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Musical Life in New Religious Movements and the Construction of Cults

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Musical Life in New Religious Movements and the Construction of Cults

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in Musicology

by

Thomas Hanslowe

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Musical Life in New Religious Movements and

the Construction of Cults

by

Thomas Hanslowe

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Mitchell Bryan Morris, Chair

The 1960s counterculture saw the birth of many new religious movements (NRMs), a few of which are now remembered as some of the most violent cults in American history. While much has been written about the crimes of the Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family, our understanding of these groups is still tied to theories of mind control that would lead us to believe that all new religious movements are cast in essentially the same mold. Sensational coverage of cult violence in journalistic and true crime media reinforce these tropes and often casts these groups in such a deviant light that their abuses seem wholly removed from the social and religious dynamics of the broader world. Scholars of NRMs have long argued that the "cult"

label hinders our ability to see the complex social and religious dynamics of NRMs and obscures the true motivations when new religions become violent.

This dissertation will intervene in these conversations through the examination of the understudied role of the music in NRMs. I will examine the music these groups made, how it expressed their religious worldview, and its role both as an act of ritual worship and a means of negotiating their relationship with a frequently hostile outside world. The music itself also draws our attention to the complex dialogue between popular and religious music throughout the era. Through an interdisciplinary approach informed by religious studies, sociology, musicology, and ethnomusicology, this dissertation will analyze the different roles that music played within these groups and how this music is reinterpreted when a controversial new religion is labeled a cult.

The dissertation of Thomas Kurt Hanslowe is approved.

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2023

Dedication

To my parents, Nancy and David Hanslowe

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"Minimalism," for History of Western Music 3, UCLA Dept. of Music, May 2021.

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religious message through rock.[2] The cofounders of Heaven's Gate, Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Nettles, named themselves with the solfège syllables *Ti* and *Do*, a reference that reinforced the hierarchy in which *Do* (Applewhite) must always follow *Ti* (Nettles).[3]

It is my contention that the close study of this music in its historical and religious setting has much to reveal about the lived, human experience of NRMs. Since the notion of brainwashing as a quasi-medical procedure capable of reprogramming people like computers has largely been discredited, we are left to question what motivates people to join religious groups that often seem so extreme to outsiders.[4] The music these groups produce provides insight into how the social, emotional, and theological dimensions of these NRMs are experienced by those who join their idiosyncratic lifestyles. I use the term "theology" to refer to the religious beliefs and values of these groups, and I pay close attention to how these beliefs and values are expressed and reinforced through musical practices. Throughout this dissertation, I also pay particular attention to the music that was recorded and released with the hope of finding an audience outside the membership of the group. These bodies of music are particularly fascinating because they need to make sense to different audiences with different levels of knowledge about their social and religious basis. As a result, this music represents the views, values, and faith of these controversial NRMs while simultaneously showing concern for how these ideas will be received by a broader public that does not share those values. As a result, songs like "He's Able"

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[2] David Thibodeau with Leon Whiteson and Aviva Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story* (New York and Boston: Hachette Books, 2018), 92-3.

[3] In spite of the musical nomenclature of Heaven's Gate's founding figures and religious practices that involved endlessly listening to the tinnitus hum of tuning forks, that particular NRM has left behind an unusually scant musical legacy. One cannot help but wonder if it has anything to do with Applewhite's former career as a music professor, a phase in his life he was surely trying to put behind him when he reinvented himself as a UFO prophet.

[4] For more on the brainwashing controversy see Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell Publishing, 1984), and Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, "Conversion and 'Brainwashing' in New Religious Movements," *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 243-97.

Introduction

The concept of the religious cult has settled deep in our collective imagination. For many the term "cult" conjures up scenes that are deeply disturbing and strangely iconic; images of dead bodies outside the Jonestown pavilion, the shrouded corpses of the Heaven's Gate mass suicide, and Charles Manson's wild eyes and scarified forehead have all been reproduced countless times. Indeed, the most notorious incidents of cult violence have in many ways become a common trope in which villainous cult leaders manipulate their brainwashed followers into committing destructive acts against themselves and others. Far less attention has been paid to the important role music plays in the lives of adherents to these controversial groups.

Many scholars in the field of religious studies have been extremely critical of the way cults have been portrayed by the media and the organized anticult movement. Religious studies scholars favor the more neutral term "new religious movement" (NRM) rather than "cult".[1] Significant academic work has been done on NRMs focusing primarily on their social and religious structures and seeking to go beyond popular myths of charismatic leaders, group brainwashing, and voracious recruitment. The role of music in NRMs, however, has received virtually no attention.

Many NRMs—including some of the most notorious—devote a considerable amount of time and energy to a wide variety of musical projects. To name just a few, Peoples Temple [sic], the Manson Family, the Children of God (COG), and Scientology all recorded LPs containing original music inspired by their faith. David Thibodeau, one of the few survivors of the Waco siege, has recalled the immense effort Branch Davidian leader David Koresh took to convey his

[1] James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Petersen, "Introduction," in *Controversial New Religions*, ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9.

as recorded by the People's Temple Choir allude to the congregant's belief in the divinity of their reverend Jim Jones in ways that would be totally illegible to listeners who did not have an insider's perspective on the beliefs and language of that particular NRM.

As such, many of the songs analyzed in this dissertation will be considered from the perspective of two different audiences: NRM members with specialized insider knowledge and the segments of the general public that these NRMs hoped would purchase and listen to their recorded music without that insider knowledge. For some of these songs, however, there is also a third audience: listeners who see these groups as cults—often learning their histories through the true crime genre—and arrive at these songs with the expectation that they will be "cult music," able to provide insight and a disconcerting sense of closeness to groups they perceive to be criminally and religiously deviant. Regardless of these NRMs' actual cultures of violence and histories of abuse, true crime often conveys narratives about cults that are informed by the assumptions and broad theories of the anticult movement, many of which have been heavily disputed by sociologists and religious studies scholars working in the field of NRMs. By analyzing the afterlife of the music created by well-known cults like Peoples Temple or the Manson Family that are the frequent subject of true crime, we are given greater insight into what these cult narratives emphasize, distort, and ignore. The analysis of these songs through the lens of cult music not only reveals much about how we imagine cults, but also what it is about cult narratives—and perhaps a particular mode of true crime focused on the violent misdeeds of individuals and groups portrayed as especially deviant in general—that so many of us find so fascinating and even oddly attractive.

The bulk of my analysis focuses on the musical life and output of three particularly notorious NRMs that I take as my case studies: The Children of God (known today as the Family

International), Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family. My case studies are not representative of NRMs as a whole. While scholars of NRMs reject the term "cult" as prejudicial to young religious groups, some academics such as Massimo Introvigne have adopted the term "criminal religious movement" to describe groups that systematically commit or incite criminal behavior, a category that neatly describes all three of these groups for periods of their existence.[5] In many ways these three groups are outliers that achieved their high profile in part because of their unusual levels of violence and abuse. As I will discuss in more detail below, I selected my case studies because they are all highly visible—and highly musical—groups that played a major role in shaping the public perception and public response to a modern conception of the religious cult that emerged and solidified throughout the 1970s.

Our understanding of cults transformed in the wake of both the 1960s counterculture and violent, attention-grabbing flashpoints like the Tate/LaBianca murders and the Jonestown massacre. That being said, NRMs have formed and flourished within the United States of America since the earliest years of European colonization of the continent. One of the best examples of how cults are socially constructed by a particular narrative framing can be seen in the founding mythology of the United States itself. Some of the earliest English colonists to arrive on American shores were devoted members of a rather restrictive new religious movement. This group sailed to contemporary New England from Holland because of their concern that their host country's liberal policy of religious freedom could lead their children to stray away from the faith of their parents (not to mention their English identities).[6] To solve this

[5] Massimo Introvigne, "The Abe Assassination. The Word 'Cult' Is A Tool for Discrimination," *Bitter Winter: A Magazine on Religious Liberty and Human Rights,* Sep. 2, 2022, accessed Jan. 5, 2023, https://bitterwinter.org/the-abe-assassination-the-word-cult-is-a-tool-for-discrimination.

[6] Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 5.

problem, this religious community decided to sail to North America where they assumed their families would be isolated from the contaminating influence of other forms of Christianity. This group is venerated in American mythology as the Pilgrims, who arrived on the Mayflower and founded the Plymouth colony.

To this day the Pilgrims are celebrated as founders of the United States in a narrative endlessly recounted to schoolchildren and enshrined in the national holiday of Thanksgiving. This narrative generally glosses over the unquieting notion that the Pilgrims arrived in the New World not in pursuit of religious liberty, but rather as a means of ensuring their children would avoid the dangers of religious plurality and have scant few chances to even learn about alternative modes of life and worship. It is a sharp contrast to the dominant narrative that surrounds Peoples Temple, where the decision to relocate the group deep within the jungles of Guyana is framed not as the actions of a dedicated, hardworking, and self-sufficient group of modern-day pilgrims, but rather as a disturbing turning point in which a faceless group of brainwashed cultists were isolated in harsh conditions with their increasingly unstable authoritarian leader.[7]

Scholarship and New Religious Movements

The USA has been the cradle of countless NRMs, visionaries, and religious freethinkers throughout its relatively short history. Religious studies scholar Catherine Albanese identifies three major strains of religious thought in the history of the United States: the evangelical form

[7] We find an interesting historical moment that sits between these two extremes in Brigham Young's decision to move his faction of the Latter-Day Saints deep into the relative isolation of nineteenth century Utah, an event that has become both a major part of the modern LDS's founding mythology, a mythology which has never quite gained mainstream acceptance in a modern culture that sees the contemporary LDS as a legitimate religious institution while generally viewing the religion's polygamist founding figures as conmen and cult leaders.

which "favors the cultivation of strong emotional experience that is felt as life-transforming," the liturgical form, which "turns, in the broadest sense, on communally organized ceremonial action," and the metaphysical form, which "turns on an individual's experience of 'mind'," which includes not only reason, but intuition, clairvoyance, and revelation.[8] It is this third strain that most readily calls to mind ideas we associate with cults, such as magical thought and the notion of the New Age. While a number of prominent NRMs, including spiritualism, theosophy, and aspects of the LDS can be traced to this metaphysical strain in American religious culture, it is important to note that NRMs have emerged from all three of these broad categories.[9] To draw from the case studies I focus on in this dissertation, the Children of God unquestionably belong to the evangelical strain that birthed the Jesus People movement, while Peoples Temple's focus on collective ritual and activism places them squarely in the liturgical strain.

Many of the precedents for the explosion of seemingly novel spiritual ideas that began in the 1960s can trace their intellectual origins back to America's nineteenth century. The century kicked off with one of the most important periods in America's religious history, the Second Great Awakening. In *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (1978) William McLoughin places the Second Great Awakening roughly from 1800-1830 and argues that it was one of five great awakenings that led to the dominance of evangelical Christianity in American religious culture.[10] Grant Wacker writes that although not everyone in the United States during this time period identified as evangelicals, "never again would a single religious outlook come so close to

[8] Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 5-6.

[9] Ibid., 136.

[10] William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 1-2.

defining what it meant to be an insider in U.S. culture."[11] The period was marked by events like the Cane Ridge Revival, an intense and ecstatic camp meeting attended by thousands of worshipers in the summer of 1800. At the meeting, attendees were so overcome with religious emotion that some "wept uncontrollably, while others appeared to laugh, twitch, and run in circles. Some even fell to their knees and barked like dogs."[12] This mode of overwhelming, embodied religious experience is what Judith Becker refers to as trancing.[13] Similar experiences of trancing play a major role in branches of Christianity that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the Holiness movement and Pentecostalism, both of which went on to inspire a number of sects and even full-blown NRMs such as Peoples Temple.

In his monograph *The American Religion,* literary (and here religious) critic Harold Bloom argues that "The American Religion"—a post-Christian, cross-faith, and quintessentially American religious outlook—has five "indelible strands," all of which emerged during the nineteenth or very early twentieth centuries: Mormonism, Christian Science, Seventh-day Adventism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostalism.[14] Bloom claims that all five of these faiths exhibit three essential characteristics of the American Religion in that they are gnostic, orphic, and millenarian, though his interpretation of some of these categories is somewhat idiosyncratic. Bloom defines the American Religion as a spiritual viewpoint that emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century, which was described by religious historian Jon Butler as a

[11] Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, *Religion in American Life: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 172

[12] Ibid., 173.

[13] Ibid.; Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

[14] Harold Bloom, *The American Religion,* kindle edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), loc. 318.

"unique spiritual hothouse."[15] In Bloom's opinion, participants in the American Religion search for God within themselves, but only after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude.

I raise the specter of Bloom's American Religion not because I fully subscribe to it, nor because I wish to engage in a deep critique of his viewpoint. Its relevance here is how closely the notion of an individualistic spiritual journey that crosses the boundaries of religious denominations maps onto religious life in America since the countercultural explosion of the late 1960s. It shares an obvious connection with Wade Clark Roof's notion of the quest culture and spiritual marketplace that became dominant forces in American religion during the second half of the twentieth century. Roof argues that the Baby Boomer generation saw religion as more personal than social, which has resulted in "the boundaries of popular religious communities… being redrawn" in response to "the quests of the large, post-World War II generations, and facilitated by the rise of an expanded spiritual marketplace."[16] In short, many Americans stopped viewing church as an aspect of their community that they had inherited from their parents and would pass on to their children, in favor of a view of spirituality where participants felt free to learn and experiment with a variety of ideas, practices, and faiths. This can range from relatively traditional Protestant congregations experimenting with rock and folk music to the variety of organizations and practices that fall under the broad category of "the New Age."

A particular subgroup of this quest culture has been theorized as "the cultic milieu," a term first coined by Colin Campbell and later updated by Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw.

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[15] Ibid., loc. 350.

[16] Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Ramking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 10.

Kaplan and Lööw describe a cultic milieu as a fluid category of iconoclastic thinkers who are united solely by their rejection of the paradigms and orthodoxies of the mainstream. They write,

> The cultic milieu is a zone in which proscribed and/or forbidden knowledge is the coin of the realm, a place in which ideas, theories and speculations are to be found, exchanged, modified and, eventually, adopted or rejected by adherents of countless, primarily ephemeral groups whose leaders come and go and whose membership constitute a permanent class of seekers whose adherence to any particular leader or organization tends to be fleeting at best.[17]

While the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s provides a particularly visible example of a cultic milieu, the authors argue that every society has its own cultic milieu. These milieus are a kind of cultural bricolage where participants move freely between ideas, practices, and ideologies that at times can even be directly contradictory.

Roof's notion of quest culture and the spiritual marketplace and Campbell's theory of the cultic milieu are both particularly useful in that they stress the extremely heterogenous nature of (among other things) the spiritual climate of the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century. This period saw the rise of not only a vast and eclectic number of NRMs, but also new forms of traditional mainline religion, and forms of spiritual practice not directly tied to specific organizations. NRMs are yet another category defined less by a particular group of beliefs, practices, and structures than it is by its relationship to the broader social and religious world.

For some time, the term cult was used in academic discourse. In the 1950s, the German theologian Ernst Troeltsch theorized a distinction between churches, which is to say religions socially accepted and often connected to the state, and sects, or relatively smaller and more

[17] Kaplan, Jeffrey, and Heléne Lööw, "Introduction," *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization,* ed. Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw *(*Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 3.

intense splinter groups from churches. American sociologists later added cults—even smaller, often ephemeral groups centered around a charismatic leader—to form the church-sect-cult trictomy.[18] The term cult began to lose traction in the scholarly community in the wake of the anticult movement's successful association of the term with abusive and violent groups, especially Peoples Temple and the Jonestown massacre.[19] The term "new religious movement" was initially coined by Japanese sociologists to describe the boom of original spiritual ideas and organizations in the wake of World War II. By the 1970s, the term NRM had largely replaced the term "cult" in academic discourse. One of the first English language writers to adopt the term "new religions" was Jacob Needleman—a philosopher and adherent of the theosophy-adjacent mystic George I. Gurdjieff—who authored *The New Religions* in 1970.[20]

Although sociology has long harbored an interest in the study of burgeoning religions, the academic study of NRMs did not bloom into a full-fledged specialty until the 1970s. It was a response in no small part to the many high-profile cult controversies of that decade, which spawned a prominent anticult movement, or ACM. Scholars Anson Shupe, David Bromley, and Susan Darnell describe the ACM as a countermovement, meaning that "it derives much of its organizational purpose from the existence of other movements."[21] The first organized manifestation of the ACM was FREECOG, a group that was put together by the distressed parents of Children of God converts in 1971. Similar organized responses soon began to crop up

[18] J. Gordon Melton, "An Introduction to New Religions," *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 17-8.

[19] Ibid., 20.

[20] Ibid., 19.

[21] Anson Shupe, David G. Bromley, and Susan E. Darnell, "The North American Anti-Cult Movement: Vicissitudes of Success and Failure, *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 185.

in opposition to other rapidly expanding NRMs from this time, especially the Unification Church and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as Hare Krishna.[22] The ACM justified its crusade to get young adults out of NRMs in part through the development and adoption of the controversial theory that cults recruit their members through mind control, or brainwashing. This mind control theory allowed the ACM to identify "a set of subversive groups and practices" and provided the means to "override the NRMs' claim to religious legitimacy."[23]

Mind control theories have roots in the work of Robert Lifton and Edgar Schein on the efforts of the Chinese government to indoctrinate POWs from the Korean War into the communist ideology.[24] In the 1970s and 1980s these theories were adapted by anticult experts to argue that NRMs were using illegitimate, coercive mind control techniques to draw in and retain recruits. These applications of mind control theories to NRMs ignored crucial aspects of Lifton and Schein's work, which stressed the important role of both physical imprisonment and personal disposition in the effectiveness of the techniques.

Brainwashing theory has been heavily disputed by NRM scholars. For example, Eileen Barker's 1984 study on the recruitment techniques of the Unification Church (aka the Mooines) found that the group only appealed to a small number of religiously oriented, politically conservative converts. The vast majority of potential recruits that were approached or even participated in the Unification Church's twenty-one-day indoctrination program did not go on to join the church.[25] Despite these criticisms, mind control theory played an important role in a

[22] Ibid.,185-6.

[23] Ibid., 186.

[24] Dick Anthony and Thomas Robbins, "Conversion and 'Brainwashing' in New Religious Movements," *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 251-2.

[25] Ibid., 261-3.

number of civil suits against NRMs during the 1980s, where the effectiveness of brainwashing was given credibility by academics such as psychologist Margaret Singer and sociologist Richard Ofshe who frequently appeared in these trials to testify as expert witnesses.[26]

Mind control theory suffered a major setback in 1987 when it was rejected by the American Psychological Association. Another blow came in the 1990 case *U.S. v. Fishman* when mind control (as implemented by Scientology in this instance) was rejected as an exonerating explanation for criminal behavior due to a lack of scientific evidence. Singer and Ofshe were disqualified from testifying as expert witnesses in future cases.[27] In spite of these setbacks, brainwashing and mind control are still major tropes in popular depictions of cults both fictional and non-fictional. The four-episode HBO docuseries on Heaven's Gate entitled *Heaven's Gate: The Cult of Cults* (2020) devoted considerable time to detailing mind control theory and applying it to the rigidly controlled NRM.

We find another clear example of the longevity of this trope in the 2022 independent video game *Cult of the Lamb,* where a major component of the gameplay involves players growing their cult by recruiting new members, building structures, and choosing rituals for their group to carry out. One of the rituals the player can select is simply called "brainwashing," which involves the cultists circling around a pentagram with their (cute animal) faces shrouded by dark robes. During the ritual the robes are cast off and we see that our cultists' pupils have been replaced with the spirals that are often used as cartoon shorthand for brainwashing or hypnosis. In terms of the game's mechanics, the brainwashing ritual raises and locks in the cultist's "faith" statistic for two days of in-game time, meaning that this important stat will not

[26] Shop, Bromley, and Darnell, "The North American Anti-Cult Movement," 194.

[27] Charlotte E. Hardman, "Children in New Religious Movements," *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 397.

be negatively affected by the player's actions while it is locked (even if the cult runs out of food or if the player decides to ritualistically sacrifice one of their followers).

Of course, the idea of brainwashing has roots in American popular culture that even predate Lifton and Schein's work on mind control in the early 1960s. One prominent example of this is Richard Condon's 1959 novel *The Manchurian Candidate,* which was adapted into an acclaimed film starring Frank Sinatra in 1962. The story is a political thriller in which sinister communist forces brainwash prisoners of war, transforming them into sleeper agents who are unknowingly forced into a plan to subvert American democracy. This academy-award-nominated film most likely served as an introduction to the concept of mind control for many viewers, both during the year of its initial theatrical release and its rebroadcast on NBC in 1974.[28]

Perhaps the most important cultural event linking brainwashing to the modern conception of the religious cult was the extended, highly publicized horror show surrounding the arrest and trial of Charles Manson and his followers for a spate of grisly murders in the summer of 1969. During the trial and (even more importantly) in his bestselling account of the Manson saga *Helter Skelter,* prosecuting attorney Vincent Bugliosi made it clear that he felt Manson's totalitarian sway over the Family stemmed in no small part from the man's supposed hypnotic powers. In a passage in which he compares Manson to Adolf Hitler, Bugliosi writes, "Both had eyes which their followers described as 'hypnotic.' Beyond that, however, both had a presence, a charisma, and a tremendous amount of personal persuasive power."[29]

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[28] *Ultimate70s.com,* 2014-2023, accessed Aug. 23, 2023, http://www.ultimate70s.com/seventies_history/19740427/television.

[29] Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders,* kindle edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 598.

Thus, when the ACM began to rely on mind control to explain the behavior of NRM converts, the notion was likely not an unfamiliar concept to the broader public. It also provided an attractive explanation for why NRM recruits were abandoning their families and possessions, fundraising in seemingly unusual outfits and venues, and even in some extreme instances committing grievous acts of violence against themselves and others. Popular culture helped to supply the anitcult movement with a convenient rationale to delegitimize NRMs, and the anticult movement in turn helped to supply pop culture with the evergreen trope of the faceless, brainwashed cultist being controlled body and soul by the manipulative, amoral cult leader.

Of course, it was not only the ACM who were in dialogue with popular culture. A number of NRMs engaged with pop culture in a variety of forms to worship, spread their beliefs, and manage their relationship with the outside world. This dissertation will focus its attention on a particular area of engagement: namely, the popular music that was performed, recorded, and sold to the general public by Peoples Temple, the Children of God, and the Manson Family. The rich relationship between these albums and the faith and culture of these groups is made clearer when we consider the academic discourse surrounding religion and music more broadly.

Music and Religion

Scholars have examined the relationship between music and religion utilizing a variety of different approaches. As Philip Bohlman observes, musical scholars have frequently approached the topic in such a way that they "effectively separated religious music from religious experience, thereby secularizing sacred music and redeploying it in a secular rather than

sectarian history."[30] Despite the important relationship between music and worship, the sheer diversity of the topic makes it resist broad theorization. Although music and religion have been the subject of academic study for many years, very little work has been done on the role of music in NRMs. In developing my approach, I draw on work from across musicology, ethnomusicology, and popular music studies to conduct analysis rooted in the specific religious, social, and musical life of my case studies.

Ethnomusicologist Stephen Marini provides a broad look at the role of music in religious life in his monograph *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture.* Although I am skeptical of Marini's efforts to form general theories about religious music, his work nevertheless provides some valuable case studies on the role music plays in a variety of American religious settings. His work on the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the New Age music of artists like Paul Winter and Kay Gardner are particularly illuminating. He also provides an important reminder of how often religion is dependent not only on things like theology and faith, but also on their interplay with emotion.[31]

Religious music sometimes takes on fraught new dimensions when it is heard in the context of NRMs rather than established churches. This is particularly true of music that is not used strictly for closed ceremonies or rituals where the listeners are all believers, but rather is public facing, as is the case with albums, concerts, and other modes of public performance. In these cases, music can help to normalize and assimilate the NRM, or further set it apart from the mainstream. For example, in his chapter on ISKCON in San Francisco, Gregory Johnson

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[30] Philip V. Bohlman, "Introduction: Music in American Religious Experience," *Music in American Religious Experience,* ed. Philip V. Bohlman, Edith L. Blumhofer, and Maria M. Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

[31] Stephen A. Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 4.

observes that the Hare Krishna's practice of chanting in public while wearing religious garb far removed from the predominantly white and Christian world of the United States in the 1970s was part of what marked the group as a "cult," in spite of the fact that many of ISKCON's beliefs and practices stem directly from Hindu mythology that forms a major part of mainline religious life on the Indian subcontinent.[32]

On the other hand, the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization (H3O) frequently performed psychedelic rock and folk music in outdoor settings and festivals that were very similar to the musical practices of the broader youth counterculture of the 1970s, which helped to normalize the group. In describing H3O's evening kirtan, or session of spiritual singing, Alan Tobey writes,

> The medium is guitar (both acoustic and electric), the idiom is folk and rock. H3O's musicians have developed dozens of ways to sing the main mantras in a modern American style, and they have written their own songs as well. Suddenly the group seems like any other group of young Americans grooving to the music that is uniquely theirs.[33]

As we see, the music performed by this NRM not only served an important religious role within the group, but also serves to mediate the relationship between this idiosyncratic religious community and the larger public.

Jake Johnson's work on the Latter-Day Saints and musicals provides a valuable musicological model for approaching the question of controversial new religions and the role of music in negotiating their relationship with the outside world. Johnson is especially concerned not with sacred song, but rather with the interrelationship between the LDS and musical theater.

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[32] Gregory Johnson, "The Hare Krishna in San Fransisco," *The New Religious Consciousness,* ed. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkley: University of California Press, 1976), 31-2.

[33] Alan Tobey, "The Summer Solstice of the Healthy-Happy-Holy Organization," *The New Religious Consciousness,* ed. Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah (Berkley: University of California Press, 1976), 17.

Ultimately, he argues that "the histories of Mormonism and American musical theater should be seen as ideologically entwined, and that a distinctively American quality of vocality has emerged from the junction of these two iconic American traditions."[34] Johnson's work is particularly relevant for this dissertation because he is able to trace how LDS composers, lyricists, and performers were able to use musical theater to further assimilate their faith into the fabric of American society.

The LDS has assimilated into the American mainstream so successfully it can be easy to forget that for most of the nineteenth century, the Latter-Day Saints were perhaps the most hated and persecuted NRM in this country's history. The LDS's slow move toward acceptance from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century was not only the result of major changes—particularly those banning the earlier practice of polygamy—and the admission of longtime LDS stronghold Utah as a state in 1896, but also through the persistent use of music and musicals that entwined the history of the LDS with the mythology of the United States as a country of (white) pioneers who blazed new trails and settled the West.

Johnson makes this particularly evident in his analysis of *Promised Valley* (1947), which was influenced by Roger and Hammerstein's recent smash success *Oklahoma!* (1943) both in terms of its frontier setting and integration of its songs and choreography with its overall dramatic structure. *Promised Valley* used this quintessentially American theatrical form to tell a story that portrayed early Mormon history as quintessentially American, with an overall message about how anyone could become an American.

Not only did this help assimilate the LDS into mainstream American culture, it also helped create the often-mocked contemporary stereotype of Mormons as squeaky-clean white

[34] Jake Johnson, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 8.

suburban optimists still entrenched in the values of the 1950s.[35] Music's important role in transforming the Latter-Day Saints from the most reviled NRM in the United States to an accepted mainline faith is significant for my dissertation because much of my work focuses on the role of music not only as an aspect of worship and an expression of faith, but also as an attempt to negotiate and normalize the position of my three case studies into their broader social landscape. Although the Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family were far less successful than the LDS in their efforts toward musical assimilation, all three performed and released music that was meant to make their unconventional beliefs and lifestyles seem familiar and understandable to the outside world.

This dissertation does not only look at the ways in which the music of these NRMs attempts to negotiate their relationship to the broader religious and social world, but also the role that music played in the lives and faiths of members of those NRMs. This can be a challenging avenue of study for several reasons, not the least of which is that the Manson Family and Peoples Temple are no longer organizational entities and the Children of God, although still an active religion, has transformed aspects of its beliefs and lifestyle so dramatically since the first two decades of its existence that conventional fieldwork is not possible. As such, my musical analysis will rely not on participant-observation research, but rather will take as its primary texts archival material and the recordings these groups have left behind. In the case of Peoples Temple, this includes archived recordings that occasionally feature the music that was made as a part of worship in the church, but similar material does not exist for either COG or the Manson Family. As such, I also rely on the albums these three groups made and commercially released, which—

[35] Ibid., 55-82.

when paired with first and secondhand accounts of the spiritual life and practices within these groups—can help give us a sense of the role music played in the lives of believers.

Since the 1960s, a wide variety American religious music has drawn increasingly from folk and popular music. I draw on the work of ethnomusicologists Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck on a particularly prominent manifestation of this phenomenon in their book *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music.* The work of Howard and Streck is useful not only because the Children of God were early participants in the development of Christian rock and Christian contemporary music (CCM) in the 1960s and 1970s, but also because their approach does not merely focus on the music itself, but also on the different aspects of Christian contemporary music's "art world." This is a concept they adopt from the work of sociologist Howard Becker and define as "the network of people whose cooperative activity produces the art world's particular type of artistic product."[36] As such, Howard and Streck focus not only on the music and musicians of CCM, but also the avenues through which it is distributed, and the audiences who engage with it.

Many NRMs weave elements of popular music into their religious music, as was the case for all three of the groups I focus on for this dissertation. The musicians of the NRMs I examine were in conversation with the popular music of the day and in some cases even recontextualized popular songs as an expression of the group's faith. As such my analysis also draws from popular music studies. The work of Richard Middleton on the importance of the listener in constructing musical meaning is particularly valuable for my approach to the shifting meanings of music created by NRMs. Middleton argues that music contains a variety of codes that are decoded by the listener, and that this process is affected by "the multiplicity of variables

[36] Quoted in Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 13.

affecting every component: sender, channel, context, message and receiver."[37] Therefore, musical meaning is not something that is imbued into a work by the artist to be passively received by the listener, but rather is something that is constructed by the listener's interaction with the music and heavily dependent on what Middleton refers to as the competence of the listener.[38]

This is especially relevant for the NRMs I study because of the dramatically different contexts in which their music has been heard. The competency of an insider in a group like Peoples Temple allows them to understand references to the group's particular blend of religion and political ideology in the album recorded by the church's choir, *He's Able*. On the other hand, now that Peoples Temple is widely understood as a particularly nefarious cult associated the horrific Jonestown massacre, contemporary listeners will likely bring an entirely different listening competence to the album. These listeners strive not for connections to socialism or the group's Pentecostal origins but rather for references to their notorious reverend Jim Jones's undue sway over his followers, as well as elements that seem to foreshadow the abuse and violence that are so prominent in accounts of the church's history. Middleton's concept of listener competence provides the tools to help us describe and understand how the meaning of these bodies of music shift so dramatically depending on the perspective of the listener.

