

Hollywood Throws God a Party

Actress Dyan Cannon's Christian meetings on a CBS backlot just might be the best show in Tinseltown. And her testimony is changing attitudes in a community known for its hostility to the gospel.

The plot seems farfetched: A movie star leaves drugs and religious experimentation to embrace Christ and begins hosting Benny Hinn-style healing meetings on the CBS studio lot in Los Angeles. Yet that's what Dyan Cannon has done with her "God's Party With Dyan Cannon & U," or GPDC & U. And she may be redefining what Hollywood thinks of charismatic Christianity.

The CBS studio lot is like a walled city, with sound stages and mock city streets. Turn one corner, and you're abruptly in a suburban neighborhood. Turn another corner, and you're in Manhattan, where the sitcom Seinfeld was filmed.

Turn again at the intersection of Mary Tyler Moore and Newhart streets, and you see the CBS commissary, which looks like an oversized Starbucks café. Tonight the room is festooned with balloons and white Christmas lights. Urban music plays over the PA system, and a crowd of 300—young and old, of all ethnicities—waits for the party to start.

Max Anderson, a crane operator from San Pedro, Calif., came here after work, bringing his wife and a friend. He goes to an Assemblies of God church and heard about GPDC & U on the radio.

"[Cannon] did really good last time," he says. "I was in awe because the Spirit of God is on her."

His words are drowned out by the 10-piece band, which has started its opening medley of "Hold on, Help Is on the Way," "Celebrate" and "We Are Family." Everyone stands and claps. Then the party music becomes praise music: "We are blessed in

the city/ We are blessed in the field.” Even the bouncer—wearing a black T-shirt that says BADD, for “Born Again Delivered Disciple”—is enjoying himself.

Cannon arrives and dances in the front row. She’s wearing jeans, a light blue sweater and hoop earrings. Her unmistakable cascade of blonde, curly hair falls past her shoulders. She raises her hands to God, then takes the microphone and asks, “Is anyone here blessed?”

Then she prays: “Lord, You brought no one here by accident. We’re not going to walk out the same way we walked in. Thank You for the Spirit of Your precious the middle of this CBS lot.”

She laughs. “This is the best show in town. Amen?”

The crowd gives a hearty amen, and the meeting thumps along like a pulse. Visible through the window is the sound stage where sitcom *Will & Grace* is taped. But tonight isn’t about Nielsen ratings—it’s about ministry.

Off the Deep End?

Cannon’s emergence as Hollywood’s most famous Christian is, she believes, unlikely. “This has nothing to do with Dyan,” she says during a later interview in her Los Angeles condominium, where worship music plays against a backdrop of international decorations and scented candles. “I think He likes us to have that feeling of helplessness [so] we have to lean on Him.”

Cannon is known for her 40-year film career and her TV roles on *Three Sisters* and *Ally McBeal*. She is known for her 1965-68 marriage to actor Cary Grant, which produced his (and her) only child. She is known for her front-row Los Angeles Lakers enthusiasm and for her agelessness, which even at 63 lands her roles with elements of sex appeal.

Now she is known in Hollywood as the formerly Jewish actress who went off the deep end, or the actress who's bringing the power of God to the movie industry—depending on your perspective.

She was born in 1937 in Tacoma, Washington, to a Jewish mother who fled post-revolutionary Russia. Her Dutch-Canadian father was nonreligious going into marriage, but met the Lord and became a passionate believer.

When his two children were born—first a son, then Samille Diane Friesen, later renamed “Dyan Cannon” by a Hollywood producer—Cannon’s father kept his promise to raise the children Jewish. But he also taught them about Jesus. Cannon was scolded for singing “Jesus Loves Me ” at the synagogue.

Just before his bar mitzvah, Cannon’s brother declared his love for Christ, further deepening the family’s divide. Trying to achieve some balance, Cannon sided with her mother and attended the synagogue.

“It’s been a lifetime of sorting that out,” she says. “The pull in me was so extreme that I couldn’t even say the name of Jesus out loud. But there was something in me that said there was something else.”

She attended the University of Washington for less than two years, then moved briefly to Phoenix and then to Los Angeles. An agent discovered her in a Hollywood restaurant, and that led to a role on a TV series.

It also caught the attention of Cary Grant, who saw her on television and arranged a meeting. They were married in 1965, when Cannon was 26 and Grant was 61. The turbulent marriage lasted three years.

