

# “WE’RE NOT A CULT”



Bobbie Houston has her own personal crusade – to empower women through the Hillsong Sisterhood program.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK SCOTT. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY SAM POWELL. STYLING BY BIANCA LANE. BOBBIE WEARS BIANCA SPENDER JACKET AND PANTS, AND WITCHERY CAMI TOP. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHEE.

Bobbie Houston found God at 15, married her first boyfriend Brian at 20 and together they planted Hillsong, Australia’s fastest growing and most controversial church. In an exclusive interview, she talks to **Juliet Rieden** about her mission to empower women, the day she discovered her father-in-law was a paedophile and bringing Justin Bieber into the flock.

**I**T’S A BRIGHT Sunday morning in Baulkham Hills and already the traffic is backed up on the Solent Circuit. Smiling teens in high-visibility orange vests and back-to-front baseball caps embroidered with Y & F – Young and Free – have been directing cars for hours. They are all heading the same way; to the Hills Campus to take part in uproarious worship at one of the four capacity services at the Hillsong convention centre and chapel. Every Sunday, more than 10,000 parishioners descend on this hallowed quadrant in the Business Park in Sydney’s north-west, some by car, some in the church’s private buses, and significantly more will be tuning in via Hillsong TV from all over the country and the world. Seventy-five per cent of the church’s followers are under 35 and 91 per cent under 50. They come perhaps for the razzamatazz that has made Hillsong Australia’s fastest-growing church, the chart-topping, award-winning music

spearheaded by Joel Houston, the pop idol eldest son of founders Brian, 62, and Bobbie, 59, who now records and co-pastors in the US, and the rousing rhetoric of Pastor Brian. Whatever they come for, it’s working. There’s a dress code among the church youths, teens and 20-somethings: skinny black jeans, often ripped at the knees, sequinned or sloganned T-shirts, waves of flowing boho tresses for the girls and boy-band gelled quiffs for the lads. The mix of parishioners is notably multicultural, taking in Chinese, Pacific Islander, Vietnamese, Indian, African as well as white Australian. As they gather together in the sunshine drinking coffee and eating muffins from the cafe culture stalls, there’s an overwhelming sense of community. People hug, chat about their families, wave to one another in the throng. Around the corner, children flock to the Hillsong Kids’ Club. It’s manned by youth leaders in turquoise T-shirts. The excited youngsters huddle in an ▶



Brian and Bobbie Houston run a massive global business and their followers are urged to excel financially, too. Left: Bobbie relaxes by the pool at the Houstons' calm and comfortable home in Baulkham Hills, Sydney.

Brian, the musician and preacher. His philosophy – people should come into church and leave more encouraged than when they came – has struck a chord with parishioners.

enthralled circle around a guest visitor from the Reptile Park who has Spike the Iguana and a huge python to keep them amused while their parents worship.

At 11am, the crowds move inside in waves, eager to nab the best seats. It's a vast arena with stacked rows of seating around an apron stage. Immediately in front of the podium, overexcited teens fresh from summer youth camps swap complex handshakes and whoop and holler. Bobbie Houston, her daughter Laura, Bobbie's young perky PA Nikki (an American who came to study at Hillsong's Bible college seven years ago and stayed) and other senior members of the ministry fill

up the premium seats to the right of the stage. And then the lights dim and the music starts. The stage comes

alive with a flashing light show. Images of the heavens, of water, of palm trees flash across the central screen, which is surrounded by stars and circles of beaming neon tubing. Meanwhile, the 14-strong band pumps out classics from Hillsong's repertoire. "Holy, Holy, Holy is your name," they sing as the crowd wave their arms and sway to the beat.

With parishioners drunk on the music, the service kicks off. First are

the prayer lists, specific messages from people eager to get a special hotline to God and then a call for tithes and offerings as buckets are passed along each row. On the screen, there are details outlining the ways you can give – via the envelope on your chair, online, via the Hillsong app, BPAY.

A Youth Leader bounces onto the stage and introduces young student Jasmine, who retells her revelation of speaking in tongues at last week's youth camp, to loud applause. Next is an advertisement for the Bible college next door, where would-be pastors learn their craft. And finally the leader of Hillsong,

"God wants us to be resourced so that we can help the poor."

impresario Brian Houston, dressed down in jeans and a loose white shirt, moves to the front. His rasping voice echoes around the centre. He talks

about the sanctity of marriage, about spiritual solutions to human problems. His parishioners are rapt. They are rapt for more than an hour.

It's easy to take aim at this happy, shiny group of Christians gorging on their Sunday fix of clappy worship, but one thing is clear, they all love this place and they're all having fun.

