

The Unusual Suspect

People were surprised when actor Stephen Baldwin became a born-again Christian and started preaching the gospel. And that's exactly what God had in mind.

Michael McManus is lying face down on the bed ... shirtless. Rousing from a deep sleep, he squints at the flood of blinding white light coming from the police flashlights. More annoyed than frightened, he cusses as the black-gloved hands grab at him and pull him out of bed to take him downtown for a meeting that will change the course of his life... (The Usual Suspects DVD).

Stephen Baldwin is lying face up on the table ... shirtless. The tattoo artist is working on his right arm. Ryan Dobson-whose father, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, probably wouldn't be caught dead at Sid's Tattoo Parlor-is sitting in the corner, recording a Podcast for ryan .

"If you hear a funny noise in the background, my guest Stephen Baldwin's getting tattooed tonight. How's the inner arm feel?" Dobson quips.

Baldwin fires back: "It's the inside of the right bicep, Dude. And it's the future of the movement of the Holy Spirit here in America ... SONNY!"

At 39, Baldwin isn't much older than Dobson. But if the comment stung, Dobson isn't letting on. What does sting is the ink gun buzzing away in the background like some kind of mechanical flying insect. But unlike Michael McManus, the foulmouthed thug that he played in the now-classic crime thriller *The Usual Suspects*, Baldwin isn't cussing up a blue streak. Instead, he's running on about his new mission in life.

Dobson inquires about Baldwin's new ink, the acronym RULI.

"Ruu-lee, Brotha," Baldwin pronounces. "Stands for 'RU LIVIN' IT?'"

"It's my skate ministry, Dawg, that's touring the country. ... The tour is an evangelistic outreach to the youth of America, but in the new kinda relevant, hardcore way. Not in that relevant way that they say is relevant ... that's irrelevant."

Born into one of Hollywood's most renowned acting families that includes big brother Alec Baldwin, Stephen was arrested in 2001 by the Holy Spirit, who grabbed his heart and led him away from the life that Hollywood had afforded him to a life of sacrifice and surrender.

He's still coming to blows with the experience.

"I'm the last guy to believe and understand the power of my own conversion," Baldwin tells New Man.

"The Lord has really slapped me upside the head pretty quick, and I believe it's for times such as this. I am no longer interested in the distractions of the world. I want to stay focused on my relationship with Christ, my love for Him and what I am supposed to do that He wants me to do. Period."

McManus sits with his hands locked firmly together in front of him in the dimly lit interrogation room. The cops try their best to break him. They accuse, they point fingers ... they curse and spit and call him nasty names. But this guy's a top-notch entry man. He's been in this situation before. McManus just smiles and shrugs it off. He's not about to give them the satisfaction... (The Usual Suspects DVD).

Baldwin sits with his hands locked around a paper cup filled with steaming hot coffee in the brightly lit bakery. It's a crisp day in Nyack, near his home in upstate New York. And Baldwin is trying to break the chill.

Some of the locals crowded into the Runcible Spoon turn their heads only slightly, not wanting to make it too obvious that they're gawking at the Hollywood celebrity dressed in camouflage pants and a wool-lined denim jacket.

Baldwin goes on to explain what I already suspected: Namely, that the response to his conversion has been a mixed bag. The church, for the most part, has been quick to embrace him as one of their own. Still, some Christians are skeptical:

"A lot of believers come up to me on the street and they say, 'Are you a Baldwin?' and I say, 'Yeah, Man, how you doing?' And they say: 'Hey! Are you Christian?' And I say: 'Praise the Lord, yeah! Isn't it awesome?' And they say, 'No you're not.' What I tell those people is this, 'Believe me, Brother ... nobody CAN'T believe it more than me.'"

Hollywood is also getting used to the idea of a sanctified Stephen Baldwin.

"I come from 15 years of working in the movie business and, you know, I am absolutely certain there's a majority of the folks in Hollywood that are hearing about what's going on with me in my life. They're rolling their eyes, and they're saying: 'This guy's nuts and da, da, da, da. And he supports [President] Bush, and all this kind of stuff.'"

But in trademark fashion, Baldwin doesn't sweat his critics. They didn't sway his decisions when it came to his movies (think Bio Dome and The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas, which Baldwin says are two of his favorite starring roles). They're not about to break him or derail him from his mission from God. That mission is Livin' It, an extreme sports ministry that is a partnership between the actor and renowned evangelist Luis Palau.

That God has re-written the script of Baldwin's life is a fascinating turn of events that rivals the surprise ending of The Usual Suspects.