The interplay between musical object and listener perspective is also crucial for another body of music scholarship I draw on in this dissertation: the relationship between worship, music, and trance. It is especially relevant for my study of Peoples Temple because of the church's origins in the Pentecostal tradition where trancing is a crucial aspect of religious life.

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[37] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 173.

[38] Ibid.

Trancing is an important topic for NRMs more broadly, however, because of the assumed connection between mind control, hypnosis, and trance states in representations of cults in popular culture. Musical scholarship on trance pushes back on these assumptions by clearly delineating what trance is and what it can and cannot do.

One of the foundational works on this topic is the 1985 monograph *Music and Trance* by the French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget. Although trance is sometimes unaccompanied by music, according to Rouget, the general rule is that "possession fit or trance is accompanied by music, and music is almost always regarded as being more or less responsible for its onset."[39] Although music plays a crucial role in the vast majority of trancing practices, "from the viewpoint of its formal characteristics it varies considerably, if not totally" from one tradition to another.[40]

Another scholar of trance, Judith Becker, points out the important role of deep musical immersion in trancing practices because it "stimulates emotion and facilitates [the trancers'] special attentiveness, their special consciousness."[41] She also observes that trancing poses special problems for academic study because it cannot be fully explained either by a purely secular, biologically informed approach nor by a strictly humanistic view of the phenomenon. Although images of entranced cultists drained of their consciousness and willpower most readily calls to mind cult tropes that emerged during the 1970s, Becker also points out that the linkage of trance with occult practices has long roots in European history. For example, Franz Mesmer—the eighteenth-century German physician who propagated an occult theory of animal magnetism and

[39] Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession,* trans. Brunhild Biebuyck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 73.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 1.

mesmerism as a healing practice—would use music to induce trancing (which he would have termed mesmerism) in his patients.

As the work of Becker and Rouget tells us, trancing is highly dependent on music, and yet there are no consistent similarities between the music that is utilized in different trancing traditions. This is not to say the choice of trance-inducing music is not significant, far from it. This music must have a deep spiritual significance for the trancer so that it will provoke the deeply embodied and emotional response that leads to trancing. The religious perspective tracers bring to their music is most important in creating this response, and one of the most important ways that religious and spiritual groups create this context is by embedding the music in ritual. As such, the significant body of academic literature on ritual also provides important tools for understanding the role of music in NRMs.

Scholarship on Ritual Practices

The academic study of rites and rituals has a long history in sociology and anthropology. I draw from early work on the academic study of ritual as well as contemporary critics who provide a fresh perspective on the theoretical framework established by figures like Émile Durkheim and Victor Turner. Religious studies scholar Catherine Bell provides a useful reminder that ritual is not a static object, but rather an action, and thus she focuses on "some of the more common strategies of 'ritualization,' initially defined as a way of acting that differentiates some acts from others."[42] Although my dissertation focuses more on music than deep ritual analysis of the sort that interests Bell, this is nevertheless an important reminder that religious practices—including musical practices—are given religious significance less through

[42] Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice,* kindle edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), loc. 147.

the inherent qualities of the text themselves than by the actions and mindsets of the practitioners that imbue those activities with spiritual significance.

A major figure in the scholarly study of ritual is the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Durkheim analyzes the ritual and religious activity of various aboriginal peoples in Australia to argue that the elementary form of religion is totemism, in which the rites and beliefs of a particular group stem from their identification with a totem. On a deeper level, Durkheim argues that totem worship does not stem from some inherent quality in the totemic being itself. Ultimately the conception of divinity as a large, abstract, overwhelmingly powerful force that both dominates and supports us reflects the human experience of society. As Durkheim succinctly phrases it, "A society is to its members what a god is to its faithful."[43]

Durkheim also states that it is impossible for any human institution, including religion, to exist on a long-term basis if it is based on a lie. As Durkheim writes,

> If it were not founded in the nature of things, it would have encountered in the facts a resistance over which it could never have triumphed. So when we commence the study of primitive religions, it is with the assurance that they hold to reality and express it… one must know how to go underneath the symbol to the reality which it represents and which gives it its meaning.[44]

Although Durkheim's justification for the study of "primitive" religions is rooted in the racism of the period in which he was writing, it applies to the study of NRMs today. NRM beliefs and rituals are often considered so bizarre, so Other, that the common reaction is to simply dismiss

[43] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 208.

[44] Ibid., 5.

entire religions, their practices, and everyone involved as "crazy" because to a normative outlook their beliefs seem entirely disconnected from reality. As such, when we study these groups, we must remember that "the most fantastic rites and the strangest myths translate some human need, some aspect of life, either individual or social."[45] Durkheim reminds us that even the most outré religious practices are ultimately a reflection of reality as it is understood by its participants, and thus provide us a window into their lives, worldview, and humanity.

Durkheim also argues that religious ideas are ultimately birthed from collective effervescence—social experiences of intense ecstasy.[46] Collective effervescence involves the group setting aside reason and social decorum in favor of the raw expression of emotion, amplified by the communal nature of the experience.[47] Durkheim gives the example of events in which the scattered members of an aboriginal clan or portion of a tribe are summoned to conduct a sacred ceremony. While these groups consistently practice a number of "negative rites," or sacred taboos and prohibitions on certain behaviors, this one of their only "positive rites," which is to say rites that involve active ritual participation.[48] Thus, collective effervescence becomes a liminal event that marks the entry from profane time into sacred time. As Durkheim writes,

> Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation… The effervescence often becomes so intense that it leads to outlandish behavior; the passions unleashed are so torrential that nothing can hold them.[49]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 220.

[47] Ibid., 218.

[48] Ibid., 221.

[49] Ibid., 217-8.

This outpouring of collective effervescence is often expressed in part through song and dance, because "a collective emotion cannot be expressed collectively without some order that permits harmony and unison of movement."[50] We can find examples of the musical expression of collective effervescence in the context of NRMs as well, such as the psychedelic jam sessions performed by the Source Family band YaHoWa13.[51]

Victor Turner is another major scholar of ritual whose work resonates with my own. One particularly significant theory that Turner posits is the concept of "communitas," or a social structure that tries to make the relatively unstructured, undifferentiated character found in liminality permanent.[52] Turner argues that liminal entities are often represented as having no possessions or status, which in turn leads to neophytes developing "an intense comradeship and egalitarianism."[53] Furthermore, liminal situations often provide a carnivalesque reversal of power, as can be seen in the installation rites of the Kanongesha when the chief-elect is berated and treated like a slave the night before his ascension.[54] Some examples Turner gives of communitas are the hippies, who "'opt out' of the status-bound social order and acquire the stigmata of the lowly," as well as millenarian movements.[55]

Turner's discussion of the liminal elements of millenarian movements is directly applicable to a great number of NRMs. Consider this abbreviated list of the communitas values Turner finds in millenarian groups:

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[50] Ibid., 218.

[51] *The Source Family,* dir. Maria Demopoulos and Jodi Wille (Los Angeles: Eternal Now, 2012), Amazon Prime.

[52] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1969), 97.

[53] Ibid., 95.

[54] Ibid., 101.

[55] Ibid., 111-2.

> homogeneity, equality, anonymity, absence of property… reduction of all to the same status level, the wearing of uniform apparel (sometimes for both sexes)… total obedience to the prophet or leader… suspension of kinship rights and obligations… acceptance of pain and suffering (even to the point of undergoing martyrdom).[56]

This accurately describes a number of NRMs, including but not limited to all three of my case studies. For example, Heaven's Gate members renounced all property rights, abstained from sex, wore matching outfits, forfeited their former social status, adopted names like Mrcody and Srfody, practiced rigorous asceticism, and created an egalitarian society that nevertheless required total obedience to the leaders Ti and Do.[57] On a more granular level, Heaven's Gate's total rejection of human society makes them an example of "the communitas of withdrawal and retreat," which involves "a total or partial withdrawal from the participation in the structural relations of the world, which is, in any case, conceived of as a sort of permanent 'disaster area.'"[58] It is hard to think of a more apt description of Heaven's Gate's belief that the world has been corrupted by malicious extraterrestrials called "Luciferians" who wish to prevent humans from reaching The Evolutionary Level Above Human (TELAH).[59]

The British anthropologist Mary Douglas developed another important theoretical framework for the study of ritual. Douglas did extensive work on the role of symbolism in human culture, which formed a large part of her major works, including *Purity and Danger: An*

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[56] Ibid.

[57] George D. Chryssides, "'Come On Up, and I Will Show Thee': Heaven's Gate as a Postmodern Group," in *Controversial New Religions,* ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 353-70.

[58] Ibid., 155.

[59] Benjamin E. Zeller, *Heaven's Gate: America's UFO Religion,* kindle edition (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), 105.

Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1966) and the work in which she first theorized grid and group analysis, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (1970). In the grid and group system, the grid axis refers to systems of shared classifications versus private systems of classifications, where a value of zero would refer to a situation in which nothing held any concrete meaning, such as a "child's undifferentiated awareness" or "the mystic's moment of dissociation when all classifications are in abeyance."[60] A strong system of shared classifications (the top part of the axis) will likely result in a stable social system where meanings are held in common and reinforced by the members of the group, at least until outside pressure or new knowledge weakens the shared system. On the other hand, a coherent but totally private system of classifications (the bottom part of the axis) "would point away from communication with others, eventually to madness."[61]

The group axis, on the other hand, refers to the level of pressure put on members of the group. At one end of the scale the members' egos are entirely independent of pressures from the group (the left side of the axis), while the other extreme represents a situation where the ego is entirely dependent on the pressure of the group (the right side of the axis). As we move toward the right side of the axis, members of the group are "increasingly under the bond of other people."[62] On the other hand, groups that would fall on the left side of this axis have members that "may be progressively freed from personal pressure and progressively indoctrinated in the prevailing classification system," which is to say that deepening one's membership in the group would not entail submission to a totalizing social structure where personal freedoms are scarce.[63]

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[60] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 59.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Ibid., 60.

[63] Ibid.

This method of analysis has useful applications both for describing the social structure of the NRMs I study and comparing those social structures to common assumptions about what life in a religious cult entails. As Douglas's grid and group theory shows us, even NRMs as controlling as my three case studies operated within quite different social structures and enacted these controls through different methods.

My dissertation also draws on the work of philosophical anthropologist René Girard. In his 1977 book *Violence and the Sacred,* Girard argues that ritual sacrifice plays an important role in containing the violent impulses of communities. Girard writes that "if left unappeased, violence will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area."[64] Ritual sacrifice thus plays a crucial role through its ability to "stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into 'proper' channels."[65] As such, the sacrificial victim essentially acts as a scapegoat for the community, thus providing a legitimate channel for violent impulses such as the desire for vengeance. Girard argues that the use of a substitute victim that both resembles what it stands in for while remaining separate cuts off potential cycles for reciprocal violence and unites the community in a single act of cathartic unilateral violence against a target that is now outside the community. Not only does this allow the community to remain united and purify itself through the act of sacrificing the scapegoat, but it also controls violence by elevating it into the realm of the sacred. Girard writes,

> [Religion] humanizes violence; it protects man from his own violence by taking it out of his hands, transforming it into a transcendent and ever-present danger to be kept in check

[64] René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 10.

[65] Ibid.

by the appropriate rites appropriately observed and by a modest and prudent demeanor.[66] Girard's interpretation of sacrificial violence provides interesting insight into violent NRMs as well as mainline religions such as Christianity.

Girard's theory of sacrifice is relevant not only to understanding acts of violence in NRMs like Peoples Temple and the Manson Family, but also provides insight into the treatment of NRMs by their surrounding societies and religious communities. Figures such as Jim Jones and Charles Manson often portrayed themselves as martyrs to cement their leadership role within their groups and to provide their followers with powerful spiritual experiences. Manson did this in a particularly straightforward way through his ritual imitation of the most famous religious martyr in Western culture, Jesus Christ. The Manson Family would be dosed with LSD under Manson's supervision, and when everyone was well into their hallucinogenic trips Manson would reenact the crucification of Christ with himself in the starring role. The Christian belief that Jesus redeemed humanity by dying for their sins is a remarkably one-to-one example of the kind of sacrificial ritual Girard theorized.

Although it is a somewhat abstract application of Girard's theory, it also resonates with the general view and treatment of NRMs once they are labeled as cults. One of the most common tropes associated with cults is the idea propagated by some elements of the anticult movement that they are not true religions. This tendency to frame cults as the negative inversion of genuine religion lacks the ritual element that is a major component of Girard's theory of sacrifice, and yet it in some respects it fulfills a similar function. When we imagine the deeply imbalanced power dynamics of groups like the Manson Family, the Children of God, and Peoples Temple and the horrifying abuse that it engendered, the suggestion that cults and religions are something

[66] Ibid., 134.

fundamentally different from one another suggests that these are exclusively the problems of NRMs. Of course, abuse of all sorts can stem from any number of situations in which an institution gives an individual unchecked power over others. We find a particularly high-profile example of this sort of abuse in the scandals surrounding reports of predatory Catholic priests who were protected by the policies of the Vatican, but of course similar cases are found in a variety of religions, to say nothing of educational and professional institutions. The notion that abusive religions are not religions at all, but are instead cults, might be understood as enacting the logics of the ritual scapegoat. We can also link this process to ideas concerning liminality and communitas theorized by Van Gennep and Turner. By purging NRMs from the broader world of religion, religion is itself cleansed and perhaps even resurrected through this act of sacrifice. When we can point to the kind of bizarre and nightmarish activity that took place in Jonestown and say the problem is "cult violence," we are purifying religion at the expense of an extremely similar and yet separate scapegoat.

Cult Artifacts, Murderabilia, and Outsiders Art

In this dissertation I not only consider the role that music played within the life and worship of my three case studies, but also how the meaning of that music can be reshaped after a group is labeled a cult. As such, I will also examine the common tropes and stereotypes of cults that have been propagated by the media and the anticult movement, some of which originated in part as a reaction to groups like the Manson Family, the Children of God, and Peoples Temple. In order to understand how albums like *He's Able* by the People's Temple Choir and *Lie: The Love and Terror Cult* by Charles Manson resonate with popular imaginings of these groups my

dissertation will consider how these albums lie at an intersection between notions of outsider art and murderabilia.

Murderabilia most often refers to collectibles that are in some way connected to a notorious crime or criminal. The term most frequently refers to physical items that can be purchased, collected, and perhaps resold at a profit. For example, the website Cult(!) Collectibles—which bills itself as "Canada's Largest Cult and True Crime Murderabilia Site"—has an entire section dedicated to the "Jeffrey Dahmer Collection" where one can purchase items connected in some way to the infamous serial killer.[67] To give a few examples, a deck of playing cards owned by Dahmer's father come in at a modest twenty-five dollars, while a collection of crossword puzzles completed by Dahmer goes for $150.[68] More relevant to this dissertation, however, is the "Cults" section, where items are on sale from a variety of notorious groups, including all three of my case studies. A signed Polaroid of Manson is available for $1,000, while a Jim Jones Humanitarian Award—a certificate handed out as a prize to certain Jonestown residents—is on sale for $800.

The inclusion of cult memorabilia alongside that of serial killers and mass shooters interests me for several reasons. For one thing, it shows how close the categories of "cult leader" and "serial killer" tend to sit in contemporary popular culture. Although figures like Jim Jones and Charles Manson are anomalous NRM leaders specifically because of their intensely violent

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[67] *Cult Collectibles*, accessed February 2, 2023, cultcollectibles.org.

[68] Cult Collectibles, accessed February 2, 2023, https://www.cultcollectibles.org/shop/dahmer-collection. While $150 perhaps sounds expensive for a particularly morbid set of completed crossword puzzles, this is still very much on the low end of the offerings available here. Dahmer's 1989 income tax forms will run you a cool $3,500, while one of Dahmer's handwritten school projects goes for $15K. Topping the list, however, is Jeffery Dahmer's purported urn, apparently complete with ashes, listed at a whopping $250K. Although the seller offers no verification for the item nor any explanation of how they might have obtained it, they do request that inquiries should be limited to "serious buyers who provide some proof of finances and evidence they have the intent to purchase the item."

and abusive behavior, they are nevertheless seen as the archetypical examples of what it means to be a cult leader.

Especially notorious cult leaders are also frequently the subject of true crime programs, where they are generally portrayed as a specific type of mass murderer, a sort of variation on the serial killer. For example, the television program *Most Evil* (2006-8) was a true crime program in which Dr. Michael Stone, a forensic psychiatrist, would discuss the crimes and backgrounds of various murderers before ranking them on his self-created "scale of evil." While the program devoted most of its time to the discussion of serial killers like Ted Bundy, Ed Gein, and Gary Heidnik, it also had episodes dedicated to "cult leaders" and "cult followers." Popular true crime podcasts like *My Favorite Murder* (2016-Present) and *The Last Podcast on The Left* (2011-Present) discuss cults and cult leaders alongside their discussions of serial murderers. The Museum of Death—a museum focused on mass murderers and other macabre topics with locations in Los Angeles and New Orleans—even sells a t-shirt featuring line drawings of serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer, John Wayne Gacy, and Aileen Wuornos alongside such notorious cult leaders as Jim Jones, Marshall Applewhite, and Charles Manson.

I do not pretend it is a great shock that figures such as Manson and Jones who presided over atrocious crimes have a place in popular culture alongside other especially notorious murderers, not do I find it surprising that media coverage of groups like Heaven's Gate, the Manson Family, or Aum Shinrikyo focuses primarily on the violent events that made them infamous. Nevertheless, the true crime genre's interest in cults raises some fascinating questions. What do cult narratives stemming from the true crime genre focus on, and what do they ignore? And how do they affect our understanding of the musical artifacts these groups leave behind?

It is my contention that the musical artifacts left behind by infamous NRMs essentially become a form of musical murderabilia—grim sonic souvenirs connected to deviant cult leaders and their dangerous followers. This necessitates a consideration of murderabilia that extends beyond the collection of physical objects.[69] I want to consider murderabilia as a mode of aesthetic reception, where much of the effect stems from reading the art object through the lens of the crimes and/or criminal that it is attached to. This aesthetics of murderabilia lends itself particularly well to the examination of artwork that is connected to a well-known crime or criminal, such as the numerous "Pogo the Clown" paintings the serial killer (and amateur clown) John Wayne Gacy completed while in prison.

The documentary *Collectors* (2000) provides a revealing glimpse into how some murderabilia dealers and aficionados understand artwork connected to violent crime. The film features several murderabilia collectors discussing what motivates them to buy paintings by serial killers. Rick Stanton—a mortician who moonlights as a serial killer art dealer—says that he is motivated less by money than by "the brush with deviant celebrity." In the same documentary, true crime author Harold Schecter describes murderabilia as "actual artifacts that have been connected to these figures who have some kind of larger-than-life mythic kind of status to certain people." Clearly the desire to own something like a Gacy painting is motivated less by an appreciation of the image itself than its connection to the artist's grim notoriety.

Murderabilia also lends itself to a particular hermeneutics in which the artwork is interpreted exclusively through the lens of the violent crimes to which it is connected. Once again, we see clear examples of this in *Collectors.* The documentary features two separate

[69] This is not to say there is no overlap between musical murderabilia and collectible objects. One of the offerings available on Cult Collectibles is CD of Branch Davidian leader David Koresh's unofficial album *Voices of Fire,* and The Museum of Death in Los Angeles displays a signed vinyl copy of the People's Temple Choir's album *He's Able.*

murderabilia collectors interpreting John Wayne Gacy's "Hi-Ho" series of paintings based on Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Collector Joe Coleman says,

> You know the seven dwarves… are like boys… and that's what he killed. And they work in a tunnel, and he buried the boys in his basement… If you see the seven dwarfs marching down… this path with all these phallic trees around, to me it is very revealing of things about John Wayne Gacy that even he, I don't think, intended to put in there but it just poured out… in this very kind of mundane scene.

Coleman's interpretation of what is by his own estimation a fairly bland piece of Disney fan art as a window into Gacy's murderous obsessions is only possible if you are seeing the artwork primarily as a way of gazing at the artist's crimes. The primary assumption of the hermeneutics of murderabilia is that the artwork provides a window into the violent psychology of its deviant creator. Although the mediocrity of Gacy's painting makes this interpretation slightly ridiculous (as one YouTube comment reads, "They're really reading into the symbolism of Gacy's shitty 7 Dwarf [sic] paintings") the fact that this intense pseudo-psychological reading is being applied to such a painting only makes the hermeneutics of murderabilia easier to trace.

Whether it takes the form of purchasing keepsakes or art appreciation, engagement with murderabilia is at least partially motivated by a desire to become more intimate with the violence it is connected to. Indeed, Coleman describes collecting serial killer artwork as a way of owning "a piece of their soul." Although the practice of actively collecting tangible murderabilia is understandably stigmatized, engaging in some way with the hermeneutics of murderabilia is far less taboo. It is not outlandish to speculate that many people who would never consider buying one of Gacy's paintings have been driven by curiosity to look them up online. Indeed, one might argue that much of the true crime genre is dedicated to fulfilling this desire to become more

intimate with violent histories, particularly those that relate to the criminals that the media have turned into celebrities.

Although the academic literature is silent on the issue of paintings by serial killers or albums by death cults, these intersections of criminal celebrity and artistic production resonate with discussions of outsider art. The concept of outsider art emerged from the visual arts. The term was coined by Roger Cardinal in 1972, though it has its origins in the French concept of *art brut* (raw art) that was theorized in 1949 by the modernist artist Jean Dubuffet.[70] According to David Maclagan,

> The term 'Outsider Art' refers, in a very open-ended way, to extraordinary works created by people who are in some way on the margins of society, and who, for whatever mixture of reasons, find themselves unable to fit into the conventional requirements—social and psychological, as well as artistic—of the culture they inhabit.[71]

Outsider artists are defined in part by their isolation, often through institutionalization, and are commonly associated with eccentricity and mental illness, all circumstances which supposedly cut them off from the broader world of social and artistic influences and incubate a wholly original creative voice.[72]

Critics have argued that the outsider art label is essentially a new form of primitivism, where the appreciation of the aesthetic object is dependent on a fetishizing and condescending view of the artist.[73] Daniel Wojcik adopts the behavioral perspective of folklore studies

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[70] Daniel Wojcik, "Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity," in *Western Folklore* (Spring-Summer, 2008, vol. 67, no. 2/3), 179. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25474913.

[71] David Maclagan, *Outsider Art: From the Margins to the Marketplace* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009), 7.

[72] Ibid., 9.

[73] For examples, see Wojcik, "Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity," 179-98, and Jesse Prinz, "Against Outsider Art," in *Journal of Social Philosophy,* vol. 48 no. 3, Fall 2017, 250-72.

advocated by Michael Owen Jones to argue that proponents of outsider art take an elitist view of cultural isolation that ignores how outsider artists were influenced by personal experiences, social interactions, and vernacular traditions.[74] These critiques speak to the slippery nature of outsider art, which might well depend more heavily on the viewer's perception that it was created by an outsider than the actual material of the piece or the conditions in which it was created. As Maclagan points out, while there might be certain aesthetic qualities associated with outsider art, it ultimately relies on the background of its creation and creator to determine its authenticity rather than any intrinsic qualities of the work itself.[75] Indeed, much of the effect created by outsider art stems from the urge to see it as a window into the world of its isolated creator. Maclagan writes,

> The mixture of the extraordinary with the baffling or secretive that characterizes Outsider Art suggests something on the edge of intelligibility and seems to offer us pictures of mental states that we can barely imagine, though the exact nature of the connection between the two is a problematic one.[76]

In many ways music associated with cults does not fit conventional definitions of outsider art. First and foremost, outsider art developed as a category within the discourse of the visual arts. Although the contexts and marketplaces of recorded music and the visual arts are of course very different, the idea of a musical equivalent to outsider art has been proposed before. The first person to discuss "outsider music" was Irwin Chudsid in a 1996 article for a Tower Records publication known as *Pulse!* In this article, Chudsid points directly toward the tendency

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[74] Wojcik, "Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity," 180.

[75] Maclagan, *Outsider Art,* 15-7.

[76] Ibid., 11.

to view "outsiders," artistic and musical, as individuals who produce work that provide a glimpse into their abnormal lives. He defines outsider music as "crackpot and visionary music where all trails lead essentially to one place: over the edge."[77] Although this definition of outsider music has an obvious overlap with our understanding of artifacts such as the music recorded and released by Charles Manson, Chudsid shies away from including violent criminals in catalogue of outsider music.

Serial killers and cultists also live very different lives from the institutionalized, mentally ill individuals who generally make up the ranks of outsider artists. Although mass murderers and cult members are not physically separated from the rest of the world, they are nevertheless still imagined as isolated. While serial killers are often seen as profoundly isolated by their deviant, violent urges, and the need to keep a major part of their personalities secret from everyone in their lives, cult are often understood as entire communities that are themselves isolated from the moderating influence of the outside world. Just as with the outsider artist, we imagine cult music as the product of musicians who have been profoundly isolated from the broader public. This viewpoint allows us to imagine their music as a glimpse into a world to which we otherwise have no access. While the framework of outsider art tends to present the creator as a sympathetic, isolated figure that the audience may pity, the lens of murderabilia distorts this perception by offering a glimpse into either wholly unsympathetic individuals that we often imagine as monsters or by brainwashed victims who have lost touch with both reality and the outside world. When we consider how the music produced by groups like Peoples Temple and the Manson Family can be reimagined as musical murderabilia, we often find the music's meaning seems entirely different from how it was understood within these groups. With that in mind, let us turn

[77] Quoted in George Plasketes, *B-Sides, Undercurrents and Overtones: Peripheries to Popular in Music, 1960 to the Present* (Milton Park, Abingdon-on-Thames, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 216), 43.

our attention to the discussions of my case studies contained in the following chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One: The Children of God

This chapter begins with a discussion of the Jesus People movement, which was the primary social and religious milieu that the Children of God emerged from. The Jesus People were a product of an encounter between evangelical Christianity and the West Coast hippie counterculture of the 1960s. Although the group known today as the Family International has undergone dramatic changes over the last fifty-odd years, their countercultural roots inform their style, ethos, and worship practices to this day.

The Sixties counterculture sounds most obviously in the vast quantity of recorded music produced by the church during the 1960s and early 1970s, though their preferred musical styles have changed along with their theological beliefs throughout the decades. Music in COG has consistently served simultaneously as a means of worship (though the terms of this worship have shifted through the decades) as well as outreach and proselytization. Their music's stylistic connections with folk-rock harmonizes with their religious rhetoric, which often used language derived from left-wing antiwar protests to voice objections to "the System," represented primarily by established Christian churches. While this music reflects COG's core values, it often steered clear of explicit references to the group's more idiosyncratic and controversial beliefs. This is especially pronounced on records released by famous musicians who joined the group, such as Jeremy Spencer of Fleetwood Mac.

COG's music from this period thus resonates with their beliefs and lifestyle while carefully framing them in a way that was congruent with the evangelical hippie subculture they first emerged from. The group's musical efforts to communicate to a wider audience must also be understood in the context of the Children of God's growing notoriety during the 1970s as one of the principal targets of the nascent anticult movement. My analysis will also consider the strategies COG musicians have employed to navigate these scandals, both in terms of the music itself and its distribution.

Chapter Two Peoples Temple

The music of Peoples Temple reflects both their roots in the Pentecostal tradition and their engagement with radical leftist politics. Much like the Children of God, Peoples Temple underwent dramatic changes over the course of its existence in terms of its theology and social structure. As such, this chapter is divided into three broad sections centered on different periods of the church's history and the music they created during that time.

The first section focuses on the group's origins in Indiana. Throughout this period, Peoples Temple was an unusually politically oriented, left-leaning Pentecostal church rather than a full-blown new religious movement, and their music reflected this. The second section focuses on the time People Temple spent in California, during which the demographics of the group began to change, socialism became one of the church's key tenants, and the Reverend Jim Jones was increasingly seen as a divine figure. The music Peoples Temple created during this period reflects this shift away from traditional Christianity and increasing embrace of hardline Marxism in fascinating and subtle ways. Although the church emphasized its religious and musical origins in Pentecostalism in its public-facing music, such as the album *He's Able*

recorded by the People's Temple Choir, it is still permeated with references to their increasingly radical religious and political views that are only legible to the informed listener. My final section looks at the time the church spent in Jonestown and the surprisingly large amount of musical activity that went on in the increasingly abusive and isolated compound. My analysis looks at the church's continued use of their skilled musicians as an (increasingly unsuccessful) means of negotiating their relationship with a hostile outside world. I will also consider how the meaning of the musical artifacts Peoples Temple left behind is transformed by the tragic violence of the Jonestown massacre.

Chapter Three: The Manson Family

While both the Children of God and Peoples Temple have been the subject of considerable scholarly discourse, academics have largely avoided studying the Manson Family. In many ways this is unsurprising. Aside from the general unsavoriness of the topic, the Manson Family lacked even the small-scale institutional apparatus that provides NRM scholarship its material for analysis. Furthermore, the group was active for only a brief time, and while they have been the subsequent subject of extensive journalistic attention, accounts of its survivors are often contradictory, particularly on the religious significance of the apocalyptic "Helter Skelter" scenario that purportedly pushed the group toward violence.

Although some reliable, if preliminary hypotheses about the function of music within the Manson Family can be culled from memoirs, this chapter will focus primarily on the group's afterlife: on how musical material such as the Manson album *Lie: The Love and Terror Cult* (1970) has contributed to popular imaginings of what it means to be a "cult leader." Indeed, because of Manson's well-known aspirations to make it in the music business, his connection

with members of the Beach Boys, and the violent inspiration he took from the Beatles' "White Album," his music is much more widely known than that of COG or Peoples Temple. There is perhaps no more concrete illustration of the way in which a song shifts its meaning after being relabeled a "cult artifact" than by comparing the reception of the Manson-penned Beach Boys track "Never Learn Not to Love" before and after the Tate/LaBianca murders. Through the close analysis of both Manson's music and the music that he publicly commented on, as well as a consideration of the scholarly discussion surrounding "outsider art," I will argue that the mode of reception inspired by "cult artifacts" can also be meaningfully extended to musical material merely associated with controversial NRMs. My analysis of this music through this lens will further reveal how Manson has been transformed into a symbolic—indeed, almost mythic—figure in the popular imagination.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of this dissertation, I look back on the different aspects of musical life in the three NRMs that formed the basis for my analysis. There is also a brief discussion of the ways that the popular concept of the religious cult has shifted in the wake of several high-profile incidents in the 1990s and the rise of the QAnon movement in the twenty-first century. I also provide a discussion for further areas of study, such as ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation research.

The Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family all contributed to the modern conception of the abusive religious cult, and all three had music as a core aspect of the lives of their followers. All three of the case studies discussed here—and NRMs in general—vary widely in terms of their social structure, religious beliefs, and musical practices. Throughout

this dissertation, I argue that the close examination of the musical life of these controversial NRMs provides unique insights into the differing reasons followers were attracted to these groups, how these groups attempted to manage their relationship with the outside world, and ultimately how we remember these groups after they have been labeled cults.