"There's excitement, you're involved," says one parishioner. "There's praise

and for a young person on a Friday or Saturday night, it's better than going clubbing. And on a Sunday, it's a great way to start the day."

But is it a cult?

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THE HOUSTON FAMILY home sits at the end of a leafy cul-de-sac in the heart of Baulkham Hills. Houses are big in this part of the world and theirs is certainly not the fanciest in the street. It is very comfortable with a handsome swimming pool out the back, decked verandas and a rather slick "shades of white" renovation care of an interior designer.

Inside, it's an orchestrated bubble of beauty and spiritual calm. By the door, on a trendy perspex lectern, a vast quasi world encyclopaedia sits open at pictures of children in Africa. "I love it; it was a gift from conference [Hillsong's annual conference]," says Bobbie. On the wall, a framed photo of Mother Teresa with a handwritten note underneath – "God is love. He loves you. Love others as He loves you." – is another personal treasure.

The home hasn't always been this chic, Bobbie is quick to explain. She and Brian bought it in 1995, a ramshackle house in which they planned to raise their family while they "planted" Hillsong. Their three children are now married with babies of their own – and all working for the church – so

it was high time for Bobbie and Brian to create their sanctuary.

The couple is a living, breathing example of what they preach: teenage sweethearts who met as hungry young Christians, waited until marriage to consummate their love and have grown together as pastors and parents following the word of God. They are, Bobbie says, still very much in love and on many levels their brand of worship is not just working for them, it's a global success story, saving souls in record numbers.

It all sounds too good to be true and certainly the Houston path to the top hasn't been without its pressures and its detractors. They met back home in New Zealand, where both were raised. Brian was a youth pastor following in the footsteps of his father, Frank, who had birthed his own Pentecostal church. Bobbie was a shorthand typist who had found God at the age of 15.

"It was at a church in Auckland, called First Assemblies of God," she says. "There was this Jesus thing happening throughout New Zealand and I think all the pieces started to come together." Bobbie was christened an Anglican, but her parents were not churchgoers and throughout her childhood she recalls a vague belief in God, but nothing more fevered.

"Then I had a conversation in biology with my girlfriend and she invited me

to her church. I actually was hungry. I was searching for something more," she recalls. "My father had died five or six months prior quite suddenly and I felt like my world caved in. Now I can see that God was awakening my desire, my reality, my awareness that he was there."

Bobbie talks about being saved at that moment, about experiencing her own personal revelation, when she knew for sure that God was real, that He loved her and was "on her side". "It is a faith step," she says. "I think the human mind cannot figure God because He's so much grander and greater than that. In faith, you open your heart to the fact that He exists and you invite him to come and be a part of your life. It's a personal encounter. It's a personal revelation."

It is guiding others to this encounter that Hillsong is all about. Bobbie and Brian talk about personal journeys, about feeling God's grace and building boundaries to live by, which include no sex before marriage, not being seduced by "the gay lifestyle" and all-round sober living. To non-believers, it can sound forced, fake and a little like brainwashing, but the Hillsong world is all about taking that leap of faith and then running with it at an exhilarating speed.

Traditional churches criticise the brashness of the Hillsong dynamic, the

showmanship, the shininess, the expert marketing. Brian, especially, has a finely tuned business brain (he was a Schweppes sales rep in New Zealand) and his zeal for branding can feel distinctly ungodly. Also criticised is the perceived materialism of his church. This isn't a world where poverty is noble; rather Brian and Bobbie encourage their flock to earn money and be successful. "There's nothing inherently noble about being impoverished. God wants us to be resourced so we can help the poor and make a difference," pleads Bobbie.

Resourcing is key in the Hillsong machine. There's a jangling ker-ching from the tills in the merchandise shop, post-service; here, you can buy T-shirts, caps, DVDs, CDs of music, books and, of course, Bibles. Those that Bobbie markets for her Sisterhood program – her own brand of religious feminism – are bound in soft cream leather and feature beatific photos of women.

In 2014, 19 per cent of the church's revenue – that's close to \$18 million – came from merchandise, including music, while 58 per cent (\$54.7 million) came from donations. Most of these donations are "tithes and offerings". In the olden days, tithes were a 10 per cent tax levied by churches and while critics have claimed that Hillsong still demands such payment from its staff and supporters, Bobbie says it's simply ▶

THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK SCOTT. BOBBIE WEARS WITCHERY MAXI DRESS.



From childhood sweethearts to wholesome wedded bliss ... Bobbie says she was drawn to Brian's "magnetic" presence. Their children, Joel, Benjamin and Laura, work for the church.



not true. "No one is forced to give. We have no idea whether people give or not. But like every church in the world, we accept offerings." Those parishioners *The Weekly* spoke to backed this up, saying donations were optional.