Born on May 12, 1966, in the middle class town of Massapequa, New York, Stephen once told a reporter that growing up as a Baldwin “was kind of like The Brady Bunch on a couple of extra shots of espresso.”

The youngest in a family of four brothers and two sisters, Stephen’s father taught school for about 30 years at Massapequa High, where all four sons excelled in athletics. As a teenager, Stephen worked in a pizza parlor and was a successful opera singer in high school. He won a state award for a cappella singing and even considered pursuing a career as a vocalist.

Meanwhile, big brother Alec, who had been the student body president in high school, lost an election for a similar post at The George Washington University. He took the loss as a sign to take a new direction in life and enrolled in The Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute at New York University. After being told “you stink” during his first movie audition, Alec landed a soap opera role on The Doctors.

“He was making more money in the first month than my dad was as a teacher the whole school year,” Stephen remembers. “And Danny, Billy and I said to ourselves, ‘If that dummy can do it, then we might as well give it a whirl.’ And that’s how it all started.”

Stephen studied at The American Academy of Dramatic Arts and went on to star in more than 60 films, including Last Exit to Brooklyn and Born on the Fourth of July. His part in ABC’s The Young Riders was a breakout role for the actor. That series began a three-year run in 1989, and a year later, he married a beautiful Brazilian woman named Kennya Deodato, the daughter of bossa nova legend Eumir Deodato.

He didn’t know it at the time, but Kennya’s faith in Christ would eventually be the key to Stephen’s surrender. That, and a tragedy that would forever change the course of a nation.

McManus stares at the bullet peppered body of his partner, fighting any flicker of emotion. The waves crash against the shoreline as the moonlight casts an eerie glow. For McManus, everything he knew to be true has changed. Nothing will be the same now... (The Usual Suspects DVD).

Baldwin stares at the tape recorder in front of him, fighting for just the right words as we continue our interview. There's a quiet intensity about the actor, like he's about to break loose at any moment. The eyes are ice-the famous "Baldwin blues" that pierce to the back of your skull.

It was a Brazilian nanny named Agusta who initially piqued Baldwin's interest in the gospel. Stephen and Kenya were living in Tucson, Arizona, at the time and had hired the woman after the birth of their first daughter. Stephen remembers that Agusta was "about 6' 1", very serious demeanor," and she kept to herself for the most part. But as she went about her daily tasks, she always sang in Portuguese. Stephen couldn't understand the songs, save one word: Jesus.

"Literally in the chorus of every song was the name Jesus. So like every seven minutes, 'La, la, la ... Jesus ... Mmmm ... Jesus,'" says Baldwin, singing falsetto.

One day, Kenya asked Agusta about the singing, and the usually reserved housekeeper doubled over laughing hysterically. "I mean no disrespect," she said. "I just find it amusing that you think I'm just here to clean your house."

As it turned out, Agusta received a prophecy from someone in her church prior to accepting the Baldwins' job offer: "If you go to work for these people, at some point they'll come to Christ. And at some point after that, they'll go on and have their own ministry."

Baldwin remembers, "So my wife comes back over to the office: 'Honey, guess what Agusta said? We're gonna become born-again Christians and someday have our own ministry!' Guess who

started laughing then?"

Agusta and Kennya had many conversations about Christ before the nanny took a job with another family. After the birth of their second daughter, the Baldwins moved to New York, where Kennya started attending an "extremely charismatic, Brazilian church," Stephen says. Then one night, she came home after a service and informed her husband that she gave her life to Jesus Christ and was baptized in water. She said that things were going to be different from then on: "We've been around the world; we have two beautiful kids; we've made a lot of money. ... But I need you to understand that I've given my life to Jesus and what that means for me from now on is that I'm going to spend each and every day figuring out how I can best serve Him," she told her husband.

During the next 12 months, Kennya began a daily prayer and Bible study regimen that fascinated and sometimes exasperated Stephen. "Every morning she would wake up, get out of bed, get on her knees and literally put her face on the ground. And she would stay in that position for an hour. Then she would get up, get back in bed and read the Bible for 30 minutes. She did that every morning and every night for one year," Stephen remembers.

About nine months into the process, the lights came on for Baldwin: "She's having this wonderful experience, and I'm not." It was at the height of his spiritual curiosity that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 happened. Baldwin's disbelief over the terrorist attacks fueled his belief in God.