Chapter 1

The Children of God:
Musical and Theological Adaptation in a Controversial New Religious Movement

The Children of God (COG)—which today goes under the moniker the Family International—is a valuable case study for the intersection of music, new religions, and the 1960s counterculture. COG started in southern California in 1966 around the same time and place that both the hippie movement and the Jesus People movement began to take shape. Part of what makes COG so valuable to study is its history of adaptation and survival through major structural and theological changes, often in the face of extreme hostility from the broader public. Some of the earliest manifestations of the anticult movement formed to oppose COG, and the group has been repeatedly and publicly accused of serious abuse, particularly from the late 1970s through the mid 1980s. In spite of this, the group has managed to survive to this day. The Children of God have also consistently dedicated a great deal of time, resources, and effort toward music making. Since its inception, COG has released hundreds of albums by dozens of different artists. Thus, COG provides a valuable opportunity to study how this controversial NRM navigated its relationship with the outside world, how it has interacted with the marketplace for Christian media which, much like COG, also has its origins in the Jesus People movement, and how their musical language and beliefs have evolved over the course of five decades.

This chapter will divide the group's history into three broad periods: the early years from their formation in California through their shift to becoming a global organization, the "Family of Love" years during which the group underwent important theological changes, including the infamous "Love Revolution," and lastly the period that saw an incremental move toward closer assimilation and stability that accelerated as Berg gradually ceded control of the group.

Throughout my history of COG, I consider how the group reflects and diverges from the religious and subcultural milieus from which it emerged. I devote particular attention to the ways in which COG's countercultural sensibilities have interacted with their patriarchal gender politics, in terms of both their theology and music. I discuss representative musical material from each of these eras to examine its function within the contemporaneous practices and beliefs of the Children of God. I also consider how COG and the music they produced fit into the broader historical context of both evangelical Christianity and the radical changes in American religious music that began in the mid-Sixties.

Jesus Freaks Forsaking All: The Children of God 1966-1972

Although many histories of the Children of God begin with the early life of the group's founder and prophet David Berg (known to his followers as "Father Moses," "Mo," or simply "Dad") it is helpful to first understand the cultural and religious environment that Berg found himself in when he began to lay the groundwork for his new religion. The Children of God—originally known as Teens for Christ—were an early part of the Jesus People movement that had its roots on the West Coast during the mid 1960s. The Jesus People, also known as the "Jesus Freaks," were participants in the hippie counterculture who turned to evangelical Christianity as an answer to the spiritual questions that were brought on for many by different forms of experimentation within the psychedelic subculture. Although many older, more traditional Christians were shocked when some of Haight-Ashbury's countercultural denizens began arriving at their Sunday morning services, many young hippies saw a deep connection between evangelism and psychedelia. As one early Jesus Freak put it, "I felt so cool that I [started telling]

my friends I was dropping LSD, smoking marijuana and that Jesus Christ was Lord… I had turned on, tuned in, and Christ was leading me out."[1]

The movement's origins can be traced back to Northern California's Bay Area during the Summer of Love in 1967 when key members of some of the most important early Jesus People groups first began to form connections based on a shared interest in Christianity.[2] By 1968 the Jesus People were a full-fledged movement in Southern California, and in 1971 they began to receive national attention from publications like *Time* magazine. Although the movement largely fizzled out by the late 1970s, religious historian Larry Eskridge argues that this relatively short-lived phenomenon created a lasting impact on evangelical Christianity, contemporary Christian music (CCM), and American religious culture more broadly.[3]

If we take a broader perspective, the Jesus People movement is just one example of the large-scale transformation of religious culture in the United States that occurred as the Baby Boomer generation came of age. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof argues that these changes reflect the influence of the "quest culture" that became particularly prominent amongst the Baby Boomers. This quest culture saw religion as a journey centered around the individual's search for answers to spiritual questions. To answer these questions, seekers turned to the "spiritual marketplace," a term which refers to the practice of "shopping around" different religious and spiritual ideas from a variety of porous sources.[4] In response, many traditional religious institutions changed and adapted to better accommodate these spiritual seekers, in no small part

[1] Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America,* kindle edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19.

[2] Ibid., 22.

[3] Ibid., 5.

[4] Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9-10.

through the use of music indebted to folk and other popular styles. This style of religious music is heard not only in the songs of the Jesus People, but also in some post-Vatican II Catholic services, in Debbie Friedman's indelible influence on Jewish American religious music since the 1970s, and in a great number of NRMs that emerged from the counterculture in the 1960s. Thus, the Jesus People movement was not a religious flash-in-the-pan, but rather an early harbinger of the Baby Boomers' transformational influence on religious culture in the United States.

While the initially shocking style of the Jesus People movement was gradually sanitized and folded into mainline evangelism, the Children of God have always set themselves firmly outside the bounds of the Christian institutions that they dismissively refer to as "Churchianity." Despite COG's very critical attitude toward mainline Christianity, their musical expressions of faith have consistently attempted to reach beyond the bounds of the group's membership and has maintained a constant, if one-sided, dialogue with the genre and marketplace of the CCM genre that it grew up alongside. The history and musical life of the Children of God give us a fascinating view into how a particularly extreme and fraught manifestation of the collision between evangelism and the counterculture 1) maintained an identity rooted both in fundamentalist Christianity and separation from Christian institutions, 2) attempted to reach outsiders both through channels unique to the Children of God and through more mainstream outlets, and 3) adapted and transformed when the group became a target of the anticult movement. With this context in mind, let us turn our attention to the founding and early history of the Children of God.

David Berg was involved with Christian ministries long before he became the founder and Endtime Prophet of the Children of God. Berg was born in 1919—making him significantly older than the Baby Boomers who would make up the bulk of COG's early recruits—to the

itinerant Christian evangelist Virginia Brandt Berg. Berg spent much of his youth and young adulthood working in Christian ministry, and was ordained in the Christian and Missionary Alliance where he served for twenty years.[5] During this time Berg also worked for Rev. Fred Jordan on his radio and television program *Church in the Home,* which may have influenced Berg's later reliance on different forms of media to spread his religious message.[6] Both Berg and his eventually successor Karen Zerby had strong familial ties to the Pentecostal and Holiness movement, the influence of which can still be detected in Family theology to this day.[7] By 1951, Berg had married his first wife and had four children, all of whom would be deeply involved in the early years of the COG.

The foundations of the Children of God were first laid in 1966, when Berg and his family left Rev. Jordan's Soul Clinic ranch and began their new lives as "an itinerant singing and evangelistic ministry."[8] Led by the missionary efforts of Berg's family and especially his children, they gradually began to accumulate followers. The group visited a number of different churches and described themselves as "Teenagers for Christ… [that] like to witness instead of Watusi, preach better than protest, and win rather than sin—a teenage witnessing revolution to prove that Christ is more than the Monkeys [sic]."[9] Although the group would later embrace much more of the counterculture's style and aesthetic—and indeed gained notoriety for staging their own particular brand of protest, as will be discussed below—it is worth noting that they

[5] James D. Chancellor, *Life in the Family: An Oral History of the Children of God* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 1.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd, *Talking with the Children of God: Prophecy and Transformation in a Radical Religious Group* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 6. The authors cite COG's emphasis on the Pentecostal principal of being "spirit-led" in all things as an example of this influence.

[8] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 1.

[9] Eskridge, *God's Forever Family,* 73.

were already describing their religious activities as a "revolution," a tendency that has carried on through the present day. It was not until the nascent group settled into the scenic Southern California community of Huntington Beach in 1968, however, that Berg's ministry began to turn in radical new directions both theologically and socially.[10]

In Huntington Beach, the Teens for Christ were able to set up shop in the Light Club, a coffeehouse that was initially opened by David Wilkerson's Teen Challenge organization. Wilkerson is best remembered today as a co-author of *The Cross and the Switchblade* (1963), an autobiographical account of his missionary efforts amongst juvenile delinquents and street gang members in New York City during the late 1950s.[11] This is where the Teens for Christ first began to develop methods for proselytizing to the hippies that had congregated around the community's beaches. As Berg's daughter Linda noted, the secret to recruiting the young members of the counterculture seemed to be "free peanut butter sandwiches and live music."[12] Indeed, the early history of COG highlights the extent to which music as a means of both witnessing and worship has always been at the forefront of the group's priorities.

No doubt the folk-influenced music of the Teens for Christ helped to counteract the otherwise "square" image of those very early members. Some attendees of these early meetings have since commented on the initially stark contrast between the clean cut, suit-wearing Teens for Christ and the young bohemians they were attempting to convert. Kent Philpott, a member of the Jesus People movement who traveled from San Francisco to see the group, recalled the strange juxtaposition of "wall-to-wall kids… and here's [Berg] dressed in a black suit."[13] Within

[10] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 1.

[11] Eskridge, *God's Forever Family,* 73.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid., 74.

a few months, however, the group itself took a strong countercultural turn. Berg himself started to adopt a more bohemian wardrobe, consisting of "dark glasses, beret, baggy pants, an old torn jacket and tennis shoes."[14] The group also began to take on a more anti-establishment tone. They began to rail against the "System," or "the corrupt educational, political, economic, and religious structures of contemporary American society that were soon to be consumed by the full wrath of God."[15] Members were encouraged to "forsake all" by cutting ties to anything connected to the System (often including the new recruit's family), giving up their possessions, and joining Berg's growing organization as a full-time, live-in member. By 1969, the Teens for Christ had attracted about fifty members and began to receive their first negative publicity in response to their recruitment tactics, which included aggressive proselytization on school campuses and disruptive "visitations" to churches deemed to be a part of the System.[16]

Particularly representative of this phase in COG's history was their practice of conducting highly public sackcloth-and-ash vigils. Sociologist David Van Zandt writes,

> During the [sackcloth-and-ash] vigil… members dressed in red sackcloths and wore large wooden yokes around their necks. They carried long staffs in one hand and bibles or scrolls in the other, and they smeared ash on their foreheads… The members formed a line and began to move, taking a step and pounding their staffs on the ground as their right feet hit. At signaled times, they turned toward the object of protest, lifted the staffs, and yelled "Woe" or "Abomination." For such events, members cultivated the look of

[14] Ibid.

[15] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 2.

[16] Ibid.

wild-eyed prophets—long hair, beards, and fierce expressions—in part to gain attention.[17]

COG's idiosyncratic take on public protest tapped them further into the rebellious spirit of the 1960s counterculture. Rather than the politically-driven protests against the war in Vietnam, however, these sackcloth-and-ash vigils were often directed at Christian churches that COG deemed part of the System and insufficiently dedicated to Christ, often referred to within the group by the degrading moniker "Churchianity."

In April of 1969, the Children of God left Huntington Beach and traveled throughout the United States and Canada. According to sociologist David Van Zandt this was their most formative period because "many of the social practices that mark the everyday life of COG members were developed, and members' identities as part of a revolutionary group were solidified."[18] During a relatively brief stay in Quebec, Berg ordained fifty church leaders, thus giving the nascent church a clergy and hierarchy.[19] This was also the year that Berg announced what is now considered the foundational prophecy for the Children of God: "A Prophecy of God on the Old Church and the New Church." Here, Berg declared that the Teens for Christ would split entirely from mainline Christianity and would now be God's New Church known as the Children of God.[20]

This was a pivotal moment for COG not only because it represents the beginning of their institutional existence, but also because it established Berg as a major Christian prophet within the group on par with Moses. Indeed, it is Berg's status as a prophet capable of producing new

[17] David E. Van Zandt, *Living in the Children of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 35.

[18] Ibid., 33.

[19] Ibid., 35.

[20] Chancellor, *Life in the Family*, 3.

scripture—referred to as "the New Wine" within the Children of God—that represents the group's break from mainline Christianity, in spite of the group's continued identification as Christians. An obvious historical parallel is Joseph Smith's prophet status within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At this time, Berg also informed his inner circle that he would be taking his secretary Karen Zerby as what he termed his New Wife, a development that proved to be a harbinger of COG's future direction.[21] As COG continued to grow and attract controversy, Berg began to withdraw not only from public view but from contact with all but his closest followers. This shift, which was announced in 1970, allowed Berg to "prove a more Olympian form of organizational guidance through his prophetic writings and correspondence."[22]

This phase in Berg's career solidified his status as the group's Endtime Prophet and established the pattern by which COG scripture and prophecy would be distributed, a pattern that has held to this day. In April of 1971, Berg and Zerby settled in London, where Berg began to communicate to COG members overseas through what would come to be known as the MO Letters.[23] MO Letters soon became Berg's primary method of communicating with his growing NRM, to inform them of news, to deliver prophecy, and at times to issue major changes in the group's theology and structure. Van Zandt argues that the MO Letters allowed Berg to maintain his charismatic authority over COG even after the group was widely dispersed and Berg himself was no longer physically present.[24] The MO Letters soon took on the status of scripture within

[21] Ibid.

[22] Shepherd and Shepherd, *Talking with the Children of God,* 7.

[23] Van Zandt, *Living with the Children of God,* 38.

[24] Ibid., 30.

the group.[25] The MO Letters themselves also reveal another point of contact between the aesthetics of the counterculture and the Children of God. Berg's MO Letters routinely make use of the hippie's distinctive slang to communicate. Eventually some of the MO Letters were even illustrated in the style of the self-published counterculture "comix" of the 1960s, such as Robert Crumb's *Fritz the Cat* and *Mr. Natural*.

Early in 1971, the Children of God received fairly positive national attention when they were covered on NBC's "First Tuesday," resulting in an influx of interest and new membership for the group.[26] This attention—combined with COG's stringent demands that new recruits give up all their worldly possessions and cut ties with the System—soon brought forth a slew of criticism from the religious press. This also helped spur the creation of FREECOG, an anticult organization created by concerned parents who feared for the safety of their children who had stopped contacting them after joining the group. This was a significant moment not only for COG, but for all American NRMs, as FREECOG was the very first organized manifestation of the anticult movement that would soon begin to target a wide variety of NRMs.[27]

Although the Children of God's demands on their recruits were extreme, FREECOG's accusations that the group drugged, kidnapped, and brainwashed members were ultimately baseless.[28] Some parents even hired professional deprogrammers like Ted "Black Lightning" Patrick who would essentially kidnap converted family members and attempt to forcibly reverse

[25] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 5.

[26] Van Zandt, *Living with the Children of God,* 37.

[27] Anson Shupe, David G. Bromley, and Susan E. Darnell, "The North American Anti-Cult Movement: Vicissitudes of Success and Failure," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 188.

[28] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 4.

what they interpreted as brainwashing.[29] As a result of this pressure, the Children of God began to stress that underaged members would not be able to join without the express approval of their legal guardians. They also adopted new security measures, such as designating certain colonies "selah," or secret, and posting guards around key locations.[30] As Van Zandt writes, this new dynamic with the outside world "contributed to a siege mentality that emphasized the difference between the group and the surrounding society."[31]

The Children of God began a major shift in 1972 when, prompted by a dream about the catastrophic destruction of the United States, Berg issued a MO letter that urged his followers to flee overseas. Rank and file members responded quickly, and by the end of the year COG had established missionary colonies in a wide variety of locations, including India, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Western Europe, and Latin America.[32] The day-to-day activities of COG members during this period generally revolved around the logistical demands of life in an itinerant communal home and a strong, organized commitment to "witnessing," or proclaiming Christ's divinity and the imminent Second Coming. During these early years witnessing generally took the form of public activities such as the sackcloth-and-ash vigils rather than face-to-face interactions, largely targeted at the hippie subculture. When these individual witnessing interactions did occur, "the members stressed the impending doom of the world at God's hands and the corruption of the System."[33] Conditions for the group were difficult at this time, leading

[29] William Sims Bainbridge, *The Endtime Family: Children of God* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 5.

[30] Van Zandt, *Living with the Children of God,* 37.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 5.

[33] Ibid., 36.

some to consider the entire period a test of the group's faith. The group survived by "procuring," which could mean dumpster diving or using a new recruit's recently forsaken credit cards until they were canceled.[34]

In terms of their broader organizational structure, the group was divided into twelve "tribes"—modeled off the twelve tribes of Israel—which were separated by gender and given specific tasks, an indication of the group's embrace of a patriarchal social hierarchy couched within their countercultural style during these early years. Members attended Bible classes and set aside parts of the day to memorize scripture. Although the Children of God's distinctive theological foundation was still being developed in these early years, music as an aid to proselytization and worship was already a central feature of the group. As James Chancellor writes, "Almost every colony had disciples who played guitar and sang on the street as part of the witnessing strategy."[35] The musical repertoire from these years, along with testimony from COG musicians, provides valuable insight into the life, beliefs, and practices of this NRM as they were first beginning to gain both a distinctive religious identity and public notoriety.

The Early Music of the Children of God

Throughout their many decades of existence, the Children of God have always put a strong emphasis on music making. Chancellor writes, "From the earliest days of 'Teens for Christ,' music had been a central aspect of Family life and witness… Disciples have written hundreds of songs of protest, praise, and proclamation."[36] Even in its early years, it is difficult to

[34] Ibid.

[35] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 7.

[36] Ibid.

trace precisely how many active musicians were a part of the Children of God. Although quite a bit of this music was recorded and archived in some manner, credits are rarely included and are further complicated by the group's habit of repeatedly rechristening members with a variety of biblical names. Music's importance to the Children of God is made clear not only by the sheer number of songs and recordings the group produced during this time period, but Berg's attitude toward this body of music, as expressed in his MO Letters.

For example, "The Music that Made the Revolution" is a MO Letter Berg released in May of 1972.[37] Throughout the letter, Berg extols COG musicians to record the group's "top hits… for the general public, as well as our own use" before things are complicated by the group's mass exodus from the United States.[38] Berg writes that he wants the group's musicians to focus on "the songs that are already proven hits, already popular, already tried and tested and proven, singable over and over again, and that really hit home, really express your feelings, give everybody a chance to put it in words and emote."[39] The letter is a fascinating glimpse into what COG's founder and prophet valued most about the group's music—not to mention Berg's ability to shift from a distant, quasi-mystical guru to a managerial presence unafraid to take his subordinates to task for their failure to carry out his wishes in an efficient and organized manner. As such it is worth quoting at some length:

> I've been waiting for three years for you guys to get our songs together, our real revolutionary hits that everybody loves to sing, for a song book and an album that

[37] Following the citational practice used by Chancellor, I will refer to MO Letters (hereafter ML) by title, number, and date. It is also worth noting that this MO Letter was labeled "DO" meaning "disciples only," which indicated that it was meant for distribution only to committed members of the Children of God. When MO Letters are quoted, where possible I have retained the author's distinctive and comic book-influenced use of bold text for emphasis.

[38] David Berg, "The Music that Made the Revolution," ML#166-DO, May 28, 1972.

[39] Ibid.

> everybody would love to have! I begged you guys to put it together before we ever left California, but so far all you've produced are a couple little songbooks, packed mostly with songs nobody ever heard, apparently by your favourite songwriter, and leaving out some of our best, all time favourites!—And in spite of our many good bands with some excellent lead vocalists who have produced some real hits, we're still waiting on someone to produce even one good album of our own music! I suggest we quit!—quit waiting on the experts for their perfection and go back to the little guys who, by the help of God Almighty, created our original Revolutionary music, and make them go to work and record their own songs we all love so well and that made the Revolution what it is each on his own taped cassette, and reproduce these cassettes with the equipment we have now for our own use and the rest of the world before it's too late![40]

This is revealing in several respects. For one thing, we see that by 1972 the Children of God's musical ecosystem was already large enough to contain what Berg considered to be tried-and-true hits as well as more less successful songs and songwriters that were being given more exposure than they deserved. Furthermore, we also see that Berg valued sing-ability, emotional expressiveness, and above all, enough popularity and appeal that the music could speak not only to the converted, but to the general public as well.

COG made their first serious attempt to enter the musical mainstream in November of 1972 with the release of *Jeremy Spencer and the Children* on CBS Records. This album was headed by the most famous musician recruited by the Children of God then or now: Jeremy Spencer, who is best known as one of the founding members of Fleetwood Mac. During the band's 1971 tour of the United States, Spencer was recruited into the Children of God in a

[40] Ibid.

bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. He failed to appear at Fleetwood Mac's concert that evening and did not tell the other members he was leaving the group until they tracked him down five days later.[41]

This was far from the end of Spencer's musical career. In addition to writing, performing, and producing his own music for the Children of God, Spencer has also worked with other COG musicians, bands, and musical programs in a number of capacities. Spencer gives a brief overview of his musical career within COG in "The Wicked World: Behind the Scenes of Rock & Roll!," an illustrated article in the "'Traumatic Testimonies'—For Teens 12 & Over!" series published by the Children of God. In addition to discussing the perils of the rockstar lifestyle, the article is also dedicated to Spencer's tale of backsliding and redemption. The recording of *Jeremy Spencer and the Children* is one of the first events he discusses as part of what led to his temporary abandonment of the group some years later. In his discussion of the album, Spencer stresses his dismissal of Berg's advice as a major cause of the album's lack of commercial—and thus religious—success.

> …Dad [Berg] suggested I form a band & call it 'Jeremy Spencer & the Prophets' or 'Jeremy Spencer & the Children of God.' If we would have done <u>that</u>, we would have been obeying & doing the right thing. Looking back, I can see how that band could possibly have been used by the Lord at that time to make a hit album to get our message out in the States, <u>if</u> we had followed the counsel Dad gave <u>when</u> it was the Lord's time. But I leaned to my own understanding & <u>didn't follow Dad's original counsel</u>. To begin with, I didn't name the band what Dad suggested. Also he suggested we record our own Family 'hits,' but I was more interested in writing & recording <u>my own new</u>

[41] Hester Lacey, "After the 'Family' broke us apart," *The Guardian,* Nov. 25, 2005, accessed May 11, 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2005/nov/26/familyandrelationships.religion.

songs, & as Dad said, they were 'duds' & it was a flop! Because we compromised & didn't obey, we ended up spinning our wheels out in the boonies of Massachusetts with empty promises from a record company who could see we were just a flat failure![42]

This is striking not only for the stress Spencer places on obedience to Berg, but also on its reinforcement of the notion that one of COG's musical goals during this period was to spread its religious message through commercially successful popular music.

[42] Jeremy Spencer, "The Wicked World: Behind the Scenes of Rock & Roll!" "Traumatic Testimonies"—For Teens Age 12 & Over! (TSM #2—DO), https://www.xfamily.org/index.php/File:TSM2_Jeremy_Spencer-s_Traumatic_Testimony.pdf.

Figure 1.1: Jeremy Spencer and the Children cover art

With this in mind, let us turn our attention to *Jeremy Spencer and the Children* itself. Much like the illustrated MO Letters, the album cover seen in Figure 1.1 reflects the Children of God's engagement with the aesthetic of underground "comix," such as those produced by R. Crumb. Indeed, the cover even includes the image of a comic book adorned with one of Crumb's most famous characters, Fritz the Cat. The cover features the grinning image of Death surrounded by a postmodern swirl of images from twentieth century American life, including

sports matches, television, motorcycles, tarot cards, and comic books. The blade on Death's scythe appears to be mirrored by the bottom edge of the American flag. In the foreground, a young boy and girl that seem modeled after the unsettlingly wholesome Hummel figurines of the 1930s look on, enraptured by the exciting tableau of worldly life and material possessions surrounding the Grim Reaper. Given the Children of God's emphasis on "dropping out of the System," the cover seems to represent the dangerous lure of modern American life that ultimately leads toward spiritual death. It is worth keeping in mind, however, that this interpretation is only legible to those who are already familiar with COG's theological view of "the System." Without this context, the album cover does not necessarily invite a religious interpretation and indeed would not seem out of place next to other rock records such as *Cheap Thrills* by Big Brother and the Holding Company.

The album's lyrics prominently feature Christian themes but avoid making an explicit connection with the Children of God. Just as we have seen with the album cover, the songs often make veiled references to the more idiosyncratic beliefs of COG that are only clear if one knows to listen for them. For example, the album's fourth track "The Prophet" tells the story of a prophet who initially stood "in the light of God" but now continues to speak in spite of the fact that he has "lost his inspiration." In the last verse, however, another prophet arrives "holding high a torch/Which lightened the darkened landscape/And everyone could see once more." While Berg and COG are never mentioned by name, to anyone familiar with the Children of God's religious worldview this is a clear reference to the group's rejection of "Churchianity" in favor of the teachings of David Berg, the group's End Time Prophet.

The song is arranged in the psychedelic rock style that infuses the album. As is often the case, Spencer's slightly distorted and occasionally doubled lead guitar is a prominent presence

featured in both a guitar solo and in melodic answers to the song's vocal lines. Although I have been unable to find information on the specific equipment he used in this recording, the dark, rich guitar tone suggests he recorded on one of the several Gibson guitars he was known for using in the early 1970s. These include the Gibson ES-175, the Gibson ES-120 T, and the Gibson Flying V, all of which are powered by double humbucker pickups that could produce the tone heard on this recording. The song is up-tempo, major-key rock with close vocal harmonies in the refrain, which is presumably meant to invoke the voice of God asking the false prophet "Oh, why do you keep on/Speaking without my light?/You once had the vision/But now you've lost your sight." The song also makes subtle use of the sitar, a sonic marker of psychedelia that was bordering on cliché by 1972.

Perhaps the song that most clearly bears the mark of the Children of God's distinctive religious outlook is the album's seventh track, "Someone Told Me." The song concerns a familiar topic for Christian rock, the apocalypse as foretold by the Book of Revelations. Like many evangelical Christians, the Children of God believe that the world will soon descend into the Great Tribulation and be ruled by the Antichrist, until Jesus returns to establish His Millennial Reign on earth. Unlike most evangelical Christians, however, the Children of God do not believe in the Rapture, in which the faithful will ascend to heaven and avoid the chaos of the Great Tribulation before the Second Coming of Christ. Rather, COG believes that Christians will remain on earth during this time and that the Children of God—prepared for the role by their marginalized status in contemporary society—will rise up as leaders in the fight for survival against the Antichrist.[43]

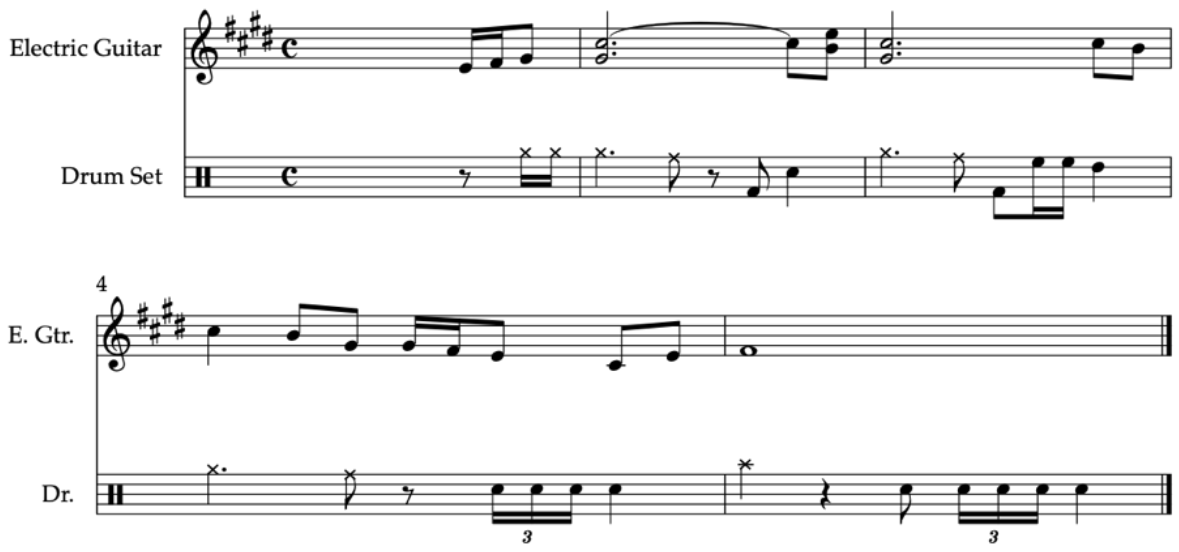
[43] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 87.

Although the Children of God's millennialism closely resembles that of fundamentalist Christianity, COG is set apart both by the intensity of their belief that the End Times are imminent and their idiosyncratic view of their own role in these events. "Someone Told Me" reflects COG's eschatology both lyrically and musically in ways that subtly but distinctly mark it as a unique product of the Children of God, even though the group itself is not named. This is particularly clear when we put the song in dialogue with Christian rock's best-known depiction the End Times: Larry Norman's "I Wish They'd All Been Ready" (1970). While Norman's acoustic ballad depicts the horrors that await the unsaved during the Great Tribulation, it is also infused with a confidence that the Rapture will spare the Christian faithful. "Someone Told Me," on the other hand, uses rock music to depict a sense of nervous anticipation at the inevitable catastrophe that the Children of God will have to endure.

"I Wish They'd All Been Ready" is filled with a sense of calm and confidence. "Someone Told Me," on the other hand, is fill with nervous, forward-looking energy created in part by the off-kilter 4/4 groove that emphasizes the upbeat of two. Norman's song is sung from the perspective of one of the saved, looking down with sympathy (tinged with more than a little condescension) at the struggles of those left behind in the Great Tribulation. This sense of looking down at a conflict from the distance of heaven is reinforced musically by the gentle timbre of Norman's acoustic fingerpicking, which might even be heard as a representation of an angel's harp. This is a sharp contrast to "Someone Told Me," which looks forward with anxious but confident anticipation to the prophesied End Times. Spencer's repeated use of the phrase "someone told me" reflects the significance of Berg as the End Time Prophet in the Children of God, though as is typical Berg is only alluded to and never named.

The lyrics bear the clear imprint of COG's distinctive eschatology in several ways. The line, "Sirens humming and people running outside/The people's army have taken over the right," alludes to the idea that COG will form the leadership of "the people's army" that will resist the Antichrist and represent the forces of God in this cataclysmic conflict. Where "I Wish They'd All Been Ready" is perfectly clear in its view of the fate that awaits both the saved and the unsaved during the apocalypse, "Someone Told Me" instead asks the listener to question how they will behave during this unavoidable final conflict. This is particularly clear in the lyrics of the song's bridge: "What will you be going through/While the dawn is breaking?/What will you have to go through/Before the sun breaks through?"

The Children of God's particular view of the End Times is reflected not only in the lyrics, but also in the music. This is done in no small part through the use of contrasting sections, some of which seem to musically represent the chaos and tension of the Great Tribulations, and some which represent a sense of calm and wonder, spurred by Berg's prophecies of the coming religious utopia once Christ begins his millennial reign on Earth. For example, the song begins with a prominent rising guitar lick centered around the C# minor blues scale. The texture is relatively thin here, with the guitar supplemented only by a rhythmic baseline and sparse drum fills. While none of this is out of place with the blues rock Spencer already had experience playing with Fleetwood Mac, the strident, upward motion of the guitar and the prominent use of the snare drum almost take on a militaristic, drum-and-bugle character, as can be seen in Example 1.1 below. For a listener who approaches the song already aware of Berg's prophecies of the apocalypse, it seems to take on the quality of a call to arms to join with "the people's army" who will oppose the antichrist.



