



EVEN BUGA-UP NEEDS CHRISTMAS

DRAG OUT your Messiah records. Unleash your credit cards. Mentally compose the letter to your folks explaining why you won't be returning home for the 31st Annual Family Barbecue at Uncle Vince and Auntie Vi's but going to Indonesia with your lover and a pair of motorbikes instead.

Christmas is a mad schizoid time. It alternates between wild sentimentality — an excitement that can be traced in a direct line back to the first childhood Santa letter — and scepticism at the waste and materialism, the awful social grinning and bearing.

You see the Third World Christmas disasters screaming bloody across your colour TV. You witness the family breakdowns and how the bright red Ho Ho-Ho simply highlights the poverty and loneliness that has been hiding out of the news all year. On the other hand, you also see the fun of picnics at the beach and old pals you haven't seen for years come down from Nimbin or weird brave careers interstate. The world spins terrifyingly on. Christmas just makes it lighter, darker and faster.

Around this time you might have noticed strange \$2 notes in the change from your Christmas purchases. You do not shove them blithely back into your wallet. No, for these \$2 bills are most curious. You stare in disbelief. Pudgy old William Farrer is peering into ears of yellow-green wheat. Above his grandpappa glasses is a bright red cap, the Disney sort that the Seven Dwarfs wear. It is lined with white fur. Farrer's conservative suit and tie is covered in a matching bright Texta-red jacket also trimmed with fur.

On the white space near the 2 — a blank that graffitists adore — is a neatly stamped message: Santa Grows Fat While The Third World Starves. There is also a rare variation where Farrer is drawn as a Dickensian industrialist. The slogan says: No Christmas Spending Sprees Until The World's Poor Are Fed.

It seems the Santa-Buster and his little helpers are back. Last year in Sydney, an angry young man spray-painted huge chortling Santas high on railway hoardings and walls. The Santas were ringed by white circles with a line drawn firmly through their portraits in the international sign for "forbidden." Now, right in the midst of the Taiwanese holly season, yet another inner-city graffiti group — this time allegedly an obscure group of radical Christians — is cranking out moral-political poems in the style of last year's Santa-Busters idea. The vandalised \$2 notes are their Christmas cards to a world they see as greedy and materialistic.

The Santa-Buster \$2 touches sensitive feelings about Christmas. It is unnerving handling cash that emanates tiny whispers on your motives. Illegal though they may be, the defaced \$2 notes nevertheless bite the moral jugular.

Some of the public last year loathed the Santa-Buster's Scrooge mentality, others loved his anti-materialism. Some were outraged at his lack of respect for property. Others admired his art work. Some people thought long and deep about the meaning of Christmas, universal brother-sisterhood, Soviet American relations and the nature of human folly. Others wanted the Santa Buster psychoanalysed (a childhood trauma from sitting on Santa's knee? A terror of bloated red shadows floating down dark chimneys?)

Leaving aside the physical destruction of property (of course, a major difficulty), the Santa-Buster issue is mostly moral. Such graffitists often leave a person with an overwhelming feeling of assault. Getting a Santa-busted \$2 is like the descending of black angels. Yet it is no different to the daily attack of idiotic, irresponsible or sexist advertising to which most of us no longer react.

The graffitists, on the contrary, seem allergic to commercial moral manipulation. Their rash outbreaks on billboards and two-dollar bills makes our insensitivity itch. How dare these eccentrics bring up the nasty side of the annual commercial Chrissie whoopee that most of us accept in a worldly manner, taking the joys with the rip offs?

We can dismiss the Santa-Busters and graffitists as a funny fringe, cranks, dogged eccentrics, impossible idealists. So why do they continue to bug and fascinate us? I think perhaps it is because their audacity screams at us like the ads on late night TV. Their unflagging ability to actually react to a level of commercialism, which we accept with no worries, makes us feel like insensitive morons. Or they make us envious. I wish I could rescue the millions of bikini girls stuck to cars with a devastating piece of billboard wit that scans nicely and is quoted at parties.

If you live among the billboard saturated, neon-drained and image manipulated consumers of the inner-city, you cannot help but know graffiti bandits. I have met the brains of the BUGA-UP movement at dinner parties in Paddington and political conferences. They are a varied lot: housewives, film makers, electronics experts, unemployed kids. (In Melbourne, BUGA-UP graffitists are often doctors and other health workers.) BUGA-UP (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions) consider themselves the Robin Hoods in the forest of modern, advertising. BUGA-UP attempts to rob the image-rich of their monopoly on the last word. It takes the right of reply back to the poor consumer. Instead of mutely allowing The Perfect Panties to be forced down your eyeballs you can answer back with The Perfect Sexist Billboard. Come December, the Lords of the Billboards have amassed more armies of what BUGA-UP sees as unhealthy promotions. It's a graffitists' paradise, their busiest time of the year. Toy makers psychologically inciting babes to outrageous demands (I can see the infants class writing "Dear Santa, Giv's a computa, luv Virginia").

It's open paranoia season again on plump, pale, middle-aged, non-blonde and unboyfriended women. As I despondently give away my Santa Grows Fat \$2 note to a busker, only one thing disturbs me about the Santa-Busters, the graffitists and BUGA-UPers. They're as dependent on the commercialism of Christmas as the rest of us. □