"That kind of stuff only happens in the movies, and I make movies. Problem: It happened," Baldwin remembers. "Something happened in the natural that I considered to be an impossibility. So now, the impossible for Stephen Baldwin had now become possible. ... I thought, If anything's possible, Jesus Christ could come back tomorrow. That's the effect 9/11 had on me."

Within a month, Baldwin found a church by his house, gave his life to Jesus Christ and was baptized in water. He was invited by his sister to attend a Luis Palau festival held in July 2002, where he met Kevin Palau, the evangelist's son and executive vice president at the Luis Palau Evangelistic Association.

Stephen and Kevin reunited at Beachfest in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, in March 2003, another Palau-sponsored event. Baldwin was impressed with the 10,000-square-foot skate park that the ministry constructed for the festival, where hardcore Christian skaters would showcase their skills and preach the gospel. He told Kevin Palau: "This is the first thing I've ever seen Christian that is legitimately on the street cool. I'd love to be of some help to you guys in any way."

Palau, who is now close friends with the actor, admits that he was initially cautious about Baldwin. When Stephen asked if he could introduce some of the bands at Beachfest, Palau politely turned him down.

"There was not a chance that I was going to put a new believer that I didn't know in front of a crowd," Palau says. "It was slightly awkward in that I didn't want to dampen his enthusiasm ... without basically coming out and just saying: 'I don't know you well enough to trust you. We don't work that way. We're not just going to grab you because you're a celebrity and stick you up there.'"

But, Palau adds: "I was just taken with the guy. I had no doubt of the genuineness of his relationship with Christ, though it was clear that he was a very new believer. And it was at Beachfest that he and I together came up with the idea of making the *Livin' It* DVD."

The high-impact outreach film, which comes from PalauFest Productions and is hosted and directed by Baldwin, features

BMX and skateboard athletes performing crazy stunts along with face-to-face, street-style evangelism. Baldwin classifies the project as “stealth evangelism” because most of the evangelism is saved for the bonus features:

“We’ve had hundreds of e-mails coming back to the Livin’ It Web site that say: ‘Hey! Got your video. Thank you for not shoving it down my throat. Thank you for respecting my intelligence enough to give me the choice.’ You know what we are doing here? We are just trusting in the Holy Spirit that ... the Lord will lead these kids.”

Stephen has taken to the road with the Livin’ It tour, a live event that will take place in up to 25 cities this year, attracting between 3,000 to 4,000 people per city. The follow-up DVD project, Livin’ It: LA, releases in September and features skate legends Christian Hosoi, Matt Beach, Lance Mountain, Lynn Cooper and others. There’s even a new RULI clothing line.

One Christian teen recently e-mailed the Palau organization after attending a Livin’ It event. He bought a copy of Livin’ It and “watched the DVD seven times already, and this is just two days after the tour [event]. I show all my friends your work, and now they are interested in your tour also. Thanks for having this program, because now I already have spread the word of God in a hip fashion to many of my friends who never even went to church. I hope more people can see this and enjoy it as much as I did.”

Winning over hardcore skaters is a long-term mission, Kevin Palau notes. He remembers one meeting that took place before they made the first Livin’ It DVD.

“Stephen went and had dinner with a very well-known pro skateboarder,” Palau says. “And when the dinner was over, secondhand, I got the word like: ‘Yikes! Get this guy away from me.’ Just in the sense, whoa, came on too strong. ... The skateboarding world is very skeptical, cynical in general. And

it was like, 'Who does this Hollywood guy think he is?'"

Baldwin has won the respect of Christians in skateboarding. But among secular skaters "it's gone from outright skepticism to maybe grudging respect," Palau says. "It's still going to be a process because, frankly, anyone who's not a skateboarder is viewed with suspicion because it's like, 'You're trying to use our sport for your purposes.'"

But Baldwin is not about to give up. Considering the growing popularity of *Livin' It*, he has no reason to.

At press time, about 100,000 copies of the DVD had been distributed (they initially set out to distribute about 10,000 to 15,000 copies). Most have been sold directly to churches and ministries and on the Web, according to Palau. But thousands have also been sold in skate shops and Christian bookstores.

Observers wonder if the growth of Baldwin's ministry will somehow outpace his spiritual growth as a believer. Kevin Palau points to Baldwin's strong commitment to the faith-and his organization's commitment to discipling Stephen.

"I agree that we should not be nabbing every celebrity that comes down the pike the second you hear about them, and just squeezing them out and putting them on every Christian talk show and putting them on the circuit. And I know that some people think that's what happened here," Palau explains.