Example 1.1: "Someone Told Me" Introduction

As the song moves into the first verse, the sense of tension and instability grows. The texture thickens with the emergence of the vocalists and a fuller drum beat as the vocals intone the vague and prophetic lines, “Someone told me the things to tell you today/What’s going to happen will surely come someday.” Each line forms a four-bar phrase that is closed with a harmonized lead guitar riff. In spite of the regularity of the phrase structure, however, the verses are filled with both a sense of rhythmic tension and harmonic ambiguity. The band places a strong emphasis on the offbeat of two, which is accented in the vocal and drum lines and aligns with the song’s harmonic rhythm. While the four bar phrases themselves are fairly even and symmetrical throughout the verse, the emphasis on the offbeat of two gives each measure an uneven, slightly jerky feel that adds to the general sense of tension and uneasiness. This is further emphasized by the harmonic instability heard in this section. The intro attunes our ear to C# minor, with the B major chord sounding like the bVII. The verse also begins on a C# minor chord, but the progression through C#m-G#m-A-E-B is ambiguous, and could be heard as being in C# minor, E major, or B major. The refrain, however, gives a strong sense that we are in B,

where the chord progression of D major-E major-B major sounds decidedly like bIII-IV-I, a familiar harmonic pattern in rock music.

The sense of harmonic stability reached in the song's refrain is just one of several factors that helps give these moments a sense of release. The strong emphasis on the offbeat of two is replaced with a more relaxed rhythmic sensibility and general thinning out of the song's texture. The bass guitar plays whole notes while the lead guitar plays a countermelody against the vocal line, sung now by Spencer alone. The drums also halt the more driving rhythm heard in the verses and returns to the much sparser pattern of the introduction. The lyrics sung during this section, "And he told me that things were not far away/And he showed me these things were not far away," are thus filled with a sense of wonder and religious awe. This release of harmonic and rhythmic tension in conjunction with the thinner texture creates a sense of clarity and assurance that reflects the narrator's faith that this prophecy will come to pass. It is also worth noting that this musical representation of faith and wonder is reserved for a moment in which any listener familiar with the Children of God would recognize the lyrical references to David Berg's prophetic powers. Spencer is thus able to craft a song on a theme very much aligned with the work of the burgeoning CCM genre that never explicitly names either the Children of God or Berg as the End Time Prophet, and yet speaks directly to Berg's distinctive eschatological vision for those who are already aware of it. The song thus has the potential to celebrate and reinforce the faith of those who already subscribe to Berg's millennial vision without alienating non-COG Christians or fans of Spencer's music through explicit references to the singer's increasingly controversial religious affiliation.

The Family of Love and the Sexual Revolution: 1973-1982

The decade that followed COG's shift from a small, localized branch of the Jesus People movement to an international NRM with colonies on numerous continents involved many significant social and theological changes for the group. It was during these years that COG's sexual ethos underwent a dramatic transformation, leading to the most controversial practices of the group's history as well as many accusations of serious abuse. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when the true crime genre turns its attention toward the Children of God, it often focuses almost exclusively on this era.[44] This section will focus on major changes to the group's social structure, recruitment practices, and modes of worship. This will provide context for the incredible volume of music produced by the group during this period, which also saw the growth of even more outlets for COG musicians to create worship music and reach out to the broader public.

As the Children of God began to witness throughout Latin America and Europe in 1973, one immediate change was a shift away from their vocal animosity toward the System, represented especially by the United States government. This was a result not only of these critiques losing much of their potency outside of the USA, but also from a change in Berg's attitude toward the rest of the Christian world. As the group began to take on a global scope, Berg sought to lessen tensions with the greater Christian community. Chancellor points toward an encounter with the World Council of Churches as particularly representative of this shift. When members began to plan one of their signature sackcloth-and-ashes vigils to confront this ultimate representation of the System church, Berg reprimanded them, saying that their witnessing mission would be better served by befriending these powerful religious figures rather

[44] Two examples of this are the documentaries *Children of God* (1994) and *Children of God: Lost and Found* (2007).

than antagonizing them.[45] This shift in attitude happened at the same time that COG instituted a fundamental change in their witnessing program, which now focused less on direct personal witness in favor of "litnessing," which revolved around distributing MO Letters warning of the coming End Times in return for donations.[46]

The 1970s also saw a number of significant shifts in the Children of God's institutional structure. In 1975, a major reorganization known as the Chain of Cooperation was enacted, which established a clear, top-down hierarchal structure with leadership at the communal, regional, national, and international levels.[47] Mary Douglas's grid-and-group theory helps us articulate this change in COG's structure. As is true of most evangelical churches, COG has always had a strong system of shared classifications, placing them high on Douglas's grid axis, as seen in Figure 1.2. The group axis, on the other hand, moved sharply to the right as members began to live in a strict, controlled environment in which they were "increasingly under the bond of other people."[48] This more authoritarian structure quickly led to abuses on the part of various intermediary leaders, and ultimately led to another major restructuring in 1978. The "Re-organization Nationalization Revolution," or RNR, led to the dismissal of about three hundred leaders and instituted a new policy in which colonies, now termed homes, would elect their own leaders who would be responsible to Berg.[49] This shift was also marked by the group dropping the name The Children of God in favor of The Family of Love. This new name alludes to a series

[45] Ibid., 6.

[46] Ibid., 7.

[47] Shepherd and Shepherd, *Talking with the Children of God,* 9.

[48] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 60.

[49] Chancellor, *Life in The Family,* 10.

of dramatic and consequential new policies on sexual behavior that would eventually come to be known as the Law of Love.

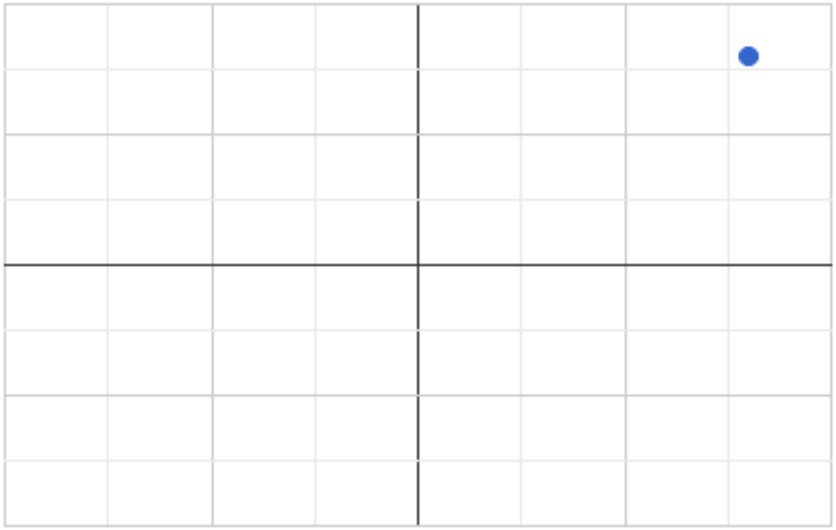


Figure 1.2: Children of God group and grid. The y axis represents a shared (+) vs. private (-) system of classifications and the x axis represents strong (+) vs. weak (-) group control of member's egos.

The Children of God's earliest stance on sexuality closely aligned to the conservative views expressed by the evangelical Christian milieu the group initially emerged from.[50] Over the course of the 1970s, Berg gradually began to disclose a radical new series of policies and practices regarding sex, initially only disclosing these new ideas to the church's inner circle of leadership. As we have already seen, this began as early as 1969 when Berg declared to this inner circle that he had begun a sexual relationship with Karen Zerby. Soon after this, Berg began having sex with other women as well, a practice that was soon emulated among the top levels of COG leadership.[51] By 1978, sexual "sharing," in which married and unmarried COG

[50] J. Gordon Melton, *The Children of God: "The Family,"* kindle edition, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997, 13.

[51] James D. Chancellor, "A Family for the Twenty-first Century," in *Controversial New Religions,* ed. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aagaard Petersen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 22.

members took on multiple partners, was commonplace not only within the Family's leadership, but within the individual colonies as well.[52]

In 1974, Berg began to introduce what would become one of the Family's most notorious recruitment practices: Flirty Fishing, or FFing. Flirting Fishing involved women in COG going to bars and clubs in order to "meet, befriend, and witness to the men they encountered," which sometimes ended in sex.[53] Berg describes the situation rather bluntly on the illustrated final page of the 1974 MO Letter "Flirty Little Fish," which depicted a mermaid on a hook embracing a man, emblazoned with the heading "HOOKER FOR JESUS."[54] The imagery of the unconverted man as a "fish" and the women of COG as "bait" reoccurred frequently during this era. By the early 1980s FFing was a common feature of Family homes. Between 1978 and 1982, records show an average of nine thousand people a year were "led to Jesus" through Flirty Fishing, though very few of these johns went on to join the Family proper.[55]

The most alarming change the Children of God underwent during this time related to their attitude toward sexuality and children. Berg issued several MO Letters on the topic of childhood sexuality that included what Chancellor characterizes as "directives for adults to allow children full freedom to express their natural sexual inclinations."[56] Although Berg and the Family never issued direct instructions mandating sexual contact between adults and children, it is clear that child abuse became a widespread problem within the organization during this time

[52] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 11.

[53] Melton, *The Children of God,* 15.

[54] Susan Raine, "Flirty Fishing in the Children of God: The Sexual Body as a Site of Proselytization and Salvation," *Marburg Journal of Religion,* vol. 12, no. 1 (May 2007), 6.

[55] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 16.

[56] Ibid., 11.

period. This was no doubt encouraged by the MO Letters Berg produced, such as "The Little Girl Dream" and the "Heaven's Girl" series, in which he envisioned himself in scenarios having sexual contact with prepubescent girls. Perhaps the most notorious of these MO Letters is "The Story of Davidito," which detailed the sexual abuse of Zerby's three-year-old son Ricky "Davidito" Rodriguez in shocking detail.[57] While contemporary members of the Family and their sympathizers go to great lengths to downplay (or outright ignore) the serious abuse that went on during this period, it is worth noting that according to Chancellor, "most disciples were aware that sexual contact between adults and children was occurring in [Berg's] household."[58] As Raine points out, this abuse occurred within an "encouraged, sanctioned, and even written doctrinal system that equated overt sexuality with religious devotion."[59]

During this period the Family developed an idiosyncratic view of sex and gender within their organization which in some respects directly contradicted the common evangelical view of sexuality—especially women's sexuality—as inherently tied to sin. At the same time, the Family was still an inherently patriarchal organization, and the expectations placed on women and women's bodies clearly reveals the gendered power dynamics that existed within the group. Somewhat counterintuitively, many of the women interviewed by Chancellor claimed that the FFing era of the Family "remains the high point of their lives," because the practice "moved many women into the center of Family life and offered them extraordinary opportunity and status."[60] These women's openness and in some cases enthusiasm for this religious take on sex work is perhaps less surprising when we remember that a large (though undetermined) number of

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 11-12.

[59] Raine, "Flirty Fishing in the Children of God," 4.

[60] Ibid., 115-6.

COG members who were uncomfortable with the group's shifting sexual ethos left the organization during the 1970s as the practice of sexual sharing became increasingly commonplace.[61]

The fact that some women within the organization where enthusiastic participants in the Family's distinctive version of the sexual revolution does not change the patriarchal sexual politics that are clearly laid out in Berg's MO Letters from this period. Indeed, these women's experience of Flirty Fishing is directly connected to the group's gender politics and theology.[62] Raine's analysis of the role of women's bodies in Berg's writing uncovers compelling evidence of the patriarchal structure established in part by the Law of Love. Berg devoted a great many words, occasionally accompanied by illustrations, laying out in detail his criteria for sexually appealing women's bodies. At this point the sexuality of women's bodies was central to the group's recruiting strategy, an important part of the theologically framed policy of sexual sharing, and eventually served as an important revenue source. As Raine points out, "this process was not always necessarily coercive, but instead, reflected the complex religious, emotional, and ideological relationship between Berg and his followers," which often involved women putting in a great deal of effort "to redefine their concept of what constituted religious behavior."[63]

This does nothing, of course, to change the patriarchal religious framework, set out by Berg, that fostered these sexual-religious experiences. Berg's gender politics are made particularly clear in a 1974 MO Letter entitled "Rape!" in which he advised women that, if they are attacked by a rapist while FFing they should yield, forgive their rapist, and remember that

[61] Ibid., 104.

[62] Raine, "Flirty Fishing in the Children of God," 2.

[63] Ibid., 6-7.

"THE GIRL WHO DOES ALL THE REST AND THEN SUDDENLY DOESN'T WANT TO GO ALL THE WAY, IS REALLY GOING TO HAVE NOBODY BUT HERSELF TO BLAME."[64] Furthermore, in a 1976 MO Letter titled "God's Whores" he reminds women to "PROVE YOUR LOVE WITH SEX" because men are tired of the "SICKENING SELFISH WOMEN" of the second-wave feminist movement who fail to properly care for men.[65]

Gender roles in the Family were not limited to the group's sexual policies. The Family also emphasized women's role as caregivers to children, as is reflected in the song "Nursery Girls" by the prolific COG singer-songwriter Sam "Singin' Sam" Halbert. Musically the song's upbeat tempo, singable, major-key melody largely confined to the pentatonic scale, and minimal acoustic guitar accompaniment evoke the sounds of folk-inflected children's music. Lyrically, the song clearly reinforces not only the idea that raising children is a job for women, but also that self-sacrifice will be an expected part of the role, with lines such as "Nursery girls girls gotta be inspiring/Gotta keep on smiling, never can be tiring/Of the little ones." The song goes on to emphasize how critical this role is for the group, which needs "new bottles to pour the new wine in." This emphasis on the importance of raising children susceptible to COG's idiosyncratic lifestyle is particularly clear in the final verse, which stresses the idea that the "nursery girls" are raising a generation that will "never hold a job of any kind, they'll never earn a dime./They'll never have to drop out 'cause they've never been in." Clearly women in the Family were not only expected to interpret the sexual duties laid out by Berg as religious work, but their domestic duties as well.

[64] Ibid., 7.

[65] Ibid.

In spite of a new sexual ethos that often seemed more radical than the practices of many participants in the sexual revolution, The Family of Love's views on gender roles ultimately remained conservative. In many ways the new practices of FFing and tending to the sexual needs of male members through sharing were simply new additions to the list of women's domestic/spiritual obligations within the group, such as rearing the Family's children. The Family of Love were far from the only instance in which traditional gender dynamics were reimagined through the lens of the sexual revolution. A more mainstream example of the same phenomenon might be seen in the 1973 best seller *The Total Woman* by Marble Morgan, a self-help book grounded in evangelical Christianity designed to help women please their husbands, sexually and otherwise.[66] While *The Total Woman* stayed within the boundaries of monogamous marriages, it nevertheless shared Berg's vision of sexually subservient women. Morgan writes, "It's only when a woman surrenders her life to her husband, reveres and worships him and is willing to serve him, that she becomes really beautiful to him."[67] The sentiment Morgan expresses here fits in comfortably with the MO Letters of the Family of Love Era.

Music With Meaning and the Law of Love

This period also saw important changes in the Family's strategies regarding music. The implementation of the Music With Meaning (MWM) programs added new dimensions to the group's musical outreach, which now sometimes involved producing music videos. Furthermore, the Family's music from this era often reflects both the group's transformation and their increasingly tense relationship with the outside world.

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[66] Mitchell Morris, *The Persistence of Sentiment: Display and Feeling in Popular Music of the 1970s* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 106.

[67] Marble Morgan, *The Total Woman* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973), 57-8.

The Music With Meaning programs were the brainchild of Christopher Carruthers, better known within the group as Simon Peter, or Happy. Carruthers studied drama in school and joined COG in 1973.[68] He first rose to prominence within the group when he released a series of cassette tapes called *Wild Wind,* in which he performed dramatic readings of MO Letters.[69] It was this experience that later inspired him to develop and host MWM, which initially took the form of a half hour radio show. This early format featured COG music and was offered to radio stations free of charge as a means of witnessing through the mass media.[70] By 1980 the show was developed further by the Family, with production units in Greece, France, Thailand, and Puerto Rico.[71] The show reached a peak in 1983 when it was broadcast on over thirteen hundred stations worldwide.[72] The show also began to expand beyond the radio format in 1980, when MWM also began to adopt a video format that would feature lip synced performances by a number of Family musicians.

These videos are fascinating glimpses into the ways in which The Family of Love attempted to broadcast their message to the widest possible audience during the most radical and controversial years of their existence. Each episode was just under a half-hour, and most are hosted by Carruthers with one of several female co-hosts. The episodes are based around themes, such as picnics or a particular musical group, and feature musical performers lip synching their songs in settings linked to this theme. The show also includes bumpers accompanied by short

[68] Celeste Jones, Kristina Jones, and Juliana Buhring, *Not Without My Sister: The Story of Three Girls Violated and Betrayed by Those They Trusted,* kindle edition (London: Harper Element, 2008), loc. 124.

[69] Ibid., 13.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 12.

[72] Ibid.

pieces of music and regularly included a call to become a member of the Music With Meaning club, complete with a catchy jingle. The show generally saves its most explicitly Christian material for the end of the program, if it appears at all, and at no point does the show acknowledge its connection to the Family. In spite of this, the performances on the program clearly reflect the group's intertwined views on religion, music, gender, and sex during this era.

Even the show's musical emphasis on soft rock and pop is an expression of Berg's religiously-framed views on popular music. Berg makes his opinions quite clear in the MO Letter, "It's Horror Noise—Not Music." In this letter, Berg directly connects his extreme distaste for hard rock to his religious outlook. Beginning with the declaration "THE HARD ROCK OF TODAY IS LIKE THE JAZZ OF YESTERDAY: IT'S REBELLION & DEFIANCE," Berg goes on to describe hard rock as "discordant, dissonant music, unharmonious music like sounds out of Hell!"[73] This connection to religion is made even clearer toward the end of the letter, in which Berg declares,

> THEY HAVE TURNED THE MUSIC, TRUTH & BEAUTY OF GOD'S LAWFUL ORDER & DECENCY OF THE ABSOLUTES OF HARMONY & BEAUTY INTO A LIE OF CORRUPTION, DEBAUCHERY, INSANITY, CHAOS & DESTRUCTION!—Like their present condition and their soon horrendous apocalyptic end![74]

Berg draws a clear binary between the gentle, soothing music he deems harmonious with God's lawful order and the "discordant" hard rock that he associates with the general corruption of the System.

[73] David Berg, "It's Horror Noise—Not Music," ML#1318-DFO, Aug. 18, 1981.

[74] Ibid.

Thus, the avoidance of anything even remotely resembling hard rock on Music With Meaning is not merely a musical choice or expression of taste, but rather a deliberate effort to align with Berg's view of "the music, truth, and beauty of God's lawful order." This sentiment was also directly expressed through songs performed on MWM. A particularly clear example of this can be found in a 1982 MWM video themed around the program's music director, Jeremy Spencer. The first song heard on this episode—"Sweet Soft Songs"—was written by MWM regular Michael Fogarty and is performed by Fogarty and Spencer with accompaniment from MWM's house band, The King's Minstrels.

The song is a condemnation of hard rock and initially asks where one can find "those sweet soft songs," before finally declaring that those are the kind of songs that they (and presumably other MWM musicians) play. Although the lyrics do not mention any specific songs by name, "Sweet Soft Songs" clearly implies that it itself is an example of the kind of "sweet soft song" that apparently had disappeared from the mainstream music industry (which is somewhat ironic considering the lyric's bitter antipathy toward hard rock). Musically, the song is country-inflected, as can be heard in the mid-tempo bass line that largely confines itself to bouncing between the root and fifth of the chords. The song also prominently features acoustic guitar with some relatively subtle slide guitar, accompanied by subdued drumming that consists mostly of a rim click backbeat and the occasional fill. This connection to country music is also made visually through Jeremy Spencer's use of a resonator guitar on the video.

These connections to country are limited both in terms of its instrumentation and especially in terms of its vocal performances, which lack both the Southern accent and the characteristic musical gestures associated with country singing. Indeed, Spencer and Fogarty's vocal deliveries are closer to Roger McGuinn than Hank Williams. It is not the country elements

but rather the focus on acoustic guitar and this decidedly soft-spoken singing style that is perhaps most important in creating a sensation of sweetness and gentleness. It also provides a distinct counterpoint to the energetic, high-octane vocal performances that have always been a staple of hard rock. The quiet, intimate singing that permeates not only the music of Spencer and Fogarty but the vast majority of Family music from this era serves as a clear musical and emotional counterpoint to the "chaos" of hard rock. It also fits comfortably into what is probably the Family of Love's single most prominent lyrical theme: love.

MWM's focus on love songs makes a great deal of sense when we remember that the Family's musical goals during this period included attracting a broad audience. To accomplish this, the producers deliberately avoided articulating the show's connection to the Family or even Christianity. Berg's MO Letter "The Music with Meaning Show" makes it clear that this was a deliberate strategy. Berg writes that while there's nothing wrong with discussing Jesus, "I certainly wouldn't start off with a hard sell on it being Jesus & Christian right off the bat… the more music, the less talk, the better!"[75] He goes on to instruct his followers that while they are pitching the show to radio stations they should characterize it as "not a religious show, it just has little spiritual thoughts for youth." If a someone should ask if the show is affiliated with any group they should claim it is independent, which is not technically a lie because the Family was not an organization or denomination in a strict governmental sense of the word during this time.[76] Throughout the MO Letter, Berg makes it clear that the show's primary appeal needs to be its youthful music rather than any overbearing religious message. Berg's desire to reach a wide audience is also illustrated by his instruction to make sure that brochures about the show

[75] David Berg, "The Music with Meaning Show," ML#929-DO, Dec. 13 1979. http://www.exfamily.org/pubs/ml/b5/ml0929.shtml.

[76] Ibid.

explicitly mention the group's most famous musician, Jeremy Spencer.[77] Many of the songs featured on MWM engage with what is perhaps the single most dominant trope in popular music, while at the same time expounding on one of the central spiritual tenants of the group during the Family of Love era: namely, love.

The topic of love, and especially romantic love, permeates the MWM videos, which often feature themes such as the "Romantic Evening" episode from April of 1982. Many of the songs heard on the show, such as Peter and Rachel's "I Want to Say I Love You," seem at first hearing to be entirely secular love songs about committing to a romantic partner. The line between spiritual and romantic love songs has often been a source of anxiety in American popular music. When singers like Sam Cooke and Amy Grant "crossed over" from gospel and CCM respectively to mainstream, secular stardom, there was considerable pushback from fans who felt like that were betraying their religious roots. Another example might be the controversy that arose over Ray Charles's reworking of the gospel hymn "This Little Light of Mine" into the R&B classic "This Little Girl of Mine." Though for many devout Christians there is something extremely troubling about musicians moving from singing about their love of God to their love of a sweetheart, the Family of Love saw deep spiritual meaning in romantic and sexual love. For COG, the line between sexual and spiritual love simply did not exist. As such, it was easy to produce a music show full of seemingly secular love songs that could slip under the radar of an audience that may not have been interested in Christian music—let alone music from the notorious Children of God—that nevertheless held deep religious meaning for the devout members who produced and consumed the show. At times MWM even included musical

[77] David Berg, "The Music with Meaning Show," ML#929-DO, Dec. 13, 1979.

references to some of their most controversial sexual practices that would have been easily understandable to members, but completely illegible to outsiders.

MWM's reflection of the Family's most controversial practices is particularly clear (and rather troubling) when we consider the children who performed on the show, such as the Lovelights, a singing trio composed of three young girls. The group appeared regularly on MWM as backup singers, dancers, and a featured act, and are the only children highlighted in the show's opening credit sequence. MWM's ability to celebrate the Family's most secretive doctrines without raising the suspicions of the general public is especially visible in the Lovelight's performance of Michael Fogarty's song "Power of Love," on the "Jeremy Spencer Music Special" episode.

The song is filmed in a tropical setting evoked by the video's modest production design. The girls perform in front of a colorful background that presents a stylized representation of a sunny day at the beach, supplemented by a prop resembling a stunted palm tree. This setting is reinforced by the girls' costumes. The lead singer appears wearing a small bikini and occasionally holding a woven basket supposedly containing tropical fruit and is flanked by the two girls singing backup vocals, who appear in colorful beach wraps and wear flowers in their hair. This tropical beach setting is reflected lightly in the music, which contains some elements of the bright, up-tempo melodies and straightforward harmonies of Harry Belafonte hits such as "Jump in the Line" and "Banana Boat (Day-O)" (a musical connection strongly aided by the song's prominent use of the word "banana"). Jeremy Spencer's slide guitar in this context might also be heard as an evocation of Hawaiian pedal style guitar, a somewhat anachronistic reference to the tropical beaches of a different ocean.

Lyrically, the song is a tribute to love's ability to make the world seem like a beautiful place and to a listener unfamiliar with Family of Love jargon, does not appear to contain any clear allusions to romantic or sexual love other than such innocent sounding lines as "One plus one still makes two/You need me, I need you." This sense of cutesy fun is reinforced by the girls' decidedly amateurish and childish vocal timbres. Outside the context of the Family of Love, none of this is dramatically out of step with the common practices of child performers in popular music. Just a decade earlier, the Jackson 5 became an international sensation thanks in no small part to a prepubescent Michael Jackson's virtuosic performances of love songs like "I Want You Back" and "Who's Loving You." These recordings gained an incredible amount of mainstream popularity in spite of the fact that they were released when Jackson was just eleven and clearly too young to have experience the kind of adult relationships and heartbreak that these songs evoke. Indeed, popular culture is littered with examples of children playing at a kind of adultness for the benefits of an adult audience, and this often involves enacting a kind of grown-up sexuality. Perhaps the most obvious examples of this sort of thing are the child beauty pageants that have lasted for more than a century. Thus, for an audience unfamiliar with COG, the Lovelights playing dress up and singing about the "irresistible, undeniable power of love" is cute at best and merely awkward at worst.

On the other hand, for a listener steeped in the theology, terminology, and practices of the Family of Love, the song contains clear allusions to some of the group's most controversial and troubling teachings, particularly those centered around childhood sexuality. Berg's unconventional views on this topic are expressed in a 1977 disciples-only MO Letter entitled "Child Brides!" Using the blunt, often vulgar language found throughout much of Berg's writings on sex, this MO Letter laments what he sees as the System's unnatural and repressive

views on underage sex and pregnancy. Berg repeatedly states that he wishes he had been allowed to marry at fifteen because it would have allowed him to start his Revolution sooner and because that was the age when he needed sex the most. This is not to say, however, that he thinks sexual behavior only becomes appropriate at the age of fifteen. He writes, "I've said before that I think the Lord must have been in favor of marriage at about 12 or 13 because you're first able to have children at that age."[78] He goes on to praise India because (according to Berg) it is not uncommon for girls as young as seven to get married which allows them to "do all the fucking they want without having to worry about any kids until they are 12 years old!"[79] Berg also takes this opportunity to denounce statutory rape laws and express his wish that "all of our young kids have plenty of sex," before finally declaring that the Family should continue to defy the System by allowing their underage members to live together and have children even if they are not legally allowed to get married. This is far from an isolated occurrence in the MO Letters from the Family of Love era. Other notorious MO Letters such as "The Devil Hates Sex! But God Loves It!" declares that restrictions against sex outside of marriage, sexual contact between minors and adults, and incest are mere products of the prudishness of the System that have been superseded by the Law of Love (though Berg goes out of his way to say that gay sex between men is still strictly taboo).[80]

With this in mind, "Power of Love" takes on a decidedly different character. This is only reinforced by the lyrics repeated use of the word "share," which appears in the line "what can make me want to share instead of fight" and the repeated line "what can make me want to share a

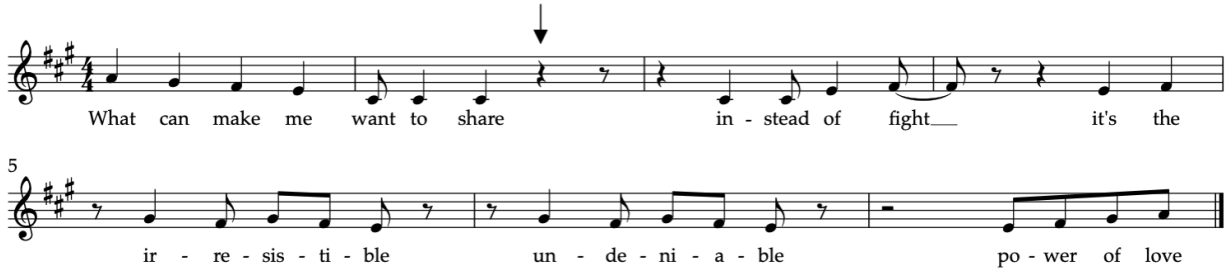
[78] David Berg, "Child Brides!" ML#902-DO, April 4 1977. http://www.exfamily.org/pubs/ml/b6/ml902.shtml.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 100-1. These MO Letters were later sanitized (or in the case of "The Story of Davidito," removed from circulation entirely) during the "lit purge" of 1988.

banana with you." From an outsider's perspective, these lyrics might reflect the tune's status as a children's song emphasizing a common moral lesson about the value of sharing. To a member of the Family, however, these lyrics have a different and decidedly sexual connotation. Since the sexual ethos of COG began to shift in the mid 1970s, the term "sharing" was used to refer to sexual encounters that occurred outside the bounds of marriage.[81]

As such, "Power of Love" is not merely a childish musical tribute to an abstract idea of love. For listeners aware of the Family's beliefs and lingo during this time the song reads clearly as a group of underaged girls, dressed in decidedly sexualizing costumes, singing a tribute to sexual love written for them by an adult. This is only made clearer when we consider the song's musical emphasis on the word "share," which is given a rhythmic spotlight by appearing directly before several beats of rest in the vocal melody as indicated by the arrow in Example 1.2. This leads us directly into the song's vocal hook about the "irresistible, undeniable power of love."



Example 1.2: "Power of Love"

This is not the only time on MWM when Family musicians utilize the double meaning of "share." We find another example of this kind of double entendre in an episode themed around picnics. The episode features a performance by "Rockin' Reggie," a pseudonym for Jeremy Spencer performing a pastiche of 1950s rock 'n' roll complete with his vocal impersonation of Elvis Presley, singing the song "Where Would We Be Without Love." Spencer, accompanied by

[81] Ibid., 281.

what appears to be two of the Lovelights on backing vocals, makes a point of including a suggestively sexualized whisper when he sings the line "where would we be without someone we could share it with." Another example of this kind of lyrical play is heard on an episode themed around a married musical duo, Peter and Rachel. When one is aware of the Family's redefinition of the word "share," the song "Love That Knows No Boundaries" becomes a clear musical tribute to the Family's polyamorous lifestyle. Against a musical texture dominated by the gentle sounds of fingerpicked acoustic guitar and a harmonic progression reminiscent of the perennial wedding favorite Pachelbel's Canon, the duo sings "Love that knows no boundaries is a love that you can share/Love that begins with you spreading everywhere," a reference to the idea that a truly free love should not be confined to the bounds of a monogamous relationship.