Through it all, Cannon says she was on a quest for God. In her 20s she visited synagogues and churches in Los Angeles. At one of those meetings she went forward to accept Christ, but the

decision didn't stick.

While filming Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice (for which she received an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress in 1969), she experienced God's presence alone in her room and started seeking out churches again. But that pursuit was marred, she says, by several pastors who came on to her or had affairs with people she knew.

"I wasn't strong enough to overcome that," she says. "I was still looking for leadership outside myself. That revival hadn't happened inside of me. I was looking to these people for guidance, and they looked to me for something else. That was staggering."

She now calls those incidents blessings in disguise because they made her dig deeper into God's Word.

The 1970s brought more success, including an Oscar nomination in 1978 for Best Supporting Actress for Heaven Can Wait. But Cannon also got into strange fads—including primal-scream therapy and watermelon dieting—as well as drug addiction.

"I was told that if I had money, I'd be OK," she says. "If I married someone important, had a kid, a house, was a movie star. I had all that stuff, and the same black hole I'd had in the synagogue was there."

One night she attended a Kathryn Kuhlman meeting at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. "I'll never forget it," she says, with lingering awe. "The lights went black, a spotlight hit the stage, and Kathryn walked on with her arms out, white robes falling. I have never before or since seen a presence like that. It swept in and took your breath away. I was transfixed."

Afterward Cannon lied to get backstage and asked Kuhlman for prayer. Kuhlman laid hands on her, and Cannon fell on the floor, overcome by the anointing.

In the following years Cannon studied the Bible intensely and found a Christian woman whom she met with almost daily (or called from pay phones when on the road) to seek clarification and counsel.

Once when she attended a Benny Hinn crusade, again at the Shrine Auditorium, Hinn invited her to the stage and prayed for her, though she was openly skeptical. She went down under the anointing. "Everything's going to change," she says he told her.

She traveled to Hinn's crusades in other cities and began an informal apprenticeship with one of his prayer leaders. But even after participating in healing miracles, she wasn't ready to make it a lifestyle.

"I thought it was so spooky and weird, but I was seeing things with my own unbelieving eyes," she says. "People would ask me to pray, but it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to be accepted and didn't want people to think I was weird. I hadn't digested that [what I was seeing at Hinn's meetings] was the hand and power of God."

Then she started a Bible study at her house that outgrew her living room. During a time of prayer God gave her the idea—and name—for God's Party With Dyan Cannon. She nailed down a meeting location at CBS, but didn't intend to do what she calls "the healing thing."

"I thought it was supposed to be a large Bible study," she says. "There were healings in my house, but I didn't think I was supposed to do that at CBS. But the first night I heard myself say, 'All those who would like to come up who have something wrong with them... .'"

Since that day in late 1998, Cannon has become an oddity in Hollywood: an established actress who openly embraces Christianity.

"Dyan has a great love for people, and she's equally comfortable ministering to the down-and-outer as the up-and-outer," says Tommy Barnett, pastor of Phoenix First Assembly of God, and co-pastor with son Matthew of Los Angeles International Church, which provides covering for her ministry. "Her Bible studies and prayer gatherings have had an incredible impact on all sorts of people."

Cannon agrees that her party is having an effect, but she insists that the power of God was "foisted" on her at first. "Now it's what I live for," she says.

Cannon is not bothered by the sometimes worldly tone of the TV shows she appears in. Her character on Three Sisters runs a yoga shop. In one episode she attends a Playboy bunny reunion. At other times, she uses crude language.

"I just go where God leads," Cannon says of her acting career. Her common response to such questions is that she's the representation of Christ's love to the people she encounters.

A Holy Ghost Party

On the CBS lot, after an hour of dancing and music solos, Cannon segues into a lengthy time of worship. The band plays, cymbals bang, people sway with arms upraised. Cannon offers prayers as a subtext to the music.

"Holy Spirit, we ask that You rain down on us."

Arms raised, eyelids sparkling with glitter, she seems to be pressing deeper into God's presence. "God is telling me there are heavy hearts in here," she says.

After 30 minutes of worship and free-singing as intense as at any revival service, Cannon dons black-rimmed reading glasses, takes the podium, opens her Bible and begins the sermon.

Her preaching is soft and pleading, heavy on Scripture quotation, seasoned with self-help phrases. The people, even

those here to observe, are caught off guard by her informality.

