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Van the Man

Spinning Green Collar Gold

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Van Jones is no ordinary man. And he doesn't lead an ordinary life. That's not surprising considering that since last October, when his book *The Green Collar Economy* hit bookstores—it immediately zoomed up the New York Times Best Seller List—Jones has become the national go-to guy on proposals that tackle both global warming and the global economic meltdown.

For his work, *Time* magazine named Jones as one of its “Environmental Heroes” of 2008, and last December, Jones, an experienced blogger, won the \$100,000 Puffin/Nation Prize for Creative Citizenship from journalism's The Nation Institute, based in New York City.

His rise in the public consciousness—a long feature in *The New Yorker* appeared in January—ran the risk of actually going over the top late last year when Salon.com, the San Francisco-based online magazine, named Jones as one of the 17 “Sexiest Men Living,” joining guys such as Robert Downey Jr., Javier Bardem, Kal Penn and, yes, President Barack Obama.

It's doubtful that Jones would have received that kind of attention, though, were it not for his powerful book, whose cover features blurbs from Al Gore, Tom Daschle, Nancy Pelosi and Tavis Smiley, among others—heady company, indeed. In person, Jones spells out the message of *The Green Collar Economy* with a mixture of cool, elegant intelligence and charismatic zeal. He is the master of the turned phrase, blending

marketing zip with cold, hard facts.

“This is the end of the carbon age,” he says. “This is the beginning of the solar age.” And the timing couldn’t be better. Jones lays out his interpretation of the sequence of events: From 1980 through 2008, the country was sold a bill of goods about trickle-down economics, consumerism and credit, all seemingly fine for the U.S. economy.

That’s over.

“Here is the great thing,” he says, “this horrible breakdown, with home values going down, credit card debt going up, it’s awful, it’s awful. But this break-down is going to be a breakthrough. We are going to have to stop relying on environmental destruction, and move to environmental restoration as a way to move the economy forward.”

And, says Jones, the green collar economy must be inclusive, involving the poorest of the poor, minorities and the newly unemployed as vital members of a workforce capable of driving American prosperity.



Black, White and ... Green

Given his work, it’s hard to believe that Jones met stiff resistance as he shopped *The Green Collar Economy* around to big-name publishers. In San Francisco, at his first book-signing event—HarperCollins accepted it, finally—Jones shared his struggle with the appreciative audience. “They told me ‘Black people don’t buy green books, and white people don’t buy black books,’ I said, ‘Well, maybe black, white and green people will buy my book.’ ” The publishers’ response? “Silly boy.”

Those publishers are the ones who look silly now. Jones crisscrosses the country speaking to groups ranging from students to church congregations, from the crowds at Slow Food Nation to legislators in the halls of Congress.

He co-founded the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, which was instrumental in the passage of two pieces of

California state legislation that created a green jobs council and established green technology career pilot programs.

Jones also directs the Oakland-based Green For All, which joined forces with other progressive national nonprofits to frame the Green Jobs and Infrastructure Act of 2008, introduced by Sen. Deborah Stabenow (D-Mich.). The landmark bill was to invest tens of billions of dollars in green collar jobs across the country, and Jones says he feels confident that Obama will commit to its funding.

Jones’ other projects in 2008 included a partnership with Gore’s Alliance for Climate Protection to initiate the Green For All

Academy, and promotion of the first national “Green Jobs Now” Day in which 600 communities in all 50 states participated.

Pitching Politics

All the acclaim, reference to his work and reverence for his opinion are, for Jones, the natural outcome of a life built on community service and a passion for politics that is almost evangelical in its fervor. It is a passion Jones swears comes as naturally to him as breathing—a compulsion that Jones says crystallized one special night at the tender age of not quite 4 and which propels him forward every day of his life.

Jones’ says his start in life was modest. “I grew up the typical kid of public school teachers in a working-class neighborhood on the edge of a small town in rural Tennessee. I went to church a lot, watched cable TV a lot, read comic books a lot,” he says. At his family’s church Jones bathed in the glow of community empowerment generated by the Civil Rights Movement—empowerment that illuminated sermons and ignited parishioners’ civic pride years after the apex of the historic effort.

Then came the pivotal night—one he remembers well. “My earliest memory which I know is mine, which I know has nothing to do with watching home movies, was being in a motel room with my dad and Uncle Chester, watching television with them. There was an African-American woman talking,” he says, recalling his intrigue. “I later realized it was Shirley Chisholm, at the 1972 Democratic Convention.” The preschooler was hooked.

“I can’t remember not being political, not being interested in politics,” Jones says. He promptly renamed his Star Wars action figures for the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King Jr. “Some people are just born to play the tuba, or born to be ballet dancers, and some people are just born to do politics,” he says with a shrug. With politics in his DNA, Jones says he considered several paths.