The Children of God is now best known for their controversial sexual practices from this period. As former members began to publicly critique the Family for these practices, the group once again became the subject of intense public pressure and condemnation. Although efforts to prosecute members of the Family for child abuse have always ultimately proved unsuccessful, by the mid-1980s the group's leadership—and most especially Berg's partner and second in command Karen Zerby—understood the sexual practices of the Family of Love were unsustainable. From the mid-1980s through the present day, the Family has moved away from the sexual practices of their most radical era, while at the same time maintaining aspects of the group's idiosyncratic lifestyle. As we shall see, this led to profound changes for life in the Family and the music they produced.

From The Family of Love to The Family International: 1983 - Present

In 1983 the Family began to scale back some of their most radical and controversial practices, especially those involving sex. This shift was in no small part instigated by the rapid spread of sexually transmitted diseases within the Family at this time. The 1983 MO letter "Ban the Bomb!" forbade most sexual relationships that occurred outside of a single home, while Zerby's 1984 MO letter "Sex for Babes?" prohibited new recruits from any sexual activity for their first six months in the organization.[82] As Chancellor writes, by this point "the pendulum of sexual freedom had reached its apex and began the slow swing back toward a somewhat more conventional sexual ethos."[83]

This trend continued in 1986, which saw the release of an internal memorandum entitled "Liberty or Stumblingblock" which clearly articulated that the Family did not (or perhaps no longer) approved of sexual contact between adults and minors.[84] This prohibition was reinforced several times throughout the decade. Shortly after "Liberty or Stumblingblock" was issued, sexual contact with minors became an excommunicable offense, a policy that was restated in Zerby's 1989 MO letter "Flirty Little Teens, Beware!"[85] Although the Family has become very strict in enforcing this prohibition, the fact that multiple official statements needed to be released condemning the sexual abuse of children speaks to how prevalent the problem was during the Family of Love era. Another major shift in the Family's sexual ethos began in 1987 with the gradual ban of a central component of life and finance in many Family homes: Flirty Fishing. Although the Family has never repudiated the years it spent FFing, by the fall of 1987—spurred

[82] Ibid., 17-8.

[83] Ibid., 18.

[84] Ibid., 20.

[85] Ibid., 20-1. This title also reveals who exactly was being blamed for adults having sexual contact with minors in the group.

in no small part by the AIDS pandemic—sexual contact with anyone outside the group other than "close and well-known" friends became an excommunicable offense.[86]

Other changes the Family instituted at this time involved a shift to education as a primary focus for the group in early 1988, which involved the establishment of sizable school homes and a considerable portion of the membership taking up teaching.[87] This era also saw a great deal anxiety focused on the group's teenagers. This anxiety manifested in the relatively short-lived establishment of several programs centered around disciplining teens that were deemed to have behavioral problems, such as the Victor Programs and later the Discipleship Training Revolution. Both programs have been accused of abuses that caused many of the older teens to leave the group.[88] This new focus on their teenagers affected the group in other ways too, particularly in terms of their music, as we shall see below.

There were other major shifts in both the geographical distribution of Family homes and in witnessing strategies. Family homes by this point were centered primarily in Latin America and Asia, and this period saw a retreat from India and North America. There was also a new focus on Eastern Europe as a new area of missionary activity.[89] In 1987, Berg ordered an end to a practice that had long been central to COG life, street evangelism. Furthermore, a new category of membership was established, TRF (Tithing Report Forms) Supporter, or TSer.[90] Although initially being designated a TSer functionally meant you were kicked out of the group but still invited to tithe, by 1993 the renamed Fellow Members were invited to participate more fully in

[86] Ibid., 22.

[87] Ibid., 23.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid., 23-6.

[90] Ibid., 24-5; Van Zandt, *Living in the Children of God,* 51.

Family life without being held to the strict standards and schedules of the full time, "Disciples Only" members.[91]

By 1988, David Berg had functionally retired as the head of the Family. Although she would not assume the role officially until Berg's death in 1994, this left Karen Zerby as the leader of COG.[92] Although in many respects this marks a major shift in the Family's history, in practice the change was gradual enough that most of the membership was not aware of it until some years later. After Zerby and her partner Peter Amsterdam became the official leaders of the Family following Berg's death in 1994, the group continued its gradual shift toward a less restrictive lifestyle for its membership and a more normalized relationship with the greater Christian world. One significant move in that direction was the implementation of "The Love Charter," or "Charter of Rights and Responsibilities" in 1995. This outlined the responsibilities and rights of the membership, made day-to-day life in the Family more democratic, and minimized the degree of direct oversight from the group's leadership. Home sizes are smaller, and disciples have the right to choose where they live.[93] As Douglas might phrase it, the Family's shared system of classifications, or grid, remained very strong, but social pressure toward a specific, restrictive religious lifestyle loosened considerably during this period, as seen in Figure 1.3.

[91] Chancellor, *Life in the Family,* 25.

[92] Ibid., 26.

[93] Ibid., 32-3.

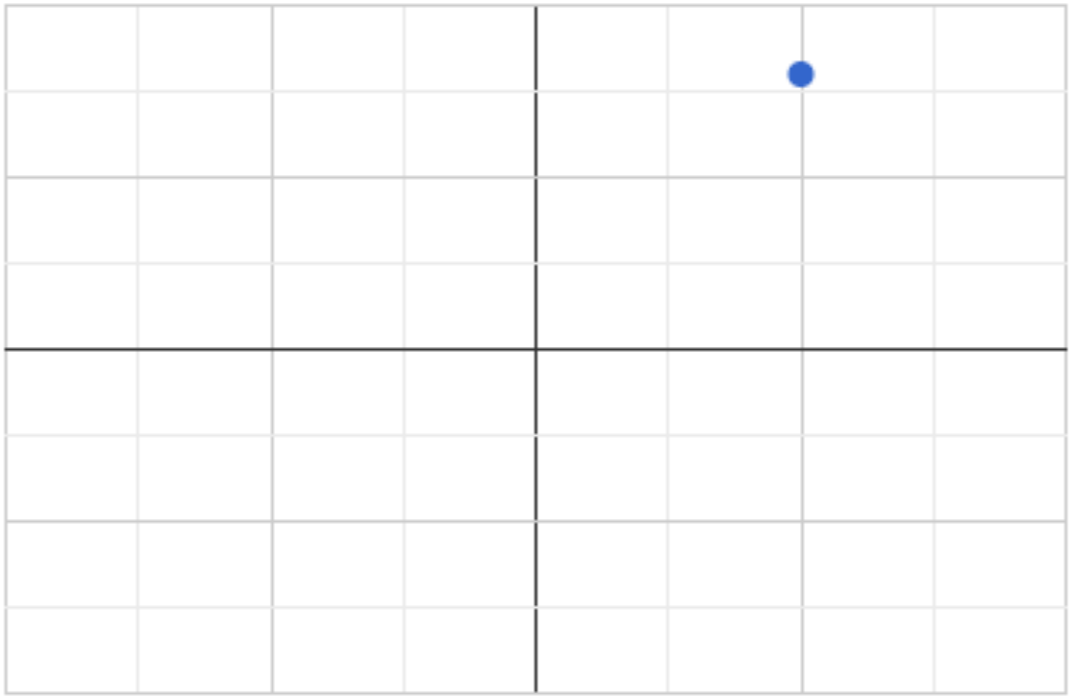


Figure 1.3: The Family International group and grid. The y axis represents a shared (+) vs. private (-) system of classifications and the x axis represents strong (+) vs. weak (-) group control of member's egos.

The movement away from the extreme beliefs and lifestyle of COG's first two decades largely coincided with a dramatic increase of attention and hostility from the broader public. By the late 1980s many former members as well as the anticult movement in Europe, Australia, and South America began publicly accusing the Family of child abuse. These charges were accompanied by high profile media coverage from the likes of *20/20* and the broadcast of a surviving "Love Video"—Family produced videos of women and sometimes very young girls performing striptease dances for Berg's benefit. These revelations led to many police raids on Family homes throughout the globe that were focused on removing children and bringing charges of child abuse against parents and adults. These raids have been widely criticized by both the Family and several NRM scholars as inflicting unnecessary trauma on the families and children who were targeted.[94] Of course, by this time the Family had already forbidden sexual

[94] Bainbridge, *The Endtime Family*, 1-20.

contact with minors and purged most of the incriminating media that these raids were meant to uncover. Although these raids resulted in hundreds of court cases, ultimately the Family has never been successfully prosecuted. While COG had been the target of hostility from the outside world since the early 1970s, they did not draw the ire of their host nations' legal systems until they had already spent years moving move away from their most extreme and criminal sexual practices.

The years since the implementation of the Love Charter have been significantly more stable than COG's earlier decades. Zerby and Amsterdam implemented significant administrative changes in 2001 with the establishment of a system of international, regional, and national boards to administer policies covering such important areas as parenting, education, teen life, missionary work, and public relations.[95] The Family has also opened additional, lower-commitment tiers of membership such as member missionaries, who have more Family responsibilities than fellow members but who hold secular jobs, educate their children in secular schools, and do not live communally.[96] In 2004 the Family renamed itself once again; this time to its current moniker: The Family International.

Despite this long period of stability and a relative softening of the group's stance toward the outside world, the Family nevertheless has retained much of its idiosyncratic theology and remains on the fringes of Christianity. Gordon Shepherd and Gary Shepherd attribute this in no small part to what they refer to as the Family's ultrasupernaturalism, which not only posits "the existence of supernatural entities and a spirit world that transcends mundane human existence," but also promotes "a miraculous rather than a naturalistic worldview by emphasizing the

[95] Shepherd and Shepherd, *Talking with the Children of God,* 13-4.

[96] Ibid., 12.

permeability of the boundary separating the spirit world from the natural world."[97] Ultimately, this leads to an outlook that sees the supernatural regularly intervening in seemingly mundane affairs. This is manifested in no small part by the contemporary Family's regular publication of messages received from the spirit world, particularly from Jesus and the now-deceased Berg.

The role of prophecy in the contemporary Family is another example of the group's ultrasuperanturalism. Prophecy was previously the domain of Berg, and belief in Berg's status as the End-Time Prophet remains one of the Family's core beliefs. In the years following his death, however, channeling prophecy has become a regular part of life for many rank-and-file members. These prophecies are not expected to be singular, emotionally charged experiences, but rather have been incorporated into the routine and even the bureaucracy of the Family. Members of the group are encouraged to write down the prophecies they receive through prayer and submit them to *Good News* (*GN*). *GN* is a Family publication that prints the group's most serious prophecies, which are then elevated to the status of "the Word," which is to say religious dogma on the level of the Bible.[98] The prophecies submitted to *Good News,* are reviewed, archived, and sorted by topic, and those deemed appropriate to publish go through an extensive editorial process. While Zerby herself does not channel prophecies for publication in *GN,* she is viewed as the Family's "Winetaster," who is most responsible for selecting gifted prophets and encouraging them to pray for prophecies on particular topics.[99] These designated prophets are able to submit their revelations with very little concern about whether or not they have produced an authentic revelation from God, in part because "they understand that whatever prophetic

[97] Ibid., 15-6.

[98] Ibid., 21-4.

[99] Ibid., 23.

messages they submit for publication will, through the *GN* editing process, be scrutinized, modified, abbreviated, expanded, or perhaps merely filed rather than incorporated into the final version of a particular *GN* issue."[100]

This democratization of prophecy resonates with Durkheim's theorization of the ways that effervescence—which is to say, transcendental, emotionally charged, often taboo-breaking experiences that create a sense of sacred time—is harnessed and channeled into organized religion. Durkheim argues that effervescence is a social, creative experience that is so powerful that participants set aside social norms and often feel "transported into a special world," the transformational world of the sacred. He argues that religious rituals gain much of their power through the creation and control of these experiences, thus transforming the effervescent into something organized and controlled by religious traditions and institutions.[101] Though we have relatively little information about Berg's process for channeling prophecies, this notion of an emotionally charged, transformational experience that breaks taboos as an entry into the realm of the sacred might well describe some of COG's collective, confrontational early witnessing practices, such as the sackcloth-and-ash vigils of their earliest years. As COG moved into the 1970s, Berg's prophecies became organized and routinized by his physical removal from the group and the channeling of his religious voice through the publication of the MO Letters. Prophecies were not something spontaneous, but rather were prepared for publication, given a number, and distributed. The move in the 1990s to having a full, bureaucratic, almost assembly-line method by which prophecies are collectively produced, filed, edited, and distributed might

[100] Ibid.

[101] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forces of the Religious Life,* trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Hollen Street Press, 1964), 214-9.

be seen as the final step in harnessing effervescence's sense of the sacred into a ritualized and routine aspect of religious life.

Although the Family's sexual ethos has moved significantly back toward the mainstream since the Family of Love era, their sexual practices and beliefs are still outliers in the realm of Christianity. Consensual sexual sharing between adults living in the same house is still practiced. The Family has also introduced new sexual/spiritual practices that fall well outside the bounds of mainline Christian belief. This is particularly evident in the "Loving Jesus Revolution," which began in 1996 and involves both the development of "a language of love and appreciation for God that uninformed outsiders might construe as sexually explicit" and the physical act of sex as an opportunity to worship, in part through the use of phrases that encourage participants to imagine their partner as Jesus.[102]

Throughout this entire period, the Family has maintained its strong focus on media production and especially their recorded musical output as a primary means of worship, witness, and attempting to manage their relationship with the outside world. As we shall see, this music reflects the theological outlook of the Family as it continues to grow, adapt, and evolve. Furthermore, the democratization of prophecy has led to a significant change in how the group views the act of songwriting itself.

Music in The Family International

The mid 1980s saw a decrease in the Family's engagement with producing high quality studio recordings for distribution, though music remained an important part of worship within Family homes. One of the Family's major musical centers—the Music with Meaning

[102] Chancellor, *Life in The Family,* 147-8.

headquarters located in Greece—was disbanded in 1982. As the Family moved into the 1990s, both the style of their music-making and the theological interpretation of this music has shifted in significant ways. Zerby articulated these changes in a lengthy 1995 MO letter entitled "New Music for a New Day!" This letter also provides insight into the issues surrounding teens and music that the Family was trying to address. While Berg's proclamations and prophecies regarding music had always seemed to be addressed to COG membership as a whole, Zerby makes it clear right from the start that she was most interested in communicating with the youth and especially the teen membership. Indeed, this letter opens with the Spongebob-esque greeting, "Okay, kids, are you ready?"[103]

Early in the letter, Zerby acknowledges that the Family needs more music geared toward their teenagers. She writes that for several years the Family distributed "System Christian songs"—which is to say CCM—before realizing that the Family should produce their own music in the styles that resonated with their teenage membership. It quickly becomes apparent that this contemporary style has its roots in the hard rock that Berg so vehemently rejected. Although Zerby never explicitly acknowledges Berg's writing on hard rock, she is clearly letting the teenage membership know that the Family's musical standards were changing. Zerby writes,

> I'm truly sorry that I wasn't able to get more involved in the teen music scene before now, and that only now could we ask for the Lord's guidance in these matters. We're sorry we've been slow in producing--or letting you produce--the kind of instrumentation that you like. You like songs with more beat, more drums and more "rawness" in the instruments and the voices, and not necessarily as refined as much of our music is. Whether you got the taste for those heavier styles from listening to System music and

[103] Karen Zerby, "New Music for a New Day!" #ML3022 DO/TS, September 1995, http://www.exfamily.org/pubs/ml/b5/ml3022.shtml.

then deciding you like it, or you just like it because you're teens and you like that kind of thing, I don't know. But however you got it, you like it and I think we should try to record the songs you write with the instrumentation that you like! The funny thing is, I like it too, and I'm not a teen![104]

Although Zerby's musical descriptions are admittedly vague, the music she references elsewhere in the letter makes it clear that these are descriptors of the more hard rock influenced style many Family musicians now work in. Early in the letter, Zerby somewhat defensively writes, "I even like "The Lion, The Dragon and the Beat,"(*sic*) and you might find that there are quite a few others of the older generation who do as well."[105] This sentence makes clear that Zerby is attempting to address a perceived generation gap in the musical tastes of the older, first generation Family members and what was then their teenage membership. The album in question is a Family-produced concept album about the coming apocalypse that bears a clear musical debt to the hard rock and heavy metal of the 1980s such as Bon Jovi, particularly in its use of distorted power chords on electric guitars, virtuosic guitar solos, and heavy, prominent drumming. Clearly "New Music For A New Day!" was articulating a change in musical ethos that was already well underway within the Family. This is particularly clear when we see that two of the musicians credited on *The Lion, the Dragon, and the Beast* are two of the Family musicians most critical of hard rock, Jeremy Spencer and Michael Fogarty.[106]

By 1995, the Family was far from the cutting edge of contemporary Christian musical styles. We can find predecessors among what Howard and Streck have dubbed Separational

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid.

[106] NuBeat Music, "*The Lion, the Dragon, and the Beast*," accessed June 29, 2022, https://www.nubeat.org/abldbt.html.

CCM, an evangelical strain of Christian music which "attempts to maintain a stark distinction between Christian and secular culture," while at the same time viewing musical style itself as "inherently and absolutely neutral," thus opening the way for Christian engagement with hard-edged genres like industrial, punk, and metal.[107] One of the most popular Christian rock bands of the late 1980s and early 1990s was Petra, a group clearly indebted to the hard rock style of bands like Aerosmith. Starting just a bit later was the equally famous DC Talk, who drew cues from hip-hop, rap rock, and alternative music. When the Family began encouraging young musicians to engage freely with whatever musical styles they were most drawn to, this was a response not just to the diverse musical offerings of the secular world, but to the ways in which CCM had engaged with these styles for more than a decade while the Family stayed rooted in the gentle, acoustic musical style that Berg preferred. The Family's acceptance of hard rock has led to a dramatic change in their musical output. By the time of the WordStock camp/festivals organized between 2004 and 2008, there were dozens of bands in the Family playing songs indebted to punk, alternative, and nu-metal. While this festival did not begin until nearly a decade after the release of "New Music for A New Day!" the musical effects of this letter were heard soon after its publication.

We hear a clear example of this in "Let's Make Love" by the Family singer/songwriter Vas Myers.[108] During the opening bars of "Let's Make Love" we hear an acoustic guitar processed with a chorus effect playing an arpeggiated riff alternating between D and G major. Soon, this is supplemented by Myers's voice, a restrained drum pattern featuring a prominent rimshot backbeat, a subdued bass guitar line, and subtle melodic fills performed on the piano.

[107] Howard and Streck, *Apostles of Rock,* 16, 236.

[108] Although this song is not currently available on many music streaming platforms, a recording can be found on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s50V716rxhw.

Although Myers clearly possesses a strong voice, in the first half of the song he sings with a soft and a slightly whisper-y timbre frequently heard in indie and alternative rock.

Although the guitar's chorus effect and the prominent position of the drums in the mix are already stylistic departures from COG's early music, the track stays within the conventions of the "sweet soft songs" that were championed by Berg until we reach the first bridge at the 1:54 mark. We now hear the introduction of distorted power chords played on the electric guitar, though their intensity is dampened by the use palm-muting, a technique often heard in punk and metal in which the heel of the strumming hand partially deadens the strings being played. The electric guitar then drops back out of the texture as we hear the chorus, now played at a louder dynamic with less restraint from the rhythm section. When the second bridge arrives at the 2:38 mark the song's engagement with hard rock becomes obvious. As Myers uses his full voice to sing the line "let's make love," we hear the unrestrained, unmuted sound of distorted power chords and a much heavier, more energetic drum pattern that makes use of the raucous, noisy timbre created by only partially closing the hi-hat as it maintains a steady eighth note beat. Although this sonic world is instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with mid 1990s alternative rock, it is a shocking contrast with the musical style championed by the Family in its earlier years.

The song also reflects the new practices of the contemporary Family in its lyrics. While many of the songs produced by MWM and other Family musicians contained only oblique references to the unique beliefs of COG and often avoided explicitly Christian themes altogether, "Let's Make Love" is both unabashedly Christian and an unmistakable expression of the Family's idiosyncratic theology. The lyrics reflect the Loving Jesus Revolution, in which members are encouraged to approach sex as an act of worship by imagining their partner as Jesus

and themselves as the bride of Christ. This song makes it clear that the narrator is addressing Christ in the first verse, which includes the line "Jesus you gave your life/Suffered and bled." The love the narrator professes for Jesus in this first verse takes on an unmistakably sexual cast in the lyrics of the chorus with lines such as "I will strip off my garments/I will tear down my pride/I will lay me down by your side." This sexual connotation becomes even more direct when the song reaches its emotional climax at the second bridge, when the dynamic is loudest, and the distorted electric guitar is reintroduced into the musical texture. At this high-energy musical moment, Myers drives home the song's message with the very direct lines "Let's make love/Let's do it right/Take me away in your arms/Let me feel you tonight."

This is striking in part because many of the Family's most prominent musicians spent years crafting songs that stayed true to COG's values while avoiding content that could potentially alienate listeners outside the group. Although this song demonstrates how a new generation of Family musicians are updating their musical language to a more popular modern style, at the same time it is an outspoken anthem celebrating an aspect of the contemporary Family that starkly differentiates them from mainline Christianity. This might be seen as a reflection of the Family's increased notoriety as a "sex cult" since the mid 1980s, which perhaps has discouraged them from attempting to gain a musical foothold in the mainstream. On the other hand, we also might see it as a reaction to the Family's deliberate attempts to pull back from the most extreme and controversial practices of the "Family of Love" era. Now that the Family's sexual ethos is far less radical, the Loving Jesus Revolution is a way of maintaining the group's identity as sexual outsiders in the greater Christian world without garnering unwanted attention from legal authorities. Whereas the music produced by MWM would only allude to the group's sexual practices, Vas Myers is now able to produce a song that openly celebrates the group's

unique spiritual/sexual practices—at least, now that those sexual practices are relatively mild compared to the years of FFing and unrestrained sharing.

It is not only the contents of this song, but the way Vas Myer's discusses its creative conception that distinctly reflect the theological viewpoint of the contemporary Family. In an interview with Vas Myers from the Family publication *Free Zine* from January 2000, the singer-songwriter makes it clear that he does not consider himself a songwriter at all. Rather, he says he has "received songs in prophecy," and that "[God] specifically spoke to me saying that He would continue to give me songs, but the second I started taking the credit for them He would withdraw His anointing."[109] While it is hardly unusual for religious songwriters and composers to view their creative output as a means of channeling the divine, Myers' view of his songwriting as prophecy is colored by the unusually strong emphasis the Family places on routinely channeling and publishing new prophecies that quickly assume the status of scripture. Myers goes on to explain how this works in practice by discussing the origins of "Let's Make Love," which he says he received during a music seminar in Japan. Myers says, "Peter had asked everybody if they could try out this new revelation of receiving songs in prophecy, and ask the Lord to give them a Loving Jesus song for one of the new Loving Jesus tapes."[110] Thus "Let's Make Love" is conceived of not as Myers's creative musical interpretation of a new Family policy, but rather as a divinely inspired musical utterance that Myers merely channeled. It also demonstrates that even the musical prophecies of the Family are often produced through teamwork, with higher ranking members of the Family encouraging their subordinates to pray for prophecies on particular issues.

[109] "Interview with Vas Myers," *Free Zine* #38 (January 2000), 10-13.

[110] Ibid.

As is so often the case with COG's musical practices over the years, "Let's Make Love" demonstrates how Family musicians reflect the larger social, religious, and musical world while still maintaining their status as a decidedly new religious movement. Even Vas Myers's conception of the song as a direct act of prophecy carries the resonances of these two seemingly contradictory points. On the one hand, Myers's insistence that the song is purely a revelation from God and that he deserves no credit is a clear illustration of the ultrasupernatural outlook of the contemporary Family where the sacred presence of God and spirits of the departed are seen as a very real, materially consequential aspect of everyday life. On the other hand, the idea of songwriting as prophecy is only a hair's breadth away from the commonplace—even cliché—view of artists as "only the vehicle" for their work.

For six decades the Family's musicians have taken the sounds and songs of the religious and secular world and reimagined them through the COG's values, often acting simultaneously as ambassadors to the general public and musical heralds of the group's beliefs. Over the years these musicians have reflected the many adaptations and transformations that have allowed this highly controversial NRM to survive not only several waves of intense public scrutiny, but the death of their founder. The next chapter asks the question, what happens to the music of a cult that does not manage to adapt and survive? To answer this question, we shall now turn our attention to Peoples Temple, best remembered today as the cult at the center of one of the largest mass murder/suicides in American history: the Jonestown massacre.

Chapter 2

Peoples Temple:
Music at the Intersection of Politics and Faith

Peoples Temple may very well be the most infamous new religious movement ever to exist. It is interesting to note, however, that "Peoples Temple," the name of the group itself, is somewhat obscure. Far more notorious are the names of the group's leader, Jim Jones, and the space where he and many of his followers died, Jonestown. Perhaps it is a phrase that began as a rather tasteless bit of black humor and gradually became a common aphorism— "Don't drink the Kool-Aid"—that has baked itself most deeply into popular culture.

All of this is to say that far more attention has been paid to the way Peoples Temple died than to the things that they lived for. Jones has become the archetype of the charismatic, manipulative, and ultimately murderous cult leader, while the members of his congregation are thought of as an undifferentiated mass of brainwashed cultists willing to kill and die on command. Furthermore, the popular and harmful stereotype of new religious movements as cults that are inevitably marching toward acts of mass violence and suicide undoubtably stems in part from the narrative and images of the Jonestown tragedy. As Rebecca Moore writes, "Rather than placing Peoples Temple within the paradigm of cults, anticult rhetoric located all new religions within the paradigm of Jonestown."[1] In other words, Peoples Temple is not seen as an extreme outlier in terms of NRMs and violence, but rather has become the model for tropes about abusive, self-destructive religious cults.

In this chapter, I complicate this narrative by giving serious consideration to life in Peoples Temple throughout its two decades of existence, rather than focusing primarily on the

[1] Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, kindle edition (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009), loc. 321.

abuses that culminated in the mass murder/suicide in Jonestown. Far from a simple narrative of a charismatic leader brainwashing his victims, this results in a far more nuanced understanding of Peoples Temple as both a religious community and a radical political group committed especially to the cause of racial justice. This builds on decades of scholarship on Peoples Temple, which is discussed in greater depth below.

I focus on an aspect of life in Peoples Temple that has by and large escaped scholarly attention: the role of music in the religious lives of the church's followers. It is my contention that the study of musical activity in Peoples Temple provides a window into the lived, embodied experience of the racially and economically diverse community that the church cultivated. Furthermore, the close analysis of the church's musical practices also provides insight into what made Peoples Temple not just legible, but attractive to its membership. The Peoples Temple congregation came from many walks of life, from the suburbs of Indianapolis to the underserved inner cities of Los Angeles and San Francisco. The factors that motivated people to join the Temple were just as varied. Although Jones initially built his following through public faith healings, many future congregants were also attracted to the church's radical leftist politics. While some became increasingly inclined to view Jones as an incarnation of divinity, others were drawn to Jones's attacks on the King James Bible and professed atheism. I argue that within the Temple, music served as a powerful means of smoothing over these contradictions through a repertoire that spoke to both their religious and political commitments.

I also consider the ways in which Peoples Temple used music as a form of outreach to the broader public. For all their notoriety today, we must remember that for most of its existence Peoples Temple was seen as a mainline Protestant congregation. Part of the way Peoples Temple maintained this image was through their engagement with outside institutions, especially other

churches with strong Pentecostal roots. Throughout much of their time in California, Peoples Temple would travel so Jones could deliver sermons at different churches. These guest services would often involve a performance by the Peoples Temple choir, and one of the ways that the Temple raised both their profile and funds was through the sale of their 1973 album *He's Able.* As such, this album provides insight into the fine line that committed Peoples Temple members had to walk in their engagement with outsiders. Close analysis of *He's Able* reveals how Peoples Temple released and performed music that did not contradict even the most radical aspects of their core ideology and theology, while still representing themselves as members of a mainline Christian denomination.

This tendency to use Temple musicians as ambassadors for the church held fast throughout the group's time in Jonestown. In Guyana the Temple's principal musical group was their R&B band The Jonestown Express. It is telling that when Congressman Leo Ryan first arrived for his inspection, he was welcomed with a Jonestown Express performance. Right to the very end, Peoples Temple turned to their musicians when they wanted to present their best public face to the outside world. Whereas the Temple's tours of California were a means of sustaining their positive reputation and recruiting new converts, the Temple's musical activities in Guyana were an effort to rehabilitate their image to an increasingly suspicious and hostile public. This phase in the Temple's history allows us a chance to consider their music as part of a broader history of controversial new religions using music as a means of negotiating their relationship with outsiders and attempting to redefine themselves in the public imagination.

Finally, I will also consider how the music of Peoples Temple has been transformed by the events of the Jonestown massacre. The degree to which their music—which was deliberately cultivated to present the Temple in a favorable light—comes to sounds like a dark prophecy of

the church's seemingly inevitable demise reveals much about the way musical meaning is dependent on the listener's understanding of its context and origins. This is illustrated by the reissue of *He's Able* in the 1990s with the inclusion of the "death tape," a lengthy and deeply disturbing recording of Jones beginning to coax, cajole, and ultimately demand that Jonestown residents join him in an act of "revolutionary suicide." This chapter will close with a consideration of how the final days of Jonestown seem to transform the meaning of the musical artifacts they left behind, and what this shift in musical meaning obscures about the Temple's history. When the story of Peoples Temple is nothing but a slow, grim march toward death in the jungles of Guyana, what are we forgetting about the human beings who lost their lives? What can the categorization of the Jonestown massacre as a "true crime" story rather than a significant moment in American history tell us about the ways our culture understands and categorizes acts of violence? If we hope to answer these questions, we must put their music in the context of the group's entire history, with an emphasis on the gradual evolution of their complex belief system and the cultural and religious settings that these beliefs grew out of.

Peoples Temple in Indianapolis (1954-65)

The story of Peoples Temple must inevitably begin with their reverend, James Warren Jones, born in 1931 in Crete, Indiana. As a young boy he visited a number of local Christian churches but was especially drawn to Pentecostal services.[2] Jones' major religious awakening came in 1952 when he first read the Methodist Social Creed, which expresses support for such causes as labor rights, racial equality, and prison reform.[3] With the support of his wife

[2] Ibid., loc. 476.

[3] Ibid., loc. 493.

Marceline, Jones founded an integrated church in 1954, initially called Community Unity, where he combined Pentecostal-style preaching and faith healing with a message of social and racial justice. After a change of venue in 1957, the church was renamed Peoples Temple.