She quotes Romans, calling the apostle Paul a “big hero” of the Bible. She talks about renewing your mind, the theme of her message.

She discusses the word “dis”—street lingo for doing somebody wrong. She says “dis” is used to mess up God’s best concepts: ability becomes disability. Accord becomes discord.

In the dictionary, she says, “dis” means: “The god of the underworld. The undoing or the reversal of something.” Then she raps: “Don’t do dis, do dat, you silly cat. I said, don’t do dis, do dat,” and invites everyone to rap with her.

Now the Scriptures are flowing from her. “‘A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways,’” she says. “‘For the law of the Spirit of Jesus Christ has made us free from the law of sin and death.’ Laws are fixed rules, but God is love!”

She stands on a chair for emphasis. “I don’t care, Dyan Cannon-Dyan Shmannon. I don’t care the biggest names in Hollywood. It ain’t gonna work. What we’re talking about is practical. Be renewed in your mind!”

At 9:35 p.m. she closes in prayer, but the ministry is not over. The band plays, people get up and stretch. Some leave, and Cannon announces that she’s going to pray for people. First she takes up a collection.

Outside, Jim, a pastor at a large church in Orange County, says he came to see if Cannon’s message was biblically aligned. “I was very impressed,” he says. “The fact that she’s here—it’s a thing where if you build it, they will come.”

Inside, a line has formed, and Cannon lays hands on people’s heads and prays. “That’s it. The Spirit of God is on you, friend,” she tells a man. “All you have to do is say yes.”

"Yes," the man says.

Nearly all of the 25 people who receive prayer go over backward, weeping. At times Cannon crumples to the floor momentarily, as if the power has hit her, too.

A woman with pain in her abdomen testifies, "I don't feel the pain anymore."

Another woman cries, "I want to be healed. Jesus, heal me."

"In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, it's done," Cannon says. "The Spirit of God is purging your body."

Mary steps outside after receiving prayer for chronic fatigue syndrome. She laid on the floor for several minutes after Cannon prayed for her.

"I had a powerful experience my first time here," Mary says. "I'd had asthma and emotional problems. The first time she prayed for me I felt like something was literally pulled out of my chest. Since then I've had no asthma, and the emotional problems got better."

With her is Vanessa, who says she's Catholic. "I wanted prayer for my mind, to clear the confusion," she says. "I feel more alive and less jumpy, but I can't say anything for a fact. I do believe in God, prayer and the power of faith."

As the prayer line continues, one young man wants healing from rage and marijuana addiction. "I understand that addiction," Cannon says. "I was a pothead. I smoked it between every take at the studio. But what I wanted was God's love."

Then she prays: "You devil of anger, come off him now. This is God's property, in the name of Jesus of Nazareth."

The man goes down.

Many people say they have been healed at Cannon's meetings.

Rose Marie Gabrielsen, a legal secretary living in Los Angeles, had a bleeding cyst on her ovaries. After receiving prayer at God's Party, she says, the bleeding stopped.

"I didn't know anything about [Cannon], her movies, her marriage. I treat her like a minister because God uses her," Gabrielsen says.

Gabrielsen's doctor, Barry Brock, an obstetrician-gynecologist in Beverly Hills, confirms that she was bleeding and that he gave her hormone pills to stop it.

Whether it was the pills or the prayer that worked, he doesn't know. Gabrielsen also says she was healed of complications stemming from a car accident and received other major answers to prayer.

"When I have a problem, I go for prayer and get results," she says.

The meeting ends at 11:30 p.m. Many of the people here have come to consider God's Party their "church." Some, including God's Party staff, thought the meetings would impact the industry but now say it's having a greater impact on burned-out and spiritually hungry believers.

Cannon will soon begin hosting parties in other cities, and she is looking for a permanent location in Los Angeles. She envisions a warehouse or hangar converted into GPDC & U headquarters, where young people can come every night to find safety, friendship and even job skills.

"Some of my pals from Hollywood will come teach them how to do makeup, how to step-dance," she says. "This city sends messages to the world. Get hold of the kids, and you can change the message."

Soon God's Party will be held every Saturday night, even as Cannon's acting career is going full steam ahead. "I really

believe my steps are ordered," she says. "Every day I learn more what Christ's love is. The power and strength of that love heals anything, if you receive it."

Joel Kilpatrick *is a frequent contributor to Charisma. He lives in Los Angeles.*