Hillsong is now "planted" in 14 countries and its services broadcast in more than 180 nations. In Australia alone in 2014, 34,083 attended services every week. It's impossible to put a figure on how many the church's gospel touches, but safe to say it's a lot.

For Bobbie, shifting into that fast lane of Pentecostal pizzazz came about when she met Brian at a Christian convention on the beach at Tauranga in New Zealand. "I saw Brian in the crowd. He stood out because he was tall and he caught my eye. I was 16 and I chose to buy everyone ice-creams, and I bought him one. But he had spotted me also."

Letters followed, Brian moved from Wellington to Auckland on the pretext of a pastorate, but really to court her. "We started dating and got married four years later. Brian was my first and only boyfriend. I'm remarkably old-fashioned in that way," says Bobbie, who adds they didn't live or sleep together before they wed. "He ran the youth ministry and was the life and soul of the party. He was that person that walks into the room and is like a magnet." This charisma is a large part of Brian's success as a pastor. "For him personally

there was no other career path," she says. And very soon serving God became the Houston family business.

They arrived in Sydney in 1977 to help Brian's father, Frank, establish his church. They set up the Sydney Christian Life Centre in Double Bay, with both Bobbie and Brian taking extra jobs to make ends meet. "Brian cleaned windows in Paddington and I worked for that first year with an import company in downtown Kent Street, using my shorthand and typing."

The business model was for fast expansion, planting more churches and putting in young pastor couples to run them. Yet when Brian and Bobbie got to Baulkham Hills, they decided to settle this church themselves. They moved their family – by now, they had three children, Joel, Benjamin and Laura – and Hillsong was born.

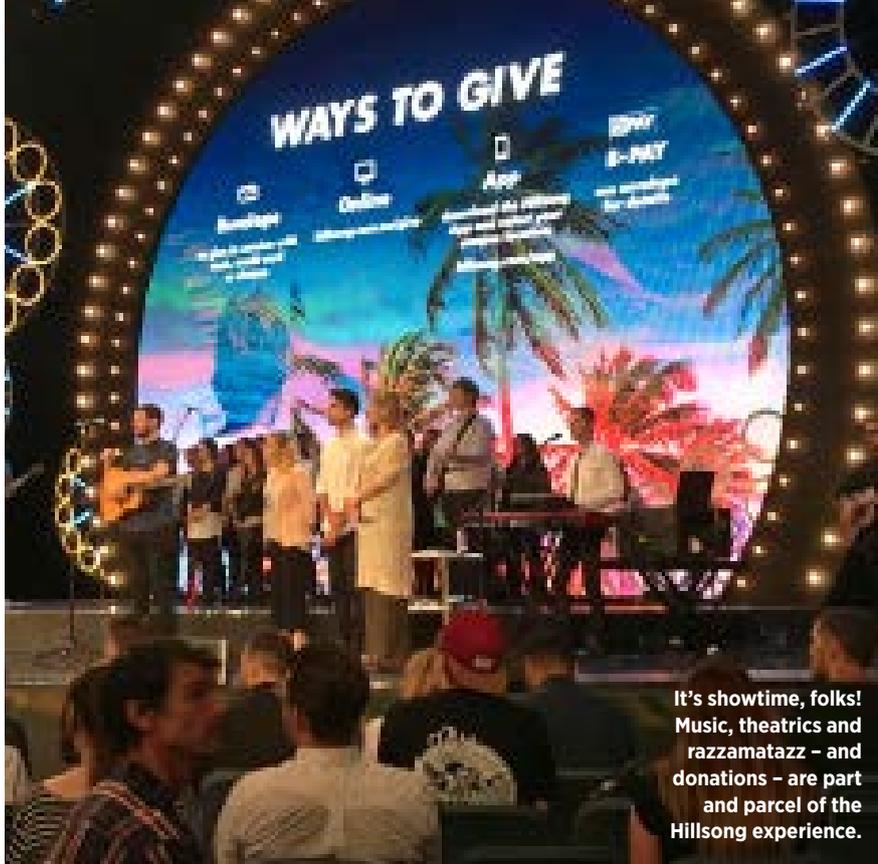
"It started in a school hall with 45 people and then it just took off. We were young – Brian was 30, I was 27. Brian always says he wants people to come into church and leave more encouraged than when they came. People think it's all about lights and staging and flash, but those things just serve the bigger picture and that is the same for any church – to worship God and experience his presence," says Bobbie.