An academic background in political science, journalism and law created numerous options for the bright young man. So why the environment? Jones says he is not exactly sure.

“I just saw this video of myself graduating from [Yale] law school. I’m talking to my mom and showing her all my books and I say, ‘Here are my environmental books.’ And there’s a whole shelf of environmental books,” he says with a light laugh.

“I am not sure when I got interested in all the environmental stuff, but I know when I got passionate about it. I saw all these environmentally focused companies starting up, and I thought ‘I’ve seen this before.’ ” Jones says he feared that, like the dot-com boom—it made many people very wealthy—poor people and people of color would be left out.

“We spent 10 years crying and carrying protest signs about the digital divide. I don’t want to be crying about the eco-divide or eco-apartheid,” he says with real urgency in his voice. “We need to get in on the ground floor and shape the green economy to be inclusive from the beginning.”

Spreading the Green Collar Economy Gospel

Jones takes the green collar economy campaign on the road in a well-crafted blend of political stumping, town hall meetings and church tent revivals. Jones is, quite frankly, more comfortable talking policy than discoursing on his personal life. But his speech-making skill, a marvel to behold, may not have come, initially at least, as naturally as his political instincts.

“Van is an amazing communicator,” says Ian Kim, the Green Collar Jobs campaign director at the Ella Baker Center. “Whether it is an audience of 20 or 200, he owns the room and inspires everyone, leaving no dry eye in the house.” The truth though, Kim says, is that Jones can be introverted, preferring to read and study. “Van is so committed to his work that he learned to come out of his shell to connect and inspire,” Kim says.

“He makes it look easy, the way Michael Jordan makes basketball look easy, but he [Jones] works very hard. He is relentless. Van has such integrity which comes from a place of heart and humility.” Kim pauses. “He has a real sense of wonder and hope for the future. And all his time and effort and practice have taken him from being a world class ruckus raiser to a world-class orator.”

Oakland as Home Base

When he is not on the road addressing crowds, Jones calls Oakland home, but the best-selling author and policy shaper isn't spending much time there lately. With two young sons, he says that he and his wife, Jana Carter, keep it pretty simple when he touches down.

“We have less fun now than either of us would like, but it is a rare moment in the country when we can talk about these issues and be part of the debate.” Jones says. “You can literally go on national TV and talk about completely redoing the U.S. economy and people say, ‘Say more about that.’ That’s a very rare moment.” Fortunately, while Jones is busy promoting the green collar economy, Jana is more than capable of holding down the family fort, he says.

“She used to run marathons and climb mountains. She is a power tools kind of girl. [She’s] very independent, which makes it a little easier for her,” says Jones. “She’s not sitting there waiting for me to fix the plumbing. She’s very resourceful.”

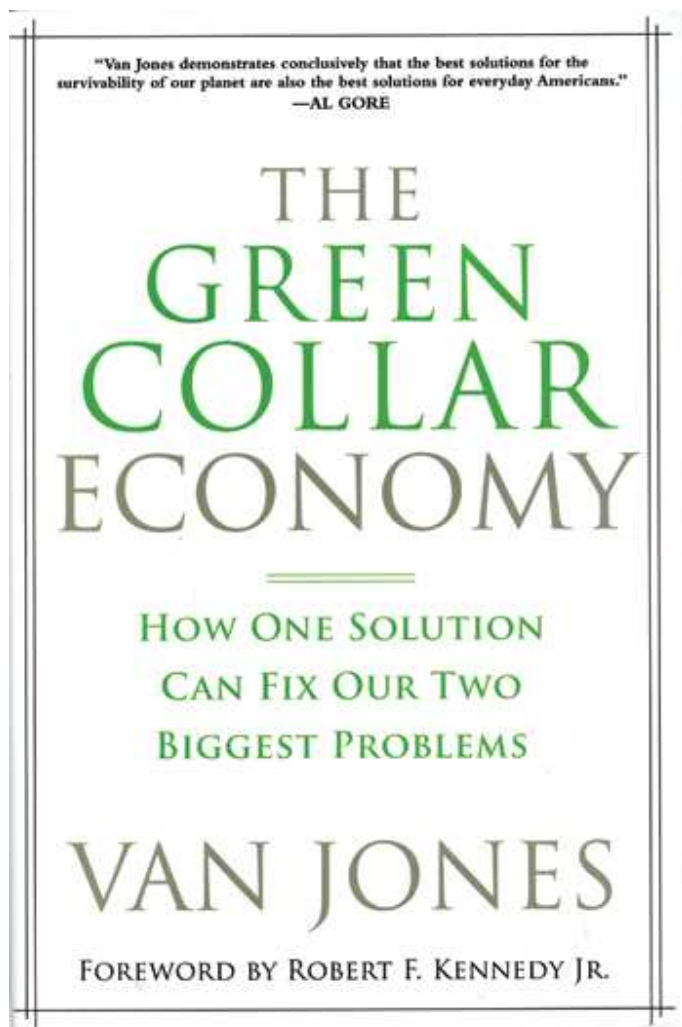
Jones’ family may have to wait quite a while longer before their driven husband and father takes a break.