He adds: "Our board of directors has demanded that Stephen be in active discipleship. But to Stephen's credit, when I say something like that to him, as opposed to saying, 'Who do these guys think they are?' His attitude is: 'Great! I need all the help I can get.'"

He also notes Stephen and Kennya are "very active" in their local church.

The *Livin' It* tour is mostly on Saturdays, and Baldwin will often fly all night to be with his family on Sunday morning.

Palau says: "He could speak in churches every Sunday and make

money doing it. But he won't do that because he made a commitment that he would do everything he could to be home to go to church with Kenya and the girls every Sunday."

McManus can see the end coming. He smiles and walks slowly across the deck. Something is not right about him. "Strangest thing," he says, looking ahead blankly. He slumps to the deck. A knife is sticking out of his back ... (*The Usual Suspects* DVD).

Baldwin can see the end coming. As our time together comes to a close, he questions why more Christians aren't putting their money into spreading the gospel.

"There is this financial bondage within the body of Jesus Christ in this country that I have observed," he says. "People have to learn that the reason we are not reaching the lost is because we're not in the natural empowering those who are supposed to be out there to do it."

For Baldwin, following Christ has meant sacrifices, both personally and professionally. "I've had to make major cutbacks in my personal life, and I wanted to," he says. "I've already had that worldly fun."

When the Sci Fi Channel didn't renew the program *Scare Tactics*, one of Baldwin's few mainstream projects as of late (he spends about 80 percent of his time with *Livin' It*), "it was a bit of a blow" for the actor, Kevin Palau explains. Even though he took some heat from believers for hosting the program in the first place.

"He got some criticism from people saying, 'I thought this guy was a believer,'" Palau says. "Financially, it would have been good. But he took it totally from the Lord and, in fact, he said, 'You know what, I think that's absolutely from the Lord because it was 'on the edge.'"

Baldwin is showing discretion with the roles that he picks. He passed up the role of Jennifer Garner's boyfriend in the

popular TV show *Alias* because he didn't want to diminish his testimony. The fame, the money ... in the end, it's not worth it.

"I've been on 250-foot yachts. I have been in people's private 737 planes. I have been with billionaires, with more money than a lot of people, and you know what? None of that stuff matters. I have been there and done that, and now I am all about the spiritual experience."

Baldwin does have some mainstream projects coming up. But now he draws the line differently.

"I would play a bad guy if there was redemption. I would perform in films that depicted violence as long as it wasn't gratuitous. I would portray a character in the film that had sexual content, as long as it wasn't explicit," Baldwin explains. "The world is the world. The world exists. It's a real place. I am not interested in turning my back on that. I am interested in showing it that the power of God is far greater and powerful than anything that can control us in a worldly way."

Baldwin is so bold with his testimony, many Christians want to know if he's actively witnessing to his family.

"Not really, 'cause I don't have to. I mean, three times a month, my brother Alec tells me that tourists in New York City stop him on the street and say to him: 'Hey! Aren't you Alec Baldwin?' and he says, 'Yes.' And they say, 'Well, could you do me a favor?' And he's expecting to either take a photo or sign an autograph, but then they will say, 'Would you please tell your brother Stephen God bless him for what he's doing for the kingdom?' What I tell a lot of Christians is that the Lord is working on him in His own way.

"That's how I feel about my relationship with my siblings. ... I may be the only Bible that they ever read, and, for me, it's far more important, in my opinion, to trust in the Lord about it and also to just let them become curious, and come and I will answer any questions that they have."

He hopes that the rest of the world will become curious too. The strangest thing has happened to Stephen Baldwin: The old man has been crucified with Christ, the new man has arrived.

He concludes: "I have been places, seen things and done things that 99.9 percent of the American public has not even wildly imagined in their wildest fantasies. I was in Hollywood ... and for me to be snatched out of that, and to receive salvation and be walking in that faith now in an extremely hardcore way, for me on a personal level, it is a living, physical proof that the Holy Spirit is real, exists and can be a life-changing experience."

Baldwin is on a train heading to his next speaking engagement. Spying a teenager nearby, he passes over a copy of the *Livin' It* DVD: "Yo, what's up, Kid? Free skate video." Baldwin's generous act gets the desired response: "Dude! Sick!" (which is actually high praise in skater-ese). As the teen ponders his new treasure, Baldwin turns and makes his exit. "Take it easy, Bro," he says under his breath. "See ya in heaven."

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Robert Andrescik is editor of New Man magazine. Learn more about Baldwin and *Livin' It* at [.](#)