation. He believes the beginning of its cult status lies in California. The crucial year was 2000, when there was a screening at the New Beverly, a legendary cinema in LA that would later be purchased by one Quentin Tarantino.

“During the film, something weird happened. I could hear all kinds of guys and girls around me, reciting dialogue by heart. They would shout ‘Oh yeah!’ when they told the Steve Buscemi character to ‘Shut the fuck up, Donny!’ That’s when I understood that *The Big Lebowski* had become a cult film. And there aren’t many cult films. A few by John Waters and David Lynch maybe...” Today, ‘official’ figures claim between 150,000 and 500,000 members of the Dudeist church.

What’s more, this ‘cult’ brings together activists nostalgic for the counterculture years: a handful of freelance journalists and writers, dropouts from the American liberal arts system, a few free spirits concerned more by enlightenment philosophy and Creedence Clearwater Revival records than jobs or responsibilities. In many ways, it’s the true American underground. Among them we have the likes of Gary Silvia. With a filthy cap perched jauntily on his head, an unkempt beard and halting speech, he is a role model for the church. A charming character based in Watertown, Maine, his grandmother hoped he might have a religious vocation. In the end, he enlisted in the army and served in the first Gulf War (incidentally the conflict against which *The Big Lebowski* is pointedly set.) When he returned, he became a mechanic, a Dudeist priest

and...a glass engraver. The rest of the time, he says he studies religion and observes nature. After several attempts to ask him some questions are met with radio silence, Gary replies with an email simply reading “OK”, and then “Cool”. But then he forgets to send his replies our questions. “I was taking a nap, man! I often take naps!” It’s safe to say that Silvia is, at all times, very, very *dude*.

In the Dudeist language “Don’t give a damn” is expressed as “Seek to repair the foundations of the good arch of the Dude and his faithful!” Whatever that means. “We’re a modern religion in that everything’s done online. We don’t meet much in real life. In any event, we don’t want to make the effort”, explains Eutsey Benjamin, though, makes the movement seem more active. “We have lots of projects. We’re working on a social network for Dudeists called The Social Network. The only thing that worries us is that we use Jeff Bridges’ photo for our tracts, sites etc. We’ve even transformed him into a religious figure, the poor guy!”

Apparently Bridges is pretty amused by the absurdity of it all. In 2005, he even attended the Lebowski Fest in Los Angeles. An annual event similar to conventions for comic book fans or superhero movies, with the format transposed into the psychedelic universe of The Dude, it was created in 2002 by graphic designer Bill Green, plus friends Scott Shuffitt, Ben Peskoe and Will Russell. According to those present, when Bridges showed up he immediately grabbed a guitar and gave a laidback performance of some folk and country songs. “He was relaxed, super accessible”, Russell recalls. But above all, Bridges was wearing the same transparent plastic sandals that he wears in the film. “At the end of his performance, he asked me: ‘Do you want to try them, man?’ It was my Cinderella moment!”

Lebowski Fest was first held in Louisville, Kentucky. “We got a bowling alley on loan from a Baptist congregation. The problem was that they were quite uptight, so we had to fight to get them to allow us to drink White Russians there.” Later, the Fest moved to places like New York or San Francisco, where in 2012 “two guys showed up to enter our bowling tournament”, says Russell. “We told them they needed to be in teams of three. But they weren’t discouraged: they just took out a coffee mug filled with ashes. It was their recently deceased uncle Frank, the third participant!”

Oliver Benjamin, looking back, simply shrugs his shoulders. In his view, Dudeism is a movement that started as a joke and would therefore be better off remaining a religion without a leader; a counterculture utopia. “Sometimes people come up to me and they go: ‘Hey! Dudely Lama! Show me the light, man!’ What do you want me to say to them? I try to help them. ‘Are you out of it, man? Take things easy. Go do a little bowling!’”

● Interviews by JVC