Rebecca Moore writes,

> Peoples Temple in Indianapolis was in most respects a Pentecostal church, with a message that appealed to working-class whites and African Americans. Services were lively and energetic, featuring healings, glossolalia—or speaking in tongues—and a biblical message.[4]

In many respects Peoples Temple fit comfortably into the broad trends of post-World War II American Pentecostalism, which saw a rise of brick-and-mortar institutions and a revitalization of the charismatic practices that were so prominent in the movement's origins in the early twentieth century.[5] This provides some important context for Jones's faith-healing practices, which are often held up in popular media as one of the earliest indicators that Peoples Temple was transforming into a cult fixated on Jones's supernatural powers. For example, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His Peoples* emphasizes testimony that details how Jones would "heal" people of undiagnosed cancer, using chicken livers as stand-ins for miraculously removed tumors.[6]

With the value of hindsight, Jones's chicanery seems obvious and outrageous. It is nevertheless important to remember that none of his claims, dishonest though they may have been, were far outside the range of a typical Pentecostal healing service. Compare Jones's claims

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[4] Ibid., loc. 514.

[5] R. G. Robins, *Pentecostalism in America* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 75-9.

[6] Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His Peoples,* kindle edition (New York: Penguin, 1982), loc. 3773.

to those of his contemporary A. A. Allen, a revivalist with a popular television ministry. As R. G. Robins writes, "Allen's miracles were often as graphic as they were grandiose: cancer patients coughed up their cancers into jars; demon-possessed men and women vomited out evil spirits."[7] Far from the mark of an idiosyncratic new religion, Jones's healings tapped into an increasingly prominent revivalist moment in Pentecostalism.

Peoples Temple also began its first ventures into social work and activism during this period. In 1955 the church established its first nursing homes, which provided the church and the Joneses with income. The Temple's attention to housing and care for its senior citizens would continue to be a high priority for the remainder of its existence. By 1960, Peoples Temple was also engaged in social services, such as their free restaurant.[8] 1960 also marked the beginning of the Temple's affiliation with the left-leaning mainline Protestant denomination the Disciples of Christ.[9] In 1961 Jones became the Human Rights Commissioner for Indianapolis, though he resigned just a few days after taking the position. During this time the Temple was also involved in early efforts to integrate Indianapolis, and the Joneses began to build what they called their "rainbow family" by adopting children of color from various backgrounds.

Moore attributes the Temple's success in these early years to "Jim Jones' charisma, energy, and passion; the support and leadership of his wife Marceline; and the power of an integrated message backed by biblical teachings."[10] Music was already serving as an important platform that allowed the Temple to display their integrated approach to Christianity and, through this, recruit new membership. One long-term African American Temple member that

[7] Robins, *Pentecostalism in America,* 85.

[8] Moore, *Understanding Peoples Temple and Jonestown,* loc. 610.

[9] Ibid., loc. 338.

[10] Ibid., loc. 574.

joined during this time period, Hyacinth Trash, cited a performance of the integrated choir on television as the motivating factor that convinced her to join the church.[11] The sight and sound of the Temple choir must have been particularly striking at a time when, as Martin Luther King Jr. observed, Sunday morning at eleven was the most segregated hour in America.

Another significant influence on the development of Peoples Temple at this time was another NRM that promoted racial integration: Father Divine's Peace Mission. The Peace Mission rose to prominence in Black urban centers in the northeastern USA during the 1930s.[12] Father Divine promoted both Black capitalism and collectivist ventures, particularly in the form of mission-owned communal housing.[13] As the religious scholars Charles Braden and Clarence Howell argued, much of Father Divine's theological thought was rooted not only in Christianity and proclamations of his own godhood, but also in the New Thought movement, which focused on the power of positive thinking to create meaningful changes in the world.[14]

Jones made numerous visits to the Peace Mission during the 1950s, and undoubtedly was more interested in the group's organization and social work than in the details of their religious thought.[15] Jones was deeply impressed by Father Divine and adopted a number of changes in Peoples Temple that reflect this influence. He began to encourage his congregation to call him "Father" and Marceline "Mother," as was the practice of Peace Mission members in referring to Father Divine and his wife Mother Divine.[16] Jones was also inspired to create a housing and

[11] Ibid., loc. 564.

[12] Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story,* kindle edition (Berkley: University of California Press, 1992), loc. 16.

[13] Moore, *Understanding Peoples Temple and Jonestown,* loc. 582.

[14] Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.,* loc. 33.

[15] Moore, *Understanding Peoples Temple and Jonestown,* loc. 588.

[16] Ibid., loc. 595.

feeding program modeled on similar programs in the Peace Mission.[17] It is hard to imagine that the Peace Mission's image of Father Divine as an embodiment of God did not influence Jones, who portrayed himself as a gifted healer but was still several years away from implying that he was an incarnation of Christ. The Temple's emulation of the Peace Mission represents an important turning point in another respect as well. Although the church had always placed a strong focus on racial equality, this also seems to be point at which Temple leadership began to actively emulate "Black Church culture in style and form and, to some extent, in substance."[18]

Music in Pentecostal Worship

Unfortunately, none of the music from the time Peoples Temple spent in Indianapolis is extant. It is nevertheless worthwhile to consider the role that music played during the early years of the Temple. We know that Peoples Temple put a strong emphasis on music nearly from their inception. In addition to the integrated choir who, as was mentioned above, would often perform when Jim Jones appeared on Indianapolis television or radio, the Temple also had a youth choir and a band.[19] Indeed, the racially integrated choir was perhaps the Temple's most effective way of publicizing their integrationist ethos during the Indianapolis years and was an effective means of drawing in membership interested in the Civil Rights movement.

The musical repertoire of Pentecostal churches has always been flexible and adaptive. As R. G. Robins writes, "Where mainline Protestants often joined modernist theology to traditional liturgy and church architecture, Pentecostals held the orthodox line but promiscuously imported

[17] Ibid.

[18] Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer, *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America,* ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), xiii.

[19] Jeff Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown: Jim Jones and Peoples Temple,* kindle edition (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), loc. 1367.

popular music and instrumentation into their worship."[20] Although we do not know the precise repertoire of the Peoples Temple choir during this period, we do know that gospel songs from the Pentecostal and Holiness traditions were a crucial part of religious life in the Temple throughout their existence, frequently with the type of electrified accompaniment that was often heard in gospel from this time. The integrated choir performance that convinced Hyacinth Trash to join the Temple almost certainly fit into this Pentecostal musical tradition.

But what role did music play in worship and ritual in Peoples Temple? We can extrapolate an answer to this question because during this period, the Temple was more or less a standard Pentecostal church that engaged in charismatic Christian practices such as glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and faith healing. Music plays an important role in creating the state of heightened religious ecstasy that accompanies these worship practices. Judith Becker refers to this heightened state as "trancing."[21] Trancing appears in a variety of forms in a number of defuse religious traditions, but always tends to feature emotional arousal, the loss of the sense of self, stopped inner language, and the ability to withstand fatigue.[22] Music is often a very important part of trancing, as it can affect our sense of time, heighten our emotions, entrain our bodies, and bring back memories of previous trance experiences.[23] As Gilbert Rouget argued, however, there is no causal relationship between particular musical styles and trance. Rather, with the right cultural expectations, any kind of music can be associated with trance.[24]

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[20] Robins, *Pentecostalism in America,* 60.

[21] Judith Becker, *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 1.

[22] Ibid., 29.

[23] Ibid., 26.

[24] Ibid., 25.

The fact that no specific kind of music is concretely linked with trancing is reflected in the Pentecostal church's openness to new musical styles and repertoires. In Peoples Temple, the musical style most often heard in association with trancing practices such as Jones's ecstatic healing services was gospel. Becker's description of Pentecostal services using "a wide variety of musical instruments, often including piano, electric organ, synthesizer, guitars, and drum set, to back up their driving, repetitive gospel hymns" matches descriptions of the Peoples Temple choir's musical style and recordings of similar Temple services in the 1970s.[25]

The religious/musical tradition of Pentecostal trance that the Peoples Temple congregation participated in not only provided members a sense of continuity with earlier experiences of charismatic Christianity, but also further bound them together as a community. Consider Becker's description of the emotional experience of Pentecostal trance:

> As the music becomes louder, more rhythmic, more repetitive, its driving quality supports, propels, and sustains the hand-waving, hand-clapping, footing-stomping choruses of 'Amen!' High on the trajectory of the musical, emotional arc, worshippers may come forward to the altar to pray, and some may dance or trance. The musical support will continue at a high intensity until all worshippers have worked through their transport… The music never flags as some members are moved to tears, to dance, to quiver and jerk in the uncoordinated gestures of some religious trances. As religious passions subside, so does the music, until every last ecstatic has become quiet—exhausted and joyful.[26]

[25] Ibid., 97.

[26] Ibid., 99.

It is no wonder that such emotional displays of religious ecstasy brought the Peoples Temple congregation closer together. It is hard to imagine that these uninhibited trancing practices do not involve the kind of vulnerability and trust that helps to bind religious communities.

I am far from the first person to suggest that unrestrained displays of religious bliss have the potential to strengthen community bonds. Indeed, we can trace this idea back to one of the fathers of the sociological study of religion, Emile Durkheim. Durkheim referred to this manner of collective, taboo-violating spiritual ecstasy as "effervescence."[27] During effervescent experiences, the group sets aside reason and social decorum in favor of raw, communal expressions of emotion.[28] As Durkheim writes,

> Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation… The effervescence often becomes so intense that it leads to outlandish behavior; the passions unleashed are so torrential that nothing can hold them.[29]

This outpouring of collective effervescence is often expressed in part through songs and dance, because "a collective emotion cannot be expressed collectively without some order that permits harmony and unison of movement."[30]

This clearly maps onto Becker's description of the Pentecostal experience of trance. While a full exploration of Durkheim's theory is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it nevertheless provides a powerful argument for the potency of the religious experiences and

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[27] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1995), 220.

[28] Ibid., 218.

[29] Ibid., 217-8.

[30] Ibid., 218.

traditions that Peoples Temple grew from. It also provides a window into the factors that made the core Temple membership so devoted to their church. Although their charismatic young preacher was surely a part of what drew them to the Temple, the musically guided, effervescent experience of Pentecostal trance also played a major role in binding the core membership of Peoples Temple not only to Jim Jones, but to each other. This devotion was part of what allowed Peoples Temple to transform so dramatically in the following decades.

The California Years (1965-77)

The early 1960s were a pivotal time for Peoples Temple. After a mental breakdown in 1961, Jones spent several months traveling in South America, where he first visited Guyana. Increasingly concerned about an impending nuclear holocaust, Jones spent much of 1962-3 in Brazil after reading an article in *Esquire* that listed the nine safest places to be in the case of a nuclear attack. It was not until Jones returned from South America that he began to portray himself as not only a pastor, but a prophet. Jones also became increasingly vocal in his support for communism.[31] Jones's frequent proclamations of a coming nuclear doomsday culminated in the decision for the church and congregation to move to another of *Esquire*'s nuclear safe spots: Redwood Valley, located in Ukiah, an agricultural town in northern California. The Joneses, along with around eighty-five Temple members undertook the move in 1965.[32]

Until the move to Ukiah, it is hard to argue that Peoples Temple was anything other than a Christian church. Although the change certainly did not happen overnight, it was in California

[31] Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* loc. 665.

[32] Ibid., loc. 774.

that Peoples Temple truly became an NRM. We can better understand how this transition took place when we consider three major changes that occurred within the Temple during these years. The first was an increased focus on Jones as a figure of worship at the expense of conventional Christian belief. The second was the elevation of the church's socialist politics to the level of religious dogma and a new focus on communal living. The third was a series of demographic shifts within the Temple caused by both an influx of new members from underserved Black communities in San Francisco and Los Angeles as well as the recruitment of the predominantly white college-educated professionals that came to form most of the Temple's leadership. As we shall see, these factors intertwined and influenced one another as life in the Temple changed.

The move to California elevated Jones's status within his church. As Moore writes, "The migration strengthened members' dependence upon their leader, and the movement thus began to focus more on Jim Jones and less on Jesus Christ."[33] It stands to reason that their cross-country relocation would make Peoples Temple more close-knit, in part because only the most dedicated members were willing to uproot their lives to follow their pastor west.

The move marked a change in Temple worship. Although it is likely that Jones began to critique racist and sexist aspects of the King James Bible as early as 1963, in California the attacks became harsher and more frequent. This coincided with Jones's increasingly vocal proclamations of his own prophetic powers. As Moore writes,

> …it was probably in San Francisco that [Jones] published a twenty-four-page booklet, titled 'The Letter Killeth,' in order to denigrate the Bible's legitimacy by exposing its errors and inconsistencies. Paradoxically, the booklet also provided the biblical basis for the Peoples Temple ministry and justified Jim Jones's position as an anointed prophet…

[33] Ibid., loc. 738.

> Jones had abandoned his biblical beliefs, although not his use of biblical language, even if the majority of his followers had not.[34]

Jones's move away from biblical Christianity and declarations of his own prophetic status signal the gradual shift of the Temple from a more or less conventional Pentecostal church to a full-blown, if somewhat covert, new religious movement. In the lead up to the California move, this change was so pronounced that one of the Temple's associate ministers, Ross Case, submitted a formal resignation that expressed his discomfort with the church's increasing focus on the figure of Jones at the expense of Christ.[35]

Although some Temple members—particularly the senior citizens—maintained a strong Christian faith for the remainder of the church's existence, many of the young, college educated white radicals that began to join the Temple during their time in the Redwood Valley appreciated Jones's increasingly vocal atheism.[36] As such, throughout their time in California, Jones's sermons became increasingly multivocal as the preacher attempted to address the sometimes directly contradictory beliefs and concerns of his congregation. While some members thought of themselves as Christians, other members were atheists who saw the Temple's religious trappings as a means of radicalizing the lumpenproletariat for the communist cause, while still others saw themselves as early adopters of a new form of socialist Christianity. This is almost certainly part of the motivation for Jones's seemingly inconsistent performances during this time, where one day he would curse the fictional "sky god" and throw his Bible on the floor, and the next day quote from Acts II about how the early Christians served as a model for communal living. There

[34] Ibid., loc. 838.

[35] Ibid., loc. 684.

[36] Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown,* loc. 3482.

was a constant need to maintain the attention of a congregation who were drawn to the Temple for different religious and political reasons.

Somewhat counterintuitively, these contradictions might also explain the Temple's increasingly fervent devotion to Jones during these years. Everyone who remained in the church at this time likely had to ignore or rationalize some aspect of life in the Temple that did not resonate with their personal beliefs, whether it was Jones's denunciations of the Bible, his unequivocal praise for Stalin, or his bogus faith healings. Although Jones grew increasingly obsessive about retaining the core membership of the Temple who were already living communally and helping to run the church, at lower levels of involvement there were many people who only participated in Peoples Temple for a brief period. It seems likely that potential Temple members who were unable or unwilling to tolerate some aspect of Jones's rhetoric left, while those who remained were socialized into a religious community where making these sorts of compromises was normal.

In California, Peoples Temple adopted a more collective lifestyle. For their first three years, they worshiped with another communal religious group, Christ's Church of the Golden Rule. By 1969, the Temple had a large church in Redwood Valley and were increasingly focused on developing a self-sufficient, collective economy. To this end, they opened several businesses, such as group homes, agricultural projects, and a print shop.[37] This turn to communal living resonated with Temple theology in a number of respects. Although Jones was increasingly critical of biblical Christianity during this time period, he nevertheless turned to the example of the early Christians in the book of Acts to justify a communal lifestyle.[38] The verses in Acts

[37] Ibid., loc. 767.

[38] Ibid., loc. 780.

2:44-45 are particularly relevant to communally-oriented Christians: "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need."[39] This more conventionally Christian justification for the Temple's collectivist turn also dovetailed with Jones's criticisms of capitalism.

Jones's use of political and religious arguments for communalism reflects another, somewhat subtle shift in the Temple worldview during this period. While Peoples Temple had always been outspokenly political, it was in California that Temple politics and Temple theology became intertwined to the point that there was no real distinction between the two. Indeed, Jones himself made this clear in his sermons, in which he would say such things as "See, socialism is love. Love is God. God is socialism."[40] Although Temple members' religious beliefs did not always align, it is telling that they were consistently united in their commitment to socialism.

Indeed, Temple members were politically motivated enough that by the mid-1970s, Jones was an influential figure in San Francisco politics. The Temple developed a reputation as a well-organized political community that could be depended on to volunteer for campaign activities or to fill out a crowd on short notice. After the Temple aided George Moscone in his very narrow victory in the 1975 mayoral election, Jones was appointed to the San Francisco Housing Commission.[41] During this period the Temple regularly received visits from prominent San Francisco politicians such as Moscone, Harvey Milk, and California assemblyman Willie Brown. Although Jones and the Temple were careful to ingratiate themselves with local Democrats, they also supported more radical political causes and ingratiated themselves with prominent leftist

[39] Acts 2: 44-45 KJV.

[40] Catherine Abbot, *Communism, Marxism, and Socialism: Radical Politics and Jim Jones,* Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, last modified July 20th, 2019, accessed March 30, 2020, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=64856

[41] Moore, *Understanding Jonestown,* loc. 899.

thinkers such as Angela Davis. Throughout this time, Jones' rhetoric was increasingly revolutionary, particularly in closed Temple meetings. Behind closed doors Jones would preach the benefits of communism and predict that the United States would soon morph into a full-blown fascist state.

The Temple's relocation also had a strong effect on the group's demographics. Mary Maaga argues that by the time Peoples Temple moved to Guyana, three distinct groups coexisted within the church.[42] The first of these groups were the mostly white, working-class members that had moved from Indianapolis. In California, the church's integrated congregation and leftist politics began to attract members of the second group, who were young, white, college educated, and politically radical.[43] As the 1970s wore on, it was this group that formed the ranks of Temple leadership. Most of the new members that the Temple recruited in California, however, formed the third group: Black members who were recruited primarily from underserved areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Although Peoples Temple was integrated from its inception, in Indianapolis the church was most likely around one-fifth, and definitely no more than fifty percent African American.[44] As the Temple began to expand into San Francisco and Los Angeles they began to recruit from the Black communities in these cities, especially senior citizens living below the poverty line. By the time the church relocated to Guyana in 1977, two-thirds of the membership was Black.[45]

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[42] Mary McCormick Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown: Putting a Human Face on an American Tragedy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 10.

[43] Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* loc. 793.

[44] Ibid., loc. 556.

[45] Rebecca Moore, "Demographics and the Black Religious Culture of Peoples Temple," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America,* ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 61.

Although Jones had already begun to adopt some elements of Black religious culture through his emulation of Father Divine, it was not until this influx of Black membership in the early 1970s that Peoples Temple truly became a Black church. For all his fiery rhetoric, Jones himself was in many ways a rather racist figure. Aside from having an incredibly literal version of white savior syndrome, Jones also reserved leadership spots in the Temple for well-to-do white members (especially the educated young women that he was having affairs with). In his sermons from this time, Jones also attempts to perform "Blackness" in ways that are shockingly racist by today's standards. Aside from consciously imitating the accent and cadences of Black preachers, Jones was also very free with anti-Black slurs, which he attempted to use as though he were himself Black.[46] Jones, however, was not the only member of Peoples Temple, and his increasingly bizarre and troubling behavior throughout this time period does not mitigate the cultural knowledge and practices that Black members brought and shared with the white membership of the church.

In many ways, the Temple's rhetoric during this period reflected the Black Power movement that grew increasingly prominent during the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly in California. In this cultural context, the Temple's increasingly revolutionary political stance appealed both to the Black members that made up most of the congregation and the white radicals that made up the core of the church's inner circle. One of these white political radicals, Tim Carter, described the cultural and political climate that made Peoples Temple rhetoric familiar and appealing:

> When I came back from Vietnam, I was radicalized, completely and totally… Peoples Temple made perfect sense to me. The fact that we were socialist wasn't hidden. There

[46] While it is not especially difficult to find this type of rhetoric from Jones, FBI tape Q162, "Sermon in Philadelphia (1976)" contains some particularly egregious examples of this behavior.

were all sorts of movements going on politically then. The youth movement, the Black Panthers, the American Indian movement, they were calling for revolution: "Tear the motherfucker down. And tear it down now!"[47]

This political climate was a crucial force that shaped Peoples Temple during their time in California. Scholars Duchess Harris and Adam Waterman argue it was the Temple's blend of Black Power and anti-colonial rhetoric with religious practices derived from the Black church that made the group legible and attractive to their membership.[48] Harris and Waterman write,

> Jim Jones tapped some of the same sources of political and cultural identity that Huey Newton did, the same historical references to slavery as well as the more contemporary days of Jim Crow laws, to draw in the more politically active segment of the Bay Area's population, both black and white. He also used a number of vehicles to attract blacks into Peoples Temple, including the cadences and language of the black preacher, faith-healings, and health and community services for California's urban indigent populations. Indeed, a typical Jones sermon during a Temple service—which, true to the black style of preaching, was constrained neither by time nor form—included a little bit of all these elements, shifting seamlessly between the religious and the political, between his announcements of free medical services and the demonstrations of his healing powers.[49]

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[47] Leigh Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown,* kindle edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) loc. 2493.

[48] Duchess Harris and Adam John Waterman, "To Die for the Peoples Temple: Religion and Revolution after Black Power," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America,* ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 104.

[49] Ibid., 110.

It was not only Jones' preaching style that connects Peoples Temple to African American religious traditions. As Milmon F. Harrison observes, musical practices were another significant religious and cultural touchstone that the Temple adopted from the Black church.[50] A closer look at musical artifacts from the California years—such as a Peoples Temple songbook from 1969 and the Temple choir's 1973 album *He's Able*—give us a window into their combination of Black religious and musical traditions with their particular blend of leftist politics.

Music During the California Years

Peoples Temple left behind a substantial musical archive from their time in California. This material helps us to better understand how the Temple used music, the repertoires they drew from, and the settings in which music was played and heard. Performances recorded at meetings and the 1969 songbook document musical life in the Temple behind closed doors, where performers knew that only fellow believers were listening. *He's Able,* on the other hand, provides a musical snapshot of the Temple's public image. When we put these materials in dialogue with one another, it is easy to discern the gap between the Temple's private worship practices and the image they presented to the world, particularly the broader Christian community.

Although *He's Able* was marketed as a musical simulacrum of a Peoples Temple meeting, a comparison of the songs on the album with those in the 1969 Temple songbook reveals some telling differences. The songbook contains a number of traditional hymns, particularly Black spirituals like "Go Down Moses." There are also a surprisingly large number

[50] Milmon F. Harrison, "Jim Jones and Black Worship Traditions," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America,* ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 128.

of songs drawn from other contexts. Some of the numbers are drawn from the Civil Rights Movement, such as "We Shall Overcome," "I Shall Not Be Moved," and "The Civil Rights National Anthem." There are also songs associated more with the labor movement, such as "Joe Hill," and hymns drawn from Father Divine's Peace Mission.[51] As discussed above, the Pentecostal church has a long history of adapting popular music to their religious needs. In California, Peoples Temple extended that tradition by drawing on the politically charged music that was heard at Civil Rights protests and union rallies. Rather than taking popular songs and styles and adjusting them to fit Pentecostal theology, Peoples Temple took political songs and sanctified their ideological message by incorporating them into their religious services. Peoples Temple blurred the line between political anthem and hymn in the same way that they blurred the line between ideology and theology more generally.

The Temple songbook's inclusion of music that critiques racism and injustice in the U.S.A. connects Peoples Temple to a Black political and artistic practice with deep roots. As Shana Redmond writes, "Within the African diaspora, music functions as a method of rebellion, revolution, and future visions that disrupt and challenge the manufactured differences used to dismiss, detain, and destroy communities."[52] A great number of scholars have written about how Black music and politics have intersected. Clyde Woods theorizes the "blues epistemology" as an understanding of "the blues and its extensions" as "a critique of plantation culture in all its manifestations" and an expression of "the desire to develop communities independent of

[51] "The Peoples Temple Songbook," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* last modified October 21, 2013, accessed August 18, 2018. https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=18793.

[52] Shana Redmond, *Anthem: Social Movements and the Sound of Solidarity in the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 1.

plantation monopoly."[53] Some of the most politically potent examples of these musical practices are what Redmond theorizes as anthems, which is to say songs that "served as articulations of defense and were so powerful that they took flight and were adopted by others," thus becoming linked with Black resistance practices.[54] Redmond writes,

> In the ways that they symbolize and call into being a system of sociopolitical ideas or positions, the songs that I analyze as anthems are devices that make the listening audience and political public merge… These anthems are transnational texts composed of *a set of musical forms* and *a set of organizing strategies* within Black movement cultures and are bound together by African derived performance techniques, Western art traditions, attachments to social justice organizations, iconic performers and performances, relationships to exile, and collective visions of freedom.[55]

It is telling that two of the songs Redmond identifies as anthems, "Lift E'ery Voice and Sing" and "We Shall Overcome," appear in the Temple songbook. "Lift E'ery Voice" is listed in the songbook by its other common moniker, "The Civil Rights National Anthem," which refers to its frequent use at Civil Rights protests and its association with organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). "We Shall Overcome" is one of the best-known freedom songs of the Civil Rights movement, and also has its roots in the labor movement of the 1940s, particularly the 1945 tobacco strike in Charleston, South Carolina.[56]

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[53] Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York City: Verso, 1998), 20.

[54] Redmond, *Anthem,* 1.

[55] Ibid., 1-3.

[56] Ibid., 162.

Both songs are not only linked with the struggle for racial justice in the United States, but also have religious roots that speak to the connection between Black political resistance and the music of the Black church. James Johnson, the composer of "Lift E'ery Voice and Sing," always referred to the song as a hymn.[57] Furthermore, "We Shall Overcome" was itself adapted from an older Black spiritual.[58] Musicologists such as Redmond and Brandi Neal argue that there were both social and logistical reasons for this. Hymns often have simple, repetitive melodies and universal themes which made them both easy to sing and readily adaptable to new political contexts.[59]

This history is part of what made these anthems slide so easily into Peoples Temple meetings, and speaks to what made the Temple legible to its membership even as it moved away from its Pentecostal roots during this period. Although Peoples Temple folded their politics into their religious beliefs in a particularly extreme and explicit way, it was also tapping into a dialogue between Black political activism, Black church culture, and music that had already existed for generations. We must also remember that it was not Jim Jones and the primarily white leadership of the Temple that fueled the church's engagement with Black musical practices, but the predominantly Black membership that the church recruited in California. Although it is certainly possible that Jones' engagement with different elements of Black culture was merely cynical, the political, religious, and musical traditions that Black Temple musicians like singer Deanna Wilkinson carried with them into the church go a long way to explaining what attracted people to the Temple. As many former members have reported, it was this rich

[57] Ibid., 79.

[58] Ibid., 142.

[59] Ibid., 143.

cultural tradition fueled by the Temple's rank-and-file congregation that made the church's idealistic community seem so welcoming and genuine.[60]

The songbook also contains traces of one of the Temple's most idiosyncratic and disturbing habits: changing the lyrics of hymns to praise Jim Jones rather than God. For example, the hymn "The Church's One Foundation" has been altered from "The Church's One Foundation/is Jesus Christ our Lord" to "The Church's One Foundation/is the Father, our God." While the uninitiated would most likely understand the reference to "Father" as a reference to the Father of the Holy Trinity, within the Temple it was common practice to refer to Jones as "Father." The practice of altering hymns to praise Jones appeared in more explicit forms during the Temple's closed-door meetings. During a 1973 meeting in Los Angeles, Temple member Caroline Washington addressed the congregation, saying "I'm going to sing a song, 'God is Real.' Because to me, Jim Jones is real. I'll change the words to that."[61]

Although *He's Able* does not contain any hymns with altered lyrics or songs that explicitly praise Jones, there are many ambiguous uses of the term "Father," which could be understood as references to either the Father of the Trinity or Jones. Perhaps the clearest example of this can be found on the album's second track, "Walking with You Father," an up-tempo gospel number that music director, guitarist, and *He's Able* producer Jack Arnold Beam adapted from Mattie Moss Clark's "Write My Name Above."[62] While "Write My Name Above" features the refrain "Wash me, cleanse me, fill me with your love/Write my name above," in "Walking with you Father" this is changed to "Wash us, fill us, cleanse us with your power/While we're

[60] Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown,* loc. 4382.

[61] "Q 357," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* mp3, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29176.

[62] Kevin, "Songs Primarily in the Key of Life," 74.

walking with you Father." Thus, a personal plea for salvation in Heaven is changed into a collective call for empowerment by an ambiguous "Father." It is not much of a stretch to suspect that many Temple members, already used to praising Jones through songs of worship, would readily have connected references to a father that washes and cleanses to the healing power of their reverend. And yet the lyrics would not seem at all out of place in conventional gospel music.

This is just one example of the many ways *He's Able* seems to act like a kaleidoscope, shifting dramatically depending on how the light hits it. While core Temple members who were already dedicating most of their lives to their reverend, church, and community were likely to understand the songs on *He's Able* as a reflection of the Temple's more radical beliefs, we must keep in mind that the album was primarily aimed toward listeners who could not actually attend Peoples Temple meetings. According to Beam, the album was primarily sold during the many cross country bus tours Peoples Temple embarked on. It is entirely likely that people who only got the opportunity to hear a single sermon by Jones would have a more conventional Christian interpretation of the album's references to "Father." Furthermore, Peoples Temple had a large contingent of senior citizens who tended to be far more devoutly Christian than the younger, more educated, and politically radical demographic the Temple attracted after the move to California. Much like Temple theology and many of Jones's sermons, *He's Able* can seem to reflect whatever preconceived notion of Peoples Temple the listener already has.

That being said, the album is clearly designed to reinforce the Temple's public image as a conventionally Christian church concerned with social justice but not necessarily anything as radical as communism. As such the album focuses on an issue that united Temple members of all beliefs and commitment levels: racial justice and integration. The Temple's dedication to

integration is made visible by the album's original artwork, seen in Figure 2.1, which shows the racially mixed choir standing in front of the Portals of the Past monument at Golden Gate Park.[63] This continues on the back of the album, which shows amongst other things the Black and white children of the choir sitting and smiling together.

[63] Brian Kevin, "Taking the Needle off *He's Able*," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, last modified December 20th, 2013, accessed August 19, 2018, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=30209.