Soon, the couple was able to build their own premises and attracted notable supporters, who to date include former

Prime Minister John Howard and, lately, Justin Bieber. "He was nearly dead a couple of years ago, he was at his wits' end and if it wasn't for our New York pastor, he'd be dead," says Bobbie, who welcomed Bieber into one of their Sydney conferences last year. "He sat in front of me. He's sweet."

Yet the business nearly came crashing down in 1999, when Frank left under a very dark cloud. Behind closed doors, Brian stripped his father of his ministry following accusations received from a man who claimed Frank had sexually abused him when he was seven years old, in 1969 and 1970, while he was a house guest of the victim's parents in Sydney. It's a day Bobbie will never forget.

"It was a huge part of our lives. It changed Brian's relationship with his father forever," she says. "He called his father in and he confronted him – he was in his late 70s at this time. Brian asked if this accusation was true and he says his dad went dry at the mouth and then he said 'Yuh'. And in that moment Frank also told Brian something that he had never told anyone. He said that when he was younger, his grandfather came home drunk one night and abused him. It doesn't excuse the abuse, but it helps to understand that this is a series of broken lives. Brian ended his father's ministry immediately, took his credential off him, fired him and said, 'You'll never preach again.' >



**It's showtime, folks! Music, theatrics and razzamatazz – and donations – are part and parcel of the Hillsong experience.**

Subsequent allegations surfaced that built up a picture of Frank as a serial paedophile, his victims being boys and young men in the church.

“I was in high school at the time,” says Laura, who is now 28, a mother of two and a Hillsong Youth Leader, “and I remember coming home from school and my dad sat me down and he told me everything that was happening. I could tell how difficult it was for him and that he was heartbroken.”

With Frank out of the picture, Brian took over the church completely. Frank died in 2004, aged 82, an old man with dementia. He never faced charges. Yet the sins of the father ended up being delivered on his son last year when the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found Brian had “made no attempt to report his father to the police” and a clear “conflict of interest existed because Pastor Brian Houston was both National President of the Assemblies of God in Australia and Mr Frank Houston’s son”.

“Brian didn’t report it to the police because the victim was an adult [36 years old] and he was extremely brittle, extremely fragile, and was adamant that he did not want anyone to know about this, not even the church leadership,” says Bobbie. “That was years ago, a

broken part of [Frank’s] life, a horrid part of his life, there’s no excuse. But I think he had repented in his own heart and moved on. The Frank that we knew was so different.”

The Commission’s findings received widespread media coverage and Brian and the church may yet face a police investigation, but the case doesn’t seem to have dulled the church’s shimmer. When *The Weekly* asks one parishioner how she feels about the case, she is quick to defend Brian. “I feel sorry for him in that it was something that his father did a long time ago, but he is being persecuted for a dead man’s crimes.”

This sentiment is common among those *The Weekly* talks to, but a more controversial subject is the church’s line on homosexuality. One of the key messages of Hillsong is inclusiveness. Yet while there are certainly many young gay men and women who go to their church, their “lifestyle choice”, as it is neatly dismissed, is criticised in Brian’s gospel and they are banned from being leaders or pastors.

“For Brian, it’s his belief and his conviction, but for me personally I don’t

agree,” says this aggrieved parishioner, who asks not to be named. “If you’re gay, you’re already suffering from a lot of internal and psychological issues. The last thing you want is being turned away.”

Bobbie admits, “This is a hard area for the wider church – even the Pope can’t give a definitive on this. It’s a dilemma because the Bible’s quite clear about some of the parameters that belong to those in leadership. And we’re still figuring it out.”

Her three children are all married in heterosexual relationships, but how would Bobbie have reacted if they had been gay? “Right now, I don’t know how to answer that. I’m skirting here, but I would want them to find happiness. But that makes some other Christians angry. We want to bridge all the divides in society and I think that’s one of the final divides.”

The other divide Bobbie is fighting, with a proud personal crusade, is to empower women thorough her Colour Sisterhood programs, which aim to build esteem and fight violence against women. It was inspired by what she quaintly calls “a God whisper” and is now more than 20 years old. Her treatise is laid out in her new book, *The Sisterhood: A Mandate For Women Who Want To Make Their World A Better Place*. It starts as a memoir and quickly trails off into proselytising, but Bobbie has grown in her confidence

and is now a powerful preacher in her own right, with her own following.

So is Hillsong a cult? “No, not at all,” says Bobbie. “A cult is usually exclusive,

divisive, separates families, it’s built about one little leader who’s usually delusional and deceived, and does everything that is contrary to the gospel. And we’re not that.”

Cult or not, megalomaniac’s empire or not, Hillsong’s success arguably says more about society’s failure to provide genuine environments for community life than it does about the power of religion. ■

“If my children were gay, I would want them to find happiness.”