“Some are born to sway those in the halls of power, others to sway those in the halls of our apartment houses, schools and businesses,” says Jones. “Neither ambition is more or less lofty than the other. Both are needed.” Jones says he likes to compare his ardent inclination for initiating change to his older son’s natural knack for sports. “My 4-year-

old son is an incredible athlete, great basketball player, great baseball player. He can make big people’s baskets, already,” he says. “I can’t explain his physical abilities, which he showed at a very young age; he was just born with them. And I was born like this.”

Jones was destined, it seems, to be an extraordinary man; and he is using his skill and passion to help configure a paradigm shift, but with an inherently common sense response to an extraordinary time. He says the time is ripe for the emergence of a new economic model, for the sake of the environment and the promise of equal opportunity prosperity—a green collar economy.

Black and Green



Van Jones on *The Green Collar Economy*

What is a green collar economy?

Look at the economy. It's flat on its back. Look at the banks. They're frozen like icebergs. The government is going to have to insert itself into this economy in an aggressive way and it needs to be a way that also deals with energy, if not climate, if not both. It means we stop borrowing from overseas. We start building here. We stop relying on credit from overseas and start relying on creativity from here. That's the green economy. If we do that in a way that respects the earth and relies on clean energy, that's the green economy. We can't burn and drill our way out, but we can invest and invent our way out.

And we need to include both the ecological "haves" and "have-nots." In Marin County we have salads, Prius hybrids and meditation. In Oakland we have asthma, cancer and crime. Kids need green jobs, not jails. The most important work in the history of civilization is to re-power and retrofit America.

What are some of your green collar economy proposals?

There are green economy proposals that can bring energy prices down and jobs up. Retrofits and weatherization bring energy prices down for consumers, bring home values up, get us jobs. We can park our cars, we can't park our houses. Right now we have cold buildings on a hot planet. There are millions of homes with no solar panels. All rooftops should either have solar panels or be green and edible: millions of roofs, millions of jobs. We can put Detroit back to work, but not on SUVs, on building wind turbines. We can have the Saudi Arabia of wind in mid-America.

If the government is willing to deficit finance some of these initiatives, then we are putting people to work and hopefully keeping the recession relatively shallow or keeping the recession from becoming a depression. And we can say green did that for us.

Can we do everything at once, or will there be compromises?

Let's get the politics right first. Everybody wants to focus on the policy. If we come up with legislation that says everything needs to be green from top to bottom it's never going to get passed. We have to build a political coalition so we can pass some laws. That coalition has to include the Rust Belt, has to include farmers. So we've got to start, in a way that is politically smart, and we've got to have trade-offs.

Are we willing to trade some problems on the side of toxins—for example, wind turbines and solar panels that are toxic to make—for a gain on the energy side? I say we have to, because it's the energy side that is driving global warming, which is the big gun to the heads of children of all species. And not just for this generation, but for every generation to come. So I'm willing to do some tough trade-offs on the environment to get a smarter energy system. Because that buys us another century to figure out the rest of it. If we hold out for the perfect energy solution, that's right on toxics, right on water, right on waste, right on mining, then the clock is ticking. I say if our existing technology isn't perfect, but is good enough to deploy on a mass scale, then we should pay that cost.

So if I'm the government and I only have so much money to play with, I want to place all my bets on clean energy transmission and storage, because that is the breakthrough that changes the whole game forever.

Read *The Green Collar Economy: How One Solution Can Fix Our Two Biggest Problems*, HarperCollins, October 2008

Learn about Green For All, a national nonprofit organization advocating for job training and employment opportunities designed to create an inclusive green economy,

particularly one that addresses pollution and poverty concurrently. Green for All, 1611 Telegraph Ave., Suite 600, (510) 663-6500, info@greenforall.org, www.greenforall.org.

Investigate the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, a national nonprofit utilizing four strategic/action-oriented campaigns to promote justice and opportunity in urban America including the Green-Collar Jobs Campaign. Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, 344 40th St., (510) 428-3939, contact@ellabakercenter.org, www.ellabakercenter.org.