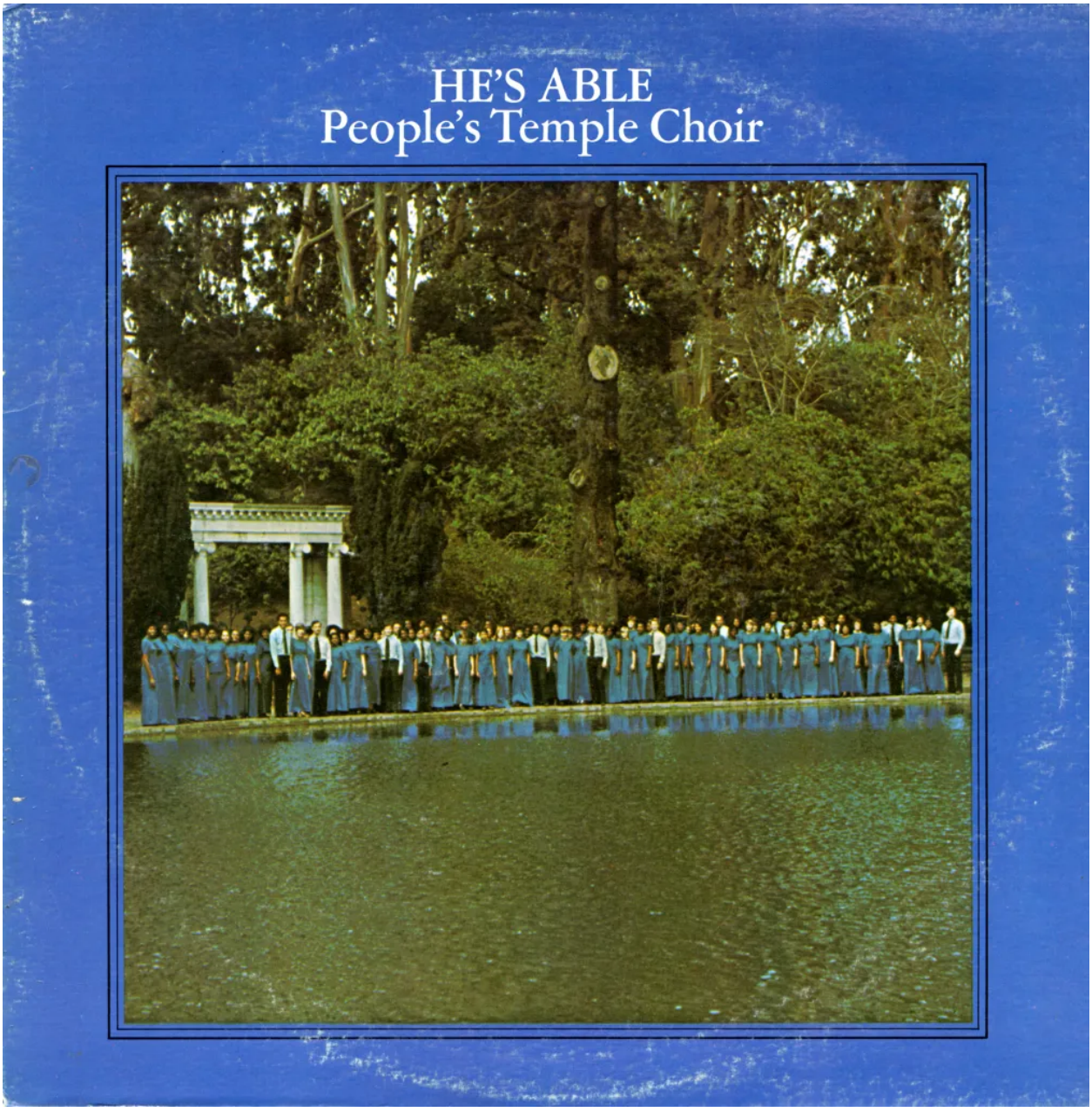

Figure 2.1: He's Able cover art

The album's emphasis on integration and racial justice are reflected musically in a number of ways. Let us turn our attention toward the album's fourth track, "Walk a Mile in My Shoes," originally a 1970 hit for singer-songwriter Joe South. The lyrics are a plea for tolerance and empathy, asking listeners "Before you abuse, criticize, or accuse/Walk a mile in my shoes" and reminding them, "There are people on reservations/And down in the ghetto/And brothers,

there, but by the grace of God/Go you and I." While the song can be interpreted as a call for racial tolerance in any context, it is only on *He's Able* that "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" really models the Temple's ideal of integration. Joe South is white, and the original recording of the song is done in a swampy, acoustic, country rock style. On *He's Able,* the song is reimagined as 1970s soul, though the production quality lacks the smoothness and immediacy of other R&B recordings from this era. The song engages with R&B in part through Melvin Johnson's vocal performance, which is full of the fills and improvisations that characterize the style. The song's latent message of racial tolerance is thus reimagined in a Black musical style and delivered by an African American singer. White voices are heard intertwining with Black voices in the choir to support a Black soloist. This, along with the emphasis Peoples Temple placed on antiracism, makes the song's lyrical plea for empathy seem like an explicit call for racial justice and equity.

This song is one of several on *He's Able* that seems to convey what many former Peoples Temple members describe as the most emotionally and spiritually powerful element of the church: its warm, integrated community. When Hyacinth and Zipporah Thrash first visited the Temple they were drawn in by that fact that, "Not only was the choir integrated, but the pews were, too… white congregants greeted them warmly. It felt like a homecoming."[64] Indeed, for many former members the integrated choir was a big part of the initial, positive impression Peoples Temple made on them. Hue Fortson recalls feeling initially skeptical about the Temple, but says, "when I went there, they did have an interracial choir, they were singing contemporary upbeat songs that you could relate to."[65] Listening to songs like "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" gives us a view into the ideas, community, and not least of all music that drew members into

[64] Julia Scheeres, *A Thousand Lives: The Untold Story of Hope, Deception, and Survival at Jonestown* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), kindle edition, loc. 252.

[65] Fondakowski, *Stories From Jonestown*, 66.

Peoples Temple. Music would continue to be a part of the Temple even after the core of the membership uprooted their lives and relocated to the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, better known by its nickname: Jonestown.

Peoples Temple in Jonestown (1974-78)

Peoples Temple is of course most famous for their final years in Jonestown, a relatively small agricultural compound located deep in the jungle of Guyana. The Temple began work on the commune in 1974, but the population was fairly small until 1977, when hundreds of new inhabitants flooded into the settlement. This mass migration was set off by a flurry of negative attention directed at Peoples Temple that year, in particular an article in the San Francisco-based *New West* magazine. This article featured interviews with several former Peoples Temple members who described physical, sexual, and financial abuse within the church.[66]

Although the mass emigration to Guyana happened suddenly, it had long been a staple of Temple discourse. Indeed, Jones once again tapped into the history and cultural practices of the Temple's Black membership by consistently describing the Jonestown settlement as "the Promised Land." As Anthony Pinn observes, "From the spirituals and blues, to early church leaders and the faithful of other traditions, to King and the present diaspora's struggle for equality, Black Religious Studies has described and analyzed black religion using the language of movement (most typically the metaphors of exodus and exile) and has preferred to speak about African Americans through a grammar of 'chosen-ness.'"[67]

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[66] Marshall Kilduff and Phil Tracy, "Inside Peoples Temple," *New West,* Aug. 1, 1977, accessed Nov 30, 2020, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=14025.

[67] Anthony B. Pinn, "Peoples Temple as Black Religion: Re-imaging the Contours of Black Religious Studies," in *Peoples Temple and Black Religion in America,* ed. Rebecca Moore, Anthony B. Pinn, and Mary R. Sawyer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 19.

This theme of the chosen people gaining their freedom by moving to the promised land is clearly mirrored by the way Jones would discuss the Guyana settlement in the years leading up to the move. Consider this excerpt from a 1974 sermon Jones delivered in Los Angeles:

> Glory, glory, glory. And once you get it, once you get it, you'll be thankful in your heart, you'll be grateful because it'll set you free, like you've never been free in your life. You'll come out under the yoke of bondage and you won't have to look down to no one, you'll be able to look everyone straight in the eyes, because you have a city, oh yes you have, you have a promised land.[68]

It is also worth noting that the notion of liberatory travel was not only a familiar rhetorical trope, but also had already become a lived reality for many of the Temple's elderly Black members. As Mary Maaga writes, "These were people who had internalized Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement during the 1920s; almost half of the elderly residents of Jonestown had already migrated once from the American South to California in search of a more just society."[69] All of this served to make the move to Guyana, alongside a deeply trusted and loved church community, seem far less extreme than it appears to be in wake of the Jonestown tragedy.

It is difficult if not impossible to find unbiased accounts of life in Jonestown.[70] While some apostates describe the compound as a concentration camp, some internal accounts describe the jungle community as a paradise. The social sciences define "apostates" as former members who actively oppose the group they left. As scholars such as Eileen Barker and Dick Anthony have argued, apostate accounts cast the groups they have left in an extremely negative light and

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[68] "Q612," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* mp3, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27492.

[69] Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown*, 10-1.

[70] Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* loc. 1225.

cannot always be relied upon.[71] Even in the case of Jonestown, where there was indeed serious abuse and cause for concern, the testimony of defectors such as Deborah Layton was somewhat exaggerated.[72] Letters and other communications from Temple members who were living in Jonestown are also unreliable inasmuch as they were censored to prevent any criticism of Jones or the community reaching the outside world. Nevertheless, scholars have dug through these many, often contradictory sources to try to piece together a semblance of what day-to-day life in Jonestown was like.

By all accounts, the community built by Jonestown's early settlers and the indigenous Guyanese workers they employed was very impressive. Jonestown was located about fifty miles into the interior of the jungle, and all 3,000 acres had to be painstakingly cleared. Many accounts of the early settlers—referred to as "pioneers" within the Temple—are extremely idealistic and reflect the pride that many of the young people who initially built the community felt during the early years of their work. According to Stephan Jones (Jim Jones' only biological son),

> It really was the best year of my life, that year or so that I spent in Jonestown before the exodus. We worked our butts off, you know, eighteen hours a day a lot of times, and we saw the fruit of our labor. We ate like kings. They were spending money, and we were building."[73]

Although Peoples Temple initially anticipated that the construction of Jonestown would take more than a decade, the various pressures on Jones that came to a head with the publication of the *New West* article prompted the mass migration to come far sooner than anyone was

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[71] Massimo Introvigne, "Something Peculiar About France: Anti-Cult Campaigns in Western Europe and French Religious Exceptionalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 208.

[72] Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* loc. 1225.

[73] Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown,* loc. 3281.

expecting. This greatly strained the small community's resources, particularly given the fact that only about a third of the population consisted of adults capable of the difficult, necessary agrarian work. According to another early settler, Mike Touchette, "When they flooded us with all those people, we begged them not to do it. We didn't have the room. We didn't have the facility. And we were told, you know, 'Piss on you, we're coming.' And they did."[74] As a result, housing was very cramped, working adults were expected to put in long hours, and the community subsisted primarily on rice, gravy, and vegetables. These issues were compounded by the increasingly paranoid mindset of Jones and his inner circle.

Jonestown essentially functioned like a small town with about a thousand residents. Moore writes,

> It had all of the things any ordinary farming community would have: a school, a library, a health clinic, businesses—including a sewing factory, a soap factory, a brick factory, and a small but serviceable sawmill—and "public utilities" to coordinate safety, sidewalks and roads, sanitation, sewage and drains, and water. A generator supplied electricity for the town, which supported streetlights, interior lighting, and other amenities… Because it was a communal town, it also had a central kitchen, bakery, and herb kitchen, as well as warehouses for storage and laundry facilities. Housing consisted of cabins painted in pastel colors, small huts called "troolies" made of palm leaves, and large, thatch-covered dormitories. A "police force" existed in the form of a security department, which included a "search and apprehend team" (SAT) and housemothers in charge of behavior in various cabins and dorms. A communications center—the radio tower—served as the hub for radio transmissions between Jonestown and Georgetown, and between Jonestown

[74] Ibid., loc. 3328.

and San Francisco. It also functioned as the center for announcements and dispatches made by Jim Jones over a public address system that ran throughout the village. Finally, since no community should be without entertainment, there were teams for basketball and karate, a dance troupe, and several musical groups, including the Jonestown Express.[75]

Given how much infrastructure Jonestown residents were able to build in a relatively short amount of time, it is perhaps unsurprising that many visitors publicly praised the project.

That being said, it is important to remember that Jonestown's visitors were only given a partial, rose-tinted view of life in the commune. Guests were usually provided with entertainment, often in the form of a musical performance, and were generally treated to a much better meal than was the norm in Jonestown. Furthermore, Jones always spent a significant amount of time before these visits coaching residents on the lies they were meant to tell to present the commune in a favorable light.

Indeed, there was much about life in Jonestown that cast Jones and the entire church in a damning light. Peoples Temple had already become controlling and abusive during its years in California, particularly to members in the upper echelons of church leadership. After Jones led the mass migration to Guyana in 1977, this abuse grew to encompass the entire Jonestown population. Issues of overcrowding and overwork aside, Jones and the Temple leadership instilled a violent, paranoid atmosphere that ultimately culminated in the mass murder/suicide on November 18, 1978. To borrow Douglas's language in describing how life shifted for Temple members in Jonestown, the grid, or shared system of classifications, remained relatively strong, though the church's varying levels of traditional Christian belief leaves this axis relatively weaker than in most religions, as seen in Figure 2.2. On the other hand, the group axis, which

[75] Ibid., loc. 1249.

charts the degree to which social pressures affect the lives of members, moves to the far right of the axis, denoting an extreme level of control.

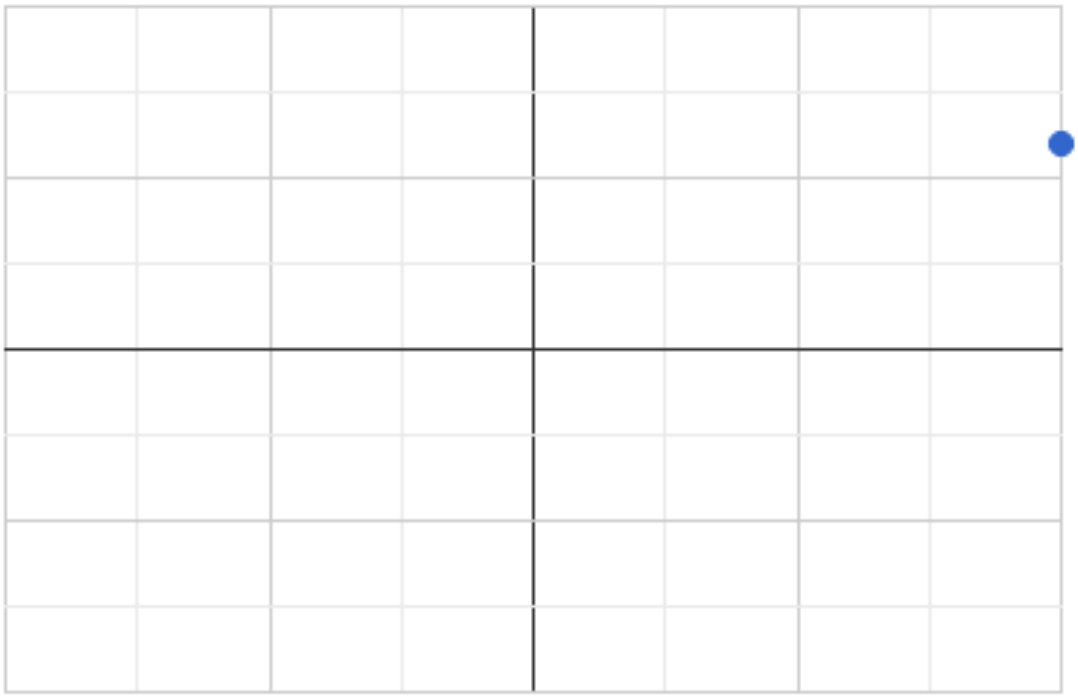

Figure 2.2: Jonestown group and grid. The y axis represents a shared (+) vs. private (-) system of classifications and the x axis represents strong (+) vs. weak (-) group control of member's egos.

The abuse in Jonestown has been amply documented in a wide variety of sources, and what follows is by no means a full catalogue of the violence. This account of Peoples Temple has thus far focused on understanding the church as a dynamic religion in dialogue with both the contemporary cultural climate and the religious history of the United States to better understand how this shaped the church's membership and the music that they made. If we wish to understand the role of music in Jonestown, however, we also need to examine the dark truths that this music attempted to paper over.

As soon as he arrived in Guyana, Jones was a dominating, unavoidable presence. He held frequent meetings to discuss logistics and socialist politics, and throughout the day he would broadcast recordings of himself reading and commenting on the news. Residents were forbidden

from talking during these broadcasts. Furthermore, by this point Jones was the community's only source of news from the outside world, and he often fabricated stories that described how the United States was rapidly sliding into full-blown fascism and was preparing concentration camps for Black citizens. Jonestown residents were also subject to regular "catharsis" sessions, where they would be publicly abused for perceived shortcomings or infractions and were often punished with physical or psychological violence, such as placing people in an underground isolation chamber for days at a time. In her journal, Jonestown resident Edith Roller recounts one example of this mode of punishment:

> A sudden call from Jim went out for Kay Rosas "front and center." All who could, went to the Radio Hut to which Kay was literally dragged. It was not made clear what her original offense had been but Jim was wrathful that she had said "Fuck Mother." The workers who came forward were very angry with Kay and Jim ordered her to be put in the "hole," the isolation box. She was taken away.[76]

Even more disturbing are the reports that residents who were particularly troublesome, or who had been repeatedly caught attempting to escape, or in at least one instance who had turned down Jones's sexual advances, were kept under sedation in the "Extended Care Unit."[77]

Jones cultivated an atmosphere of deep paranoia and mistrust during his time in Jonestown. For example, Jones would announce that a certain number of people had been instructed to approach residents and invite them to escape, and that all those who did not report the faux defectors would be punished. One of Jones's favorite topics at meetings were the high-

[76] Edith Roller, "March 1978," *Edith Roller Jouranls,* transcribed by Don Beck, Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, originally posted July 25, 2013, accessed January 13, 2021, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=35694.

[77] Bonnie Yates, "Murder by Thorazine: A Look at the Use of Sedatives in Jonestown," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, August 29, 2014, accessed January 13, 2021, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=40232.

ranking Temple defectors who had become openly critical opponents of the church, such as Jones's former right-hand man Tim Stoen and other members of the anti-Peoples Temple organization the Concerned Relatives. Any effort to leave the community was depicted as a severe betrayal, and Jonestown residents regularly engaged in meetings where they laid out violent fantasies of revenge against apostates. This was compounded by the Concerned Relatives increasing use of legal action against Peoples Temple and especially the Stoens' custody suit in which they claimed that John Victor Stoen—a young child living in Jonestown that Jones claimed was his child with Tim's wife Grace Stoen—was actually Tim's child.

This paranoid atmosphere culminated in increasingly frequent "White Nights," Jones's emergency meetings that would often last until dawn under the pretense that Jonestown was in immediate danger of being destroyed. As Moore writes, "'White Nights' signified a severe crisis within Jonestown and the possibility of mass death during, or as a result of, an invasion."[78] White Nights sometimes involved the community, primarily armed with rakes and other makeshift weapons, standing guard while fully expecting to face certain death at the hands of the Guyanese Defense Force or the CIA. Collective suicide as an act of protest—Jones's reimagining of Huey Newton's concept of revolutionary suicide—was a frequent topic of discussion during White Nights. Indeed, on at least one occasion Jones and the Temple leadership conducted a dress rehearsal of group suicide in which the community would all imbibe a drink they were led to believe was a lethal poison. While the Temple assiduously maintained a positive, optimistic facade when entertaining guests, this thin mask was concealing an entire community that increasingly thought of themselves as doomed.

[78] Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* loc. 1918.

This was the mood of the community when Congressman Ryan made his inspection in November of 1978. After a great deal of handwringing and contention, the Congressman—along with his entourage of aids, reporters for NBC, and Concerned Relatives—made their way into Jonestown on November 17 to investigate reports of abuse. They were welcomed with a variety of Temple entertainment, including a concert by the Jonestown Express whose performance of "That's the Way of the World" by Earth, Wind & Fire was captured by the NBC camera crew. At one point during the concert on the 17th, Ryan addressed the community and said, "…I can tell you right now that from the conversations I've had with a few other folks here already this evening, that whatever the [allegations] are, there are some people here who believe that this is the best thing that's ever happened to them in their whole life," a sentiment that was met with roaring applause from the residents of Jonestown.[79]

Although several Jonestown residents indicated that they wanted to leave—and that they did not feel safe making this request in public—it is noteworthy that Ryan initially felt like the trip was a vindication of Jonestown. Residents clearly were not undernourished, and it was only a very small percentage of the community that voiced a wish to leave. Although this occasion prompted only a few dozen defections (which would have likely eased the burden on the severely overcrowded commune), Jones and the inner circle of Temple leadership felt that any defections whatsoever were an existential threat to the community. Ultimately these defections and the presence of Ryan convinced the Temple leadership that the community would not be able to survive, and that Jonestown needed to be wiped out in a grand act of "revolutionary suicide" rather than be allowed to slowly dissolve. As Ryan, his entourage, and Temple defectors gathered at the Port Kaituma airstrip to return to the United States, a truck full of armed Temple

[79] Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown,* loc. 6968.

guards opened fire, killing Ryan and four others. As this was happening, Jones called for a meeting in which he told his congregation that he had a premonition of Ryan's demise and that the only way to avoid a slow, brutal death at the hands of U.S. and Guyanese armed forces would be for the community to drink a concoction of Flavor-aid and cyanide, killing themselves in a final act of defiance.

Catherine Wessinger has theorized that violence in NRMs is often provoked by their need to defend their "ultimate concern." Wessinger's theory is built on the work of Robert D. Baird and theologian Paul Tillich, who considered religion the "ultimate concern" that "is more important than anything else in the universe for the person [or the group] involved."[80] Wessinger argues that when the ultimate concern is under threat it can serve as a catalyst for violence. Regarding Peoples Temple, Wessinger writes, "The ultimate concern of the Jonestown residents was to preserve their communal solidarity, and, thus, be an example that would help establish a future society free of racism, sexism, classism, and ageism."[81] Although Ryan's inspection was the catalyst that set off Jonestown's final White Night, the sense that Peoples Temple's ultimate concern—which is to say the survival of Jonestown as a utopian socialist model for the world—had long been threatened by a variety of forces, from oppositional former members to the custody cases involving John Victor Stoen to the basic logistics of surviving in the jungle.

It is also worth remembering that the realities of the mass murder/suicide at Jonestown were far more complex than the popular image of brainwashed cultists mindlessly getting into line to poison themselves. Many residents, particularly the youngest and the most elderly, were forcibly poisoned. Jonestown residents were surrounded by armed guards as Jones pressured

[80] Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violent: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 15.

[81] Ibid.

them to ingest what he called "the potion." Despite all this, some Peoples Temple members did push back against Jones's call for mass suicide. On the infamous "death tape" that captured the first forty-five minutes of the lengthy, harrowing ordeal, one member—Christine Miller—approaches the microphone and argues that the church should seek other solutions to their problem than mass suicide. It is telling, however, that it is not just Jones who rejects her pleas. When another member—Jim McIrvine—shoots down her suggestion, he is met with applause. Indeed, much of the tape consists of Temple members thanking "Dad" one last time, even as their community violently dies all around them. The accounts of survivors vary as to whether some people at the pavilion who refused to drink the poison willingly were forcible injected. In truth we will likely never understand fully how the events of November 18, 1978, played out, but we can be sure that the story was more nuanced and complex than the simplified image of Peoples Temple as a "death cult" would lead us to believe.

Jones's obsession with martyrdom and self-sacrifice played a huge role in the tragedy at Jonestown, and strongly resonates with René Girard's theories regarding scapegoats and ritual sacrifice. Jones's portrayal of himself and his followers as martyrs reached new heights in Jonestown, though these ideas had played a strong role in Peoples Temple since their time in California. His sermons were peppered with frequent references to the suffering, persecution, and danger that he put himself in through his work in Peoples Temple and advocation for radical socialism and antiracist politics. At one point he took this a step further by conspiring with some close associates to enact a dramatic assassination in front of his congregation, followed by a miraculous resurrection. The logics of Girard's theory of sacrifice were put into practice in many ways in Peoples Temple, including the control of reciprocal violence through often brutal punishments that the church began to rely on more and more heavily after the community

relocated to Jonestown, the church's isolated jungle compound. This tendency even extends to the infamous mass murder/suicide that took place in Jonestown in 1978, during which Jones pushed his congregation to willingly participate in the community's self-destruction by framing their suicides as a political gesture "protesting the conditions of an inhumane world."[82] Jones was able to lead most of his adult congregation to willing participate in their own demise not through brainwashing, but rather by framing the act as a grand gesture of sacrifice.

We can add clarity to this muddled picture when we consider the music that was made in Jonestown and the ways it was deployed. The music of the Jonestown Express helps us understand the true believers' view of the agricultural compound as a utopia rather than a totalitarian nightmare. We can also look at how music was strategically deployed in an effort for the Temple to negotiate their position with an increasingly hostile outside world. Finally, we can look at how drastically the meaning of the Temple's music has shifted as Jonestown became shorthand for the dangerous, brainwashing cult.

Music in Jonestown

Much of the musical life in Jonestown is surprisingly well-documented. There are a great many tapes of meetings, conversations, and even some concerts that have been preserved and made publicly available by the Jonestown Institute. Musicologist John Brackett has even compiled a comprehensive list of surviving recordings of Jonestown's music. When we consider these recordings alongside written records and interviews that describe the situations in which Jonestown musicians would perform, we are able to get a sense of both how this music sounded in the moment and the Temple's use of music in the last years of its existence.

[82] *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple,* "Q042 Transcript, FBI Transcription," March 12, 2019, accessed August 24, 2023. https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=29081.

As Peoples Temple transformed over time, their music transformed along with them. In Indianapolis, the Temple's musicians functioned much as they would have in any other Pentecostal church, though the fact that they were racially integrated was inherently a political act. In California, the Temple's music began to take on different meanings depending on who was listening. When Temple musicians toured with Jones, their music was understood as politically progressive Christianity, though Temple members likely heard many of these same songs through their more Jones-centric belief system. In Jonestown, music lost its connection to Pentecostal worship practices, and was often performed for outsiders as a means of putting the controversial church's best face forward.

The Temple's use of music shifted significantly after the mass-migration to Jonestown in 1977. For one thing, the religious services and faith healing sessions that had long been a staple of Peoples Temple were largely discarded in Guyana. As sociologist John Hall writes, "True believers [in Jonestown] lamented the decline of faith healing and religion, and they faced the disappointment of coming to terms with the less than perfect Jones as someone other than 'god.'"[83] Although Jones was in constant contact with his congregation and spent an incredible amount of time talking to them in meetings and over the PA system, he spent almost all of his time discussing politics, the logistics of life in Jonestown, and railing against the Temple's many enemies. Whereas music had been a link to the Temple's Pentecostal roots, in Jonestown music was not heard and performed in the context of worship. Rather, music was presented as much-needed entertainment after long, difficult days building and cultivating the agrarian community.

As Peoples Temple dropped most of their Christian trappings in Jonestown, their music followed suit. When Jones stopped performing healing services or anything that resembled the

[83] John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 239.

religious meetings the church held during their time in the United States, there was no longer a venue for the trancing practices and the religious music that accompanied them. The Jonestown Express drew their repertoire not from the Pentecostal gospel tradition, but from the popular hits of the day. They performed songs such as "Keep on Dancing" by the Jackson 5, "I've Just Seen a Face" by the Beatles, and "Message in Our Music" by the O'Jays.[84] At first glance this repertoire suggests that when the Jonestown Express performed within the Temple, it was primarily with entertainment in mind. Jonestown residents also put on skits and dance routines for each other, and even gathered to watch a movie every Sunday night.[85]

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the lack of explicitly Christian material in the Jonestown Express repertoire means that their song choices and performances are totally divorced from the Temple's religious project. Jones had long elevated politics into religious dogma, and Jonestown represented the apotheosis of the apostolic socialism he had preached for years. For Temple members, Jonestown was not just a communal experiment, it was the socialist utopia—the long-awaited promised land—made real on the earth. For some Temple members, helping to build this promised land only fueled their increasingly fanatic loyalty to Jones and the Temple. This was especially true of the inner circle of Temple leadership which was largely responsible for carrying out the day-to-day logistics of life in the commune as Jones became more and more incapacitated by his drug use.[86] Even for some of the members that did not manage to adjust to the arduous demands of life in Jonestown, and who recognized Jones's increasingly abusive behavior for the danger that it was, the power of the Temple's utopian

[84] John Brackett, "Music as an Expression of Freedom in the Political Theology of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple," Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, last modified October 30, 2019, accessed January 12, 2021, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=34234.

[85] Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* loc. 1285.

[86] Maaga, *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown,* 57.

dream was such that they second-guessed the motivations for their doubt even as they made their plans to escape. For example, one defector, Vernon Gosney, has said that he left his son in Jonestown because he "wasn't sure he was doing the right thing" by abandoning the community.[87] Clearly some of the defectors still felt the pull of the community's utopian idealism, all of which was reinforced by the music that was heard and performed in Jonestown.

On October 31, 1978, the Jonestown Express performed an evening of music interspersed with commentary from the community that provides a fascinating window into the musical life of Peoples Temple in Guyana.[88] The recording from this evening is one of the most extensive documentations of how the politically charged evenings of musical entertainment unfolded during Jonestown's final months. The songs performed that evening include Earth Wind & Fire's "That's the Way of the World," Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come," Victor Jara's "El derecho de vivid en Paz!" the Jackson 5's "Never Can Say Goodbye," K-Ci & JoJo's "Love Ballad," the Bee Gee's "How Deep is Your Love," Natalie Cole's "Lovers," Harry Nielsen's "Everybody's Talking," and Joe Cocker's "You Are So Beautiful to Me."[89] Although the archived recording of this performance is low quality, it nevertheless provides firsthand evidence of the musical skill and varied repertoire of musicians in Peoples Temple. More significantly, the performances from that evening showcase how music, Temple theology, and Temple ideology were still deeply intertwined.

The October 31 performances, which were found on a tape labeled "entertainment," feature both the Jonestown Express and other Temple members performing songs that are

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[87] Fondakowski, *Stories from Jonestown,* loc. 3281.

[88] McGehee III, Fielding M, "Q219 Summary," The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* Dec. 18, 2015, accessed April 15, 2021, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=28087.

[89] McGehee III, Fielding M, "Q219 Transcript," The Jonestown Institute, *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple,* Feb. 18, 2016, accessed April 15, 2021, https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=27381.

occasionally interspersed with spoken monologues. The evening seems to have been put on in part for the benefit of the Danish filmmaker Peter Elsass who was visiting Jonestown.[90] Although the numerous tape edits and low audio quality of the surviving recording make it impossible to determine specific details about performance order or arrangement choices, the tape nevertheless provides a fascinating window into the use of music in Jonestown.

Although there is no explicitly religious material on the tape, there are several songs that seem to speak directly to the Temple's political concerns. Furthermore, we can also hear how Temple musicians once again perform musical material that likely held "insider" meaning for members who were privy to the Temple's private business. We can hear a clear example of this during the performance of "A Change is Gonna Come." This song was originally written and recorded by Sam Cooke in 1964 and is generally regarded as the singer-songwriter's most direct musical comment on the Civil Rights Movement and racial inequality. The partial performance of the song preserved on Q219 is sung a capella by an unidentified man.[91]

The decision to sing "A Change is Gonna Come" unaccompanied results in a strikingly intimate performance, in which the singer has a great degree of rhythmic freedom to improvise and extrapolate on Cooke's melody. This freedom is emphasized not only through the singer's improvisations, but also through the pregnant pauses he uses effectively between musical phrases. The decision to employ the bare human voice alone lends this performance intimacy—an intimacy which could only have been enhanced by the close quarters of Jonestown. The lack of musical accompaniment in this performance calls back to the singing of a cappella freedom

[90] McGehee, "Q219 Summary."

[91] The faint sounds of organ music can be heard in the background of this performance, but in my opinion this is more likely the result of the Temple's practice of reusing tapes (which sometimes resulted in somewhat ghostly sonic afterimages) rather than the presence of a nearly inaudible accompanist.

songs at protests during the Civil Rights Movement, thus reinforcing Temple members' sense of themselves as antiracists activists. This lack of accompaniment also lends the performance a starkness that enhances the nuanced blend of hopelessness and optimism that permeates the song.

Although the title and refrain speak to a belief that progress is inevitable, the rest of the lyrics evoke the constant and unavoidable weight of oppression that burdens Black Americans. As a result, the repeated musical declaration that "a change is gonna come" begins to sound like the narrator's effort to reassure and comfort I rather than a triumphant proclamation that victory is inevitable. This pervasive undercurrent of pessimism is reinforced by Cooke's melody, particularly in the refrain. Not only does the narrator repeat the lyrics "I know" in a way that undermines their seeming certainty, but the melody also drops considerably at this moment, and continues this descending, almost resigned melodic motion with "a change is gonna come, oh yes it will." It is not difficult to imagine how different this line would have sounded at the end of a long, rising crescendo, but instead it appears as a quiet moment of affirmation in the face of overwhelming odds. This sense of working toward a liberatory goal that one might never live to see was surely familiar to the residents of Jonestown who were routinely reminded that they may be called to lay down their lives for Peoples Temple.

Although this may reflect how Q219 was edited rather than the performance itself, it is interesting to note that this recording omits the lines that seem to comment most directly on racism and segregation in America: "I go to the movie/And I go downtown/Somebody keep telling me/Don't hang around." Rather, the verse that is most strongly emphasized is the bridge, which features the lines, "Then I go to my brother/And I say, brother, help me please/But he winds up, knocking' me/Back down on my knees." The singer emphasizes the final two lines here through repetition. It is noteworthy that the singer musically highlights the lines that

describe a scene of betrayal by a "brother" whom the narrator assumed would be an ally. Once again, Temple musicians take familiar material and highlight the moments that resonate most strongly with the church's rhetoric. As has been discussed above, during its final year the Temple was especially preoccupied by a number of high-ranking defections that Jones consistently described as unforgivable betrayals. During White Night meetings Jones made it clear that he felt these traitors were to blame for Jonestown's increasingly precarious legal and economic position. Just through musical emphasis, this singer was able to reimagine "A Change is Gonna Come" as an anthem of what members thought of as Jonestown's own tragic betrayal that may well keep them from ever realizing their utopian dreams of being a self-sustaining socialist community.

After singing these lines followed by the "change is gonna come" refrain, the singer pauses to deliver a short, spoken reflection that connects the lyrics to the Vietnam War and a pervasive sense of the injustice of life in the United States:

> A knock comes to *my* door. (Pause) And who turns out to be, a human just like you and me. And I'm *bitter*. Each day my bitterness grows *deeper* and *deeper* as I search for reasons to what we were really fighting for. You see, I volunteered my life to fight in the war, a war that was supposed to guarantee freedom for my people here at home, that they would have a better life, and I'm *bitter*. It was *not* the Vietnamese, it was *not* the Japanese, it was *not* the Communist who pulled a gun on my mother because she was one minute late for work in the fields. No, she had a sick baby at home to care for.[92]

The singer uses "A Change is Gonna Come" as a springboard to connect racial injustice in the United States to the colonial violence of the Vietnam War, an idea which had long been

[92] McGehee, "Q219 Transcript."

articulated by the Black Power movement. While it is somewhat surprising to hear Temple musicians speak so passionately about the Vietnam War nearly four years after the United States' involvement was concluded, this moment speaks to the political lineage the Temple drew inspiration from. Perhaps the most famous public linkage of the domestic racism and international aggression of the United States during the Vietnam War came when the boxing champion Muhammad Ali refused to enlist more than a decade prior to this performance. This message, embedded within Cooke's classic song, helped to reinforce the Temple's self-image as part of a revolutionary movement with a history that extended beyond the confines of the church.

It is worth remembering that this performance was not only held for the benefit of Temple members, but also to make a good impression on visiting documentarian Peter Elsass. In Guyana, the Temple continued to use music as a way of reaching people outside of the church, although after the *New West* article and the mass migration to Jonestown the church was viewed with much greater hostility and suspicion than they were in California. The skilled musicians in Peoples Temple—and most especially the house R&B band the Jonestown Express—were essentially deployed as musical ambassadors in the hope of engendering a positive relationship with the outside world. In addition to playing for the commune's guests, the Jonestown Express also performed regularly in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana, both as a means of ingratiating the Temple with important members of the Guyanese government and to raise money for Jonestown. Shiva Naipaul, who visited Guyana two months after the massacre, noted that the Jonestown Express was the only thing about Jonestown most of the Guyanese citizens he spoke to knew about.[93] By far the most famous and obvious example of Temple musicians performing

[93] Shiva Naipaul, *Black & White* (London: Abacus, 1980), 65.

for outsiders in order to put a positive face on the church was the Jonestown Express's performance for Congressman Ryan during his fateful inspection.

Peoples Temple was far from the first controversial NRM to use music as a way of improving public perception of their religion. Perhaps no religion has been more successful in this regard than the most famous American NRM of the nineteenth century, the Latter-Day Saints. For the first century of their existence, the LDS was widely reviled and heavily persecuted. Over the course of the twentieth century, however, the LDS was able to reverse much of the stigma against their religion and enter the American mainstream. This was accomplished not only through changes in religious doctrine, but though a wide variety of musical offerings that actively worked to garner greater public acceptance of the Mormon faith. A brief examination of the role music played in ushering the LDS into mainstream American religious life brings greater clarity to what Temple musicians wished to achieve and the reason their efforts failed where the LDS was able to succeed.

Many of the Mormon's most successful attempts at transforming their public image were accomplished through musical theater. During the late nineteenth century, stereotypes about the polygamous LDS revolved around the notion that "Mormon men were… violent, sex-crazed tyrants," an image that was closely aligned to racist views of Muslim men.[94] In spite of the LDS's overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon membership, "associating Mormons with other undesirable ethnicities led outsiders to suggest Mormons were in fact not white at all, but rather a different ethnicity altogether."[95] The LDS "successfully reattached themselves to the narrative of

[94] Jake Johnson, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 219), 65.

[95] Ibid.

whiteness" in part through musicals such as *Promised Valley* (1947).[96] In this musical, Mormon characters perform whiteness through choral singing, which distanced them "from a perceived ill-refined sound of racial or ethnic minorities."[97] Furthermore, the musical as a whole was an attempt to portray Mormonism as quintessentially American. As Jake Johnson writes,

> After decades of living on the fringe of American life, postwar Mormons actively sought out ways of assimilation. *Promised Valley,* Mormonism's true entrée into musical theater, seems well timed and purposefully designed to show Mormonism's good faith in core American enterprises—hard work, community spirit, devotion to the land and family, and, of course, the thoroughly American institution of musical theater. Previous displays of Mormons in popular culture, including musical comedy, were antagonistic, mocking, and exploitative. *Promised Valley* disrupted those conventional images of Mormon faith and life by emphasizing beloved American work ethics inscribed within Mormon vocality. Furthermore, the show played up the conventions of singing in musicals. If in musical theater to sing means to belong, then *Promised Valley* was an opportunity to prove that Mormons belonged, by establishing their mastery over the style and conventions of America's home-grown theatrical genre.[98]

Thus, music and musical theater were a vehicle by which the LDS was able to successfully reimagine itself as a mainstream American institution.

Stephen Marini sees similar dynamics at work in the storied history of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. He argues the MTC has been used successfully to link the LDS to American

[96] Ibid., 82.

[97] Ibid., 78.

[98] Ibid., 81.

civil religion, which he defines as a combination of "transcendent ideals and a national mythos with the practical morality necessary to make the constitutional order work."[99] Throughout their history the Mormon Tabernacle Choir has focused on public performance and making use of new audio technologies to reach a broad audience. Furthermore, they have consistently programmed their music so Mormon hymns will sit alongside popular entries from the European classical tradition and patriotic songs. World War II in particular provided an opportunity for the choir to "become the voice of American nationalism and civil religion."[100] The Mormon Tabernacle choir were so successful in this regard that Ronald Reagan dubbed them "America's Choir."[101]

The final performance of the Jonestown Express during Ryan's inspection seems to model the social dynamics of the Mormons' musical rehabilitation in miniature. Rather than a large-scale NRM gradually transforming its public image over the course of many decades, we hear the musicians of a much smaller religious movement attempt to sway a single delegation of hostile outsiders serving as representatives for some of the Temple's most hated enemies. Although Temple musicians began performing music for outsiders long before they moved to Guyana, those performances were carried out when Peoples Temple was still viewed as a conventional Pentecostal church. The Temple may have had a long history of using music to define themselves to the broader public, but this was the only time music was deployed specifically to *rehabilitate* the church to its critics once it became the subject of scandal.

Although only brief clips of the Jonestown Express's set were recorded, these suggest that Temple musicians were once again playing carefully to their audience. One of the songs that

[99] Stephen A. Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 221.

[100] Ibid., 225.

[101] Johnson, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America,* 78.

was partially captured by the NBC crew was one of the staples of the Jonestown Express repertoire, "That's the Way of the World" by Earth, Wind, and Fire. The song is full of lyrics that can easily be related to the view of Jonestown as a budding utopia, such as "Plant your flower/And you grow a pearl." The fact that this message is being conveyed through a song that was commercially successful in the United States downplays the extent to which Peoples Temple were calling for a radical departure from capitalist economies, suggesting instead the same kind of familiar, moderate progressivism that the Temple consistently strove to project during their years in California. This is only reinforced by the Jonestown Express's skillful performance and the joyful reactions we see from the crowded dance floor. Just as Jonestown residents would attempt to impress visiting Soviet officials with their socialist anthems and knowledge of Russian, here we see the Temple trying to project a sense that they are nothing more than normal Americans engaged in an inspiring—if somewhat unusual—social experiment. Indeed, this is made even more clear when we consider the report in the *Time* article that Ryan's delegation was also treated to a performance of "America the Beautiful." It seems a safe bet that this was the only time that patriotic American songs were sung in Jonestown.

In retrospect it is easy to see this final performance of the Jonestown Express as a desperate, dishonest attempt to put a happy face on the commune's dire circumstances, and there is some truth to that view. It is worth remembering, however, that their attempt to present a positive image to Ryan was initially quite successful. Ultimately, the catalyst for the murder-suicides was not the fear that Ryan would return to the United States with a damning report, but rather the Temple leadership's refusal to allow even the small number of defections that were prompted by Ryan's visit. Indeed, moments before the initial attempt on Ryan's life, the congressman was telling Jones that he felt the trip had been a complete vindication for Peoples

Temple. Although they were not the only factor at play here, the Jonestown Express played a role in creating a positive view of Peoples Temple in Ryan's mind, though obviously this was not enough for the Temple's increasingly violent, paranoid leadership.

Peoples Temple After Jonestown

Once Guyanese authorities discovered the aftermath of the Jonestown massacre, the story was an international news sensation for weeks. As Jonathan Z. Smith writes,

> The press, by and large, featured the pornography of Jonestown—the initial focus on the daily revisions of the body count, the details on the condition of the corpses. Then, as more "background" information became available, space was taken over by lurid details of beatings, sexual humiliations, and public acts of perversion… Everything was sensational. Almost no attempt was made to gain any interpretative framework.[102]

This is particularly clear when we consider *Time* magazine's coverage of the incident in their December 1978 issue, released just a month after the deaths in Jonestown. The article itself, "Cult of Death: The Jonestown Nightmare," forgoes any discussion of the history or beliefs of Peoples Temple and instead focuses on the events immediately surrounding the massacre. Accounts of Jonestown often feature forensic realism, or "the aesthetics of the aftermath," or deadpan descriptions of brutal violence that Mark Seltzer argues are a crucial stylistic element of the true crime genre.[103]

[102] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109.

[103] Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 37.

Consider the *Time* article's detached description of the fluctuating bodycount at Jonestown:

> Not until week's end did Guyanese authorities report that they had miscounted the bodies. Instead of 409, as first related, the count was about 900. U.S. embassy officials confirmed the discrepancy, attributing it at first to the finding of many children's bodies underneath the piles of others.[104]

Although the scene being described is intensely grim, the tone remains dry and impersonal. Seltzer argues that this type of forensic realism serves to convert "the spectacle of the torn and open body" into information.[105] Furthermore, this conversion of bodies to information "is also the opening of the torn and private body, the torn and private person, to public spectacle."[106] It is hard to think of a more fitting description of the tone that was struck in the coverage of the Jonestown massacre in both true crime and the mainstream news media.

Perhaps the clearest example of the transformation of the bodies of Jonestown into public spectacle is found not in the contents of the *Time* article, but on the cover of the magazine seen in Figure 2.3. Emblazoned with the words "Cult of Death," the cover features a photograph of the infamous vat of purple Flavor-Aid surrounded by corpses. The camera is positioned in such a way that the vat itself is given the foreground, with the viewer just able to peer into its dangerous, drying content. The vat appears to be positioned on a wooden walkway just outside the Jonestown pavilion. The portion of the walkway we see leads to a pile of open bottles which contained the drugs and poison used to create the deadly concoction. This small pile of litter

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[104] "Cult of Death: The Jonestown Nightmare," *Time,* Dec. 4, 1978, accessed Sep 5, 2023, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,912249-1,00.html.

[105] Seltzer, *True Crime,* 37.

[106] Ibid.

forms the center of the image, just below the cover's text. The actual dead of Jonestown are regulated to the periphery of the frame. Off to the side of the vat we see a woman's legs protruding into the shot. Behind her another Temple member lies face down. Further in the background of the photograph we catch a glimpse of the vast field of bodies left in the wake of the massacre, but these are obscured by the title of the magazine. No faces are visible. Just as we saw in the article, the focus here is not on the victims themselves, but rather on the way in which they died. The history of People Temple and the human beings who formed its ranks are washed away by the public spectacle of their decomposing, interchangeable bodies.

Figure 2.3: Time "Cult of Death" cover

The intense press coverage in the wake of the massacre played a major role in framing Peoples Temple as the archetypical death cult in the public imagination and secured Jim Jones's place as a fixture of the true crime genre for decades to come. Although the anticult movement's desire to see every NRM as a potential Jonestown has strongly affected the popular narrative of Peoples Temple, it does not entirely explain the position of Jonestown in popular culture. We must also look to the characterization of Jones and Peoples Temple in the true crime genre to complete the picture.

True crime is a form of popular media that spans books, documentary film, and television and conveys accounts of criminal activity. Seltzer writes,

> True crime… posits stranger-intimacy and vicarious violation as models of sociality. This might be described as a social tie on the model of *referred pain*. And in that true crime is crime fact that looks like crime fiction, it marks or irritates the distinction between real and fictional reality, holding steadily visible that vague and shifting region between truth and falsity where belief resides: what we can call, on the model of referred pain, *referred belief*.[107]

True crime is thus able to give us a paradoxical sense of being intimately close to moments of violence while framing that violence as somewhat unreal. As Seltzer observes, true crime "knowingly takes the crime novel as its prototype and tries it out on real life."[108] While I am not suggesting that figures like Jones are seen as literally fictional, it nevertheless seems plausible that true crime's use of narrative models derived from fiction can help us understand how events like the Jonestown massacre are transformed into consumable entertainment.

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[107] Mark Seltzer, *True Crime: Observations on Violence and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), 2.

[108] Ibid., 9.

It would be a mistake, however, to characterize true crime as a monolith. True crime is a vast genre that has adopted a great many approaches to relating nonfictional crime narratives. For example, documentaries such as *The Thin Blue Line* and the *Paradise Lost* series have focused on false imprisonment and criticisms of the American justice system, while Michelle McNamara's *I'll Be Gone in the Dark: One Woman's Obsessive Search for the Golden State Killer* not only brought about renewed investigative efforts that eventually led to the capture of a long-elusive serial killer, but also provided an insightful meditation on the nature of long-term fixations and the online communities that have formed around cold cases. Although the true crime genre has produced informative and insightful works on Peoples Temple, the story of Jonestown is most often cast not as the story of the church's complex, shifting social dynamics, but rather as the narrative of a single man's psychological abnormality and deviance which leads to a gradually escalating pattern of violence. Jim Jones and other leaders of violent "cults" are thus recast as essentially a variation on one of true crime's principal obsessions: the serial killer. The true crime genre's positioning of the cult leader as a close relative to the serial killer not only reinforces the anticult movement's narrative, but it also further strips Peoples Temple of its ideology, theology, and historical context. It relegates the figure of Jim Jones to the cultural box where the serial killer resides, where they almost cease to exist as real figures with the potential to reveal something about violence in our society and instead become like sideshow attractions whose deviance is so inherently Other that we can do nothing besides gawk.

This categorization of the cult leader as a close relative of the serial killer is readily apparent in the true crime genre. For example, consider the case of the Investigation Discovery true crime television program *Most Evil,* in which a forensic psychologist or psychiatrist would rank how evil different murderers are on a scale of one to ten. Although the show focuses almost

exclusively on serial and spree killers, they also occasionally turn their attention to cult activity, including the Jonestown Massacre. The show presents serial killers and cult leaders as essentially belonging to the same category. We also see this blurring of the distinction between cult leaders and serial killers in a t-shirt sold by the Museum of Death, which features illustrated portraits of serial killers such as Richard Ramirez and John Wayne Gacy alongside cult leaders, including Marshall Applewhite, Charles Manson, and Jim Jones.

Our cultural fixation on serial killers is particularly evident when we consider the explosion of popular media that has been produced on the subject, especially since the 1990s. To give an example, Robert Conrath writes,

> …when [serial killer] Jeffrey Dahmer's house of carnage was discovered in Milwaukee in 1991, television rights to his story were being negotiated within the hour. Over the next few years, Dahmer was the subject of numerous documentaries (including *An American Nightmare* (1993) and *The Monster Within* (1996)), films (*The Secret Life* (1993) and *Dahmer* (2002)), several biographies and Joyce Carol Oates's fictionalized *Zombie* (1996), a comic strip (by Derf, a cartoonist and coincidentally Dahmer's childhood acquaintance) and a concept album by a heavy metal band called Macabre.[109]

The result is a feedback loop in which we are saturated with fictional and nonfictional media endlessly repackaging acts of extreme violence. Real incidents are presented as though they were fictional horrors while horror fiction takes inspiration from real-life violent crimes. It is perhaps no wonder that—as Philip Jenkins has argued—the line between historical and fictional serial killers is disappearing.[110]

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[109] Brian Jarvis, "Monsters Inc.: Serial Killers and Consumer Culture," *Crime, Media, Culture* 3, no. 3 (2007), 328.

[110] Ibid.

Just as was the case with Dahmer, the story of Jonestown has inspired an outpouring of media. In addition to a wide variety of true crime books and documentaries, there have also been numerous fictional works clearly modeled off the events at Jonestown. These range from direct fictional adaptations of Jones's life, such as the miniseries *Guayana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones* (1980) to films that make use of the narrative and imagery of Jonestown without claiming to be based directly on the events, such as the found footage horror film *The Sacrament* (2013). Peoples Temple has also served as an inspiration for video games such as *The Church in the Darkness* (2019). Although there have been numerous in-depth studies of Peoples Temple in academia and evenhanded true crime books and documentaries such as Jeff Guin's *The Road to Jonestown: Jim Jones and Peoples Temple (*2017) and Stanley Nelson's *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (2006), the popular media around Jonestown has remained singularly fixated on the events of November 18, 1978, which are explained entirely through Jones's charismatic power. The history and context of Peoples Temple is stripped away, leaving only the impression of a single act of horrific violence orchestrated by Jim Jones, the archetypical cult leader driven entirely by his own deviant desires. Jones has been made into a true crime icon alongside other such instantly recognizable, slightly unreal figures as Ted Bundy and Ed Gein.

In the years following the Jonestown massacre the various artifacts that have been left behind by Peoples Temple—including their music—can easily be framed as murderabilia. The transformation of Temple music into murderabilia is particularly clear if we revisit the album the church released in 1973, *He's Able,* and trace its history after Jonestown. Soon after November 18, 1978, the remaining unsold copies of *He's Able* were auctioned off and the album became an out-of-print rarity. In 1993, however, an independent label operating out of the UK called Grey Matter Productions rereleased *He's Able* on CD. The original album art was replaced with a

black and white photograph of the bloated bodies of the Jonestown dead lying outside the pavilion. The inside sleeve contains an image resembling a package of Kool-Aid powder renamed "Jones-Aid" and emblazoned with Jim Jones's face. Most shocking of all, the album has been given a forty-two-minute bonus track, officially known as FBI no. Q042 but more commonly referred to as the "Death Tape." This audio has been included on two additional rereleases of *He's Able.* The Grey Matter Productions rerelease of *He's Able* reminds us how often today Peoples Temple is seen only as a target for dark humor and morbid fascination.

This reprint is not the only evidence of the way that *He's Able* has been inextricably linked to the Jonestown massacre. The way the songs on this album have been used by documentary filmmakers also demonstrates how thoroughly their meaning has been transformed by the violence at Jonestown. Indeed, the transmutation that occurs when something like *He's Able* is heard through the hermeneutics of murderabilia makes it clear how thoroughly musical meaning is affected by the frameworks we listen though.

For an example of this process in action, let us turn our attention toward "Welcome," the first track on *He's Able*. As was discussed above, *He's Able* was originally framed as a musical recreation of a Temple meeting intended for distribution to the sympathetic outsiders the choir performed for on their many tours. "Welcome," an original song performed by the children's choir, opens the album. This song was used to begin many Peoples Temple meetings, and without the additional context of the Jonestown massacre it sounds like nothing more than a cute performance of a simple song by a children's choir. The song's refrain is a catchy, easily sung pentatonic melody with a range of a single octave. This is performed over bouncy, stripped-down instrumentation, featuring just piano, bass, and drums playing a somewhat folk-inflected I-II-V chord progression. The timbre of the record is dominated by the unmistakable sound of an

amateur children's choir belting out the song in unison. This unpolished performance of a cheerful children's song goes a long way to establishing the album's sense of recreating the intimate, homey feel of a church service. In the wake of the Jonestown massacre, however, this same performance transforms into something much more unsettling.

A quick perusal of the comments on the video of "Welcome" that was uploaded to YouTube by beeninsane makes it obvious how closely connected the song has become to the Jonestown massacre. Numerous commenters describe the song as "haunting," while other make morbid jokes about the song's connection to the infamous murder-suicides. Perhaps most revealing is the comment by Mibevan, who writes, "This sounds like one of those songs you'd hear in a horror movie trailer where its [sic] slowed down and sung by a little girl."[111]

This YouTube commenter is not the only person to connect this song to the conventions of the horror genre. Let us consider how the song is used in the four-part documentary miniseries *Jonestown: Terror in the Jungle.* During the second episode, "On the Run," "Welcome" is heard as former Peoples Temple member Leslie Wagner-Wilson describes her arrival at Jonestown. Wagner-Wilson says,

> I was seasick, it was not a pleasant trip but part of me was happy, it was like 'don't complain because you're on your way to the Promised Land.' When we pulled up to the dock and got off I was still apprehensive. We got on the tractor and we rounded this corner and I could just hear the [singing] 'welcome, welcome all of you…'

Wagner-Wilson's narrative is underscored by a tense, repetitive minor-key melody played high in the range of a cello using *pontecello* technique, in which the bow is positioned close enough to the bridge to create a scratchy, unsettling timbre.

[111] "Peoples Temple Choir – He's Able – 01 'Welcome,'" uploaded by beeninsane, *YouTube,* Sep. 22, 2011, accessed Sep 5, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVdAgfLxCus.

As Wagner-Wilson singer her brief rendition of "Welcome," the documentary cuts to heavily processed audio of the song as it is heard on *He's Able.* The audio clip lasts only a few seconds and contains just the first sung phrase of the song, "welcome, welcome all of you, glad you are with us." The song has been processed to sound distant and static, as though we are hearing it played on an old radio. Whereas this song was initially intended as a wholesome welcome, it is now being reimagined as a sonic moment that would be right at home in a horror film. Indeed, horror cinema frequently makes use of children's songs, music boxes, and lullabies to create an eerie, ghostly effect, such as the unsettling jump rope song heard throughout the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film franchise. The decision to process this audio to sound distant and distorted further solidifies this connection.

This musical choice is revealing of the peculiar position Jonestown occupies in contemporary popular culture. Even in a long form documentary, subtle decisions such as these reinforce the sense of Peoples Temple as something so inherently freakish and unnatural that it seems to have been ripped off the celluloid of a horror film. Of course, the violence of Peoples Temple and Jonestown are by all accounts an important part of their history, and it must not be ignored. When this violence is framed only as a grim reminder of the danger of new religions, however, we are not only reinforcing negative stereotypes about the many non-abusive NRMs, but we are also ignoring the unsettling familiarity many of social dynamics at play in Peoples Temple. Upon closer examination, the narrative of Peoples Temple is a story about an abuse of unequal power dynamics, religious and political fanaticism, and the extreme ends people are willing to go to escape the violence of American racism. While the specific forms this violence took were often bizarre, the social dynamics that drove that violence are sadly familiar and have

much to teach us about our culture and history. When Jonestown is primarily remembered as a dark joke about “not drinking the Kool-Aid,” these lessons are lost.

Chapter 3

The Manson Family:
Music, Outsider Art, and Murderabilia

Charles Manson is not only one of the most famous American "cult leaders," he is without a doubt one of the most notorious figures of the twentieth century. Manson has been an object of fascination and a fixture of the true crime genre since his arrest, trial, and conviction for his role in the Tate/LaBianca murders of 1969. As a result, the image of the diminutive ex-convict-turned-guru surrounded by his dangerous, titillating "Family" has left a deep mark on popular culture. Manson not only epitomizes the phenomenon of the murder-celebrity, but he is also often portrayed as an almost allegorical figure symbolizing the death of the Sixties and embodying the negative aspects of the hippie counterculture.

Manson's loosely organized cabal of dedicated followers and transient friends lack the institutional structure and concrete theology that are central for many religions. No doubt this accounts for the lack of academic work on the group by scholars of new religious movements (NRMs). While the Manson Family's status as a full-blown NRM is debatable, they have consistently been characterized as a cult by the vast quantity of media that has been produced on the group. Alongside the Jonestown massacre in 1978, the endlessly reproduced narrative of Charles Manson compelling his followers to murder helped to ferment the image of the charismatic, deviant cult leader seducing and brainwashing his vulnerable, sheep-like followers in the popular imagination.

Music has been central to the life and afterlife of the Manson Family. For the first years of their existence the primary goal of the Manson Family was to help Charles Manson succeed in the music business. Part of what spurred Manson and his followers to violence in the summer of 1969 was the gradual, bitter realization that Manson's dream of being signed to a record label

was not going to come to fruition. Despite Manson's success in networking and befriending powerful figures in the Los Angeles music scene, his music would mostly remain unreleased until his murder trial in 1970.[1] During Manson's lengthy incarceration he made continual efforts to have his music released and was surprisingly successful. Manson's songs have since been used in a variety of contexts. Unsurprisingly, they often appear in fictional and nonfictional television and movies depicting Manson. They have also appeared in contexts with no obvious connection to the story of the Manson Family and have even been covered by high-profile musical groups like Guns 'N' Roses.

The afterlife of Manson's music has a great deal to tell us not only about how we imagine Charles Manson, but also how we imagine cults. It provides a glimpse into the ways we collectively process and compartmentalize the high-profile, bizarre, and hyper-violent crimes associated with both cults and serial killers. For decades popular culture has produced and reproduced the narrative of Manson as an almost cartoonishly evil supervillain, corrupting the young and murdering the innocent. Although we are horrified by his crimes, the sideshow-esque way in which Charles Manson is presented makes him so decidedly Other—so fully removed from everyday life—that we are safe to leer at the man and his gory tale without ever catching a glimpse of anything with the disturbing glint of familiarity. The analysis of Manson's music in the different contexts in which it has appeared is not only valuable for revealing how Manson has been imagined, but also the aspects of Manson and his crimes we have resolutely tried to ignore.

[1] The exception here is the Beach Boy's reworking, recording, and release of Manson's song "Cease To Exist" as "Never Learn Not to Love" in 1969, as shall will be discussed below.

A Brief History of Charles Manson and the Family

Charles Manson was born in 1934 into an unstable home life. His very young mother struggled with alcoholism and had numerous run-ins with the law. From a very young age, Manson began to engage in criminal activity, and as a result he spent a great deal of his youth incarcerated at several juvenile detention facilities, and later prison, on various charges including car theft, fraud, and pimping. By the time Manson was paroled in 1967, he had spent more than half of his life behind bars.

While in prison, Manson picked up many of the skills that would later help him form the Family. Manson reportedly spent a great deal of time learning how to become an effective pimp from older, more experienced inmates. He also devoted his time to studying texts such as the proto-New Age pseudo-therapy of L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (1950)—which later became the foundational text of Scientology—as well as Dale Carnegie's self-help best seller *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and Robert Heinlein's science fiction classic *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961).[2] While Manson's interest in these books would wane with time, they provided terms and ideas that would later resurface in the Family.

Manson also became interested in music during his incarceration. He learned to play guitar and felt immediately drawn to the Beatles during the initial American explosion of Beatlemania in 1964. It was not merely the Beatles' music that interested Manson, but also their ability to whip their young fans into a frenzy. According to Manson's prison mentor and guitar

[2] Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders,* kindle edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Compnay, 1974), 187; Ed Sanders, *The Family: The Manson Group and Its Aftermath, Revised and Updated Edition* (New York: New American Library, 1989), 18.

teacher, the former Barker-Karpis gang leader Alvin Karpis, "[Manson] was constantly telling people he could come on like the Beatles, if he got the chance."[3]

Upon the completion of his ten-year sentence in 1967, Manson was released on probation at the age of thirty-two. He was so institutionalized that on the morning of his release he reportedly begged the officials to let him stay in prison.[4] Manson emerged into a world that was dramatically different from the one he grew up in, particularly on the West Coast where the counterculture was in full swing. This gave Manson his first exposure to both the hippie movement and the Black Panthers. As time went on, the Black Panthers became a fixture of Manson's racist paranoia and played an important role in his apocalyptic "Helter Skelter" scenario often cited as the primary motivation for the Tate/LaBianca murders.

Manson immediately latched on to the hippies and within a month of his release he moved to Berkley, close to the countercultural epicenter of San Francisco and the Bay Area. Manson quickly picked up on the lingo and fashion, which helped him appear closer in age to the young denizens who were flocking to ground zero of the hippie movement: the Haight-Asbury district. Upon arriving in the Bay Area, Manson almost immediately began to pick up followers, focusing primarily on seducing vulnerable young women. The first was a librarian at the University of California, Berkley named Mary Brunner, who began a sexual relationship with Manson and allowed him to stay at her house. Brunner was soon joined by a teenage runaway named Lynette Fromme, who Manson later nicknamed "Squeaky." Although Fromme was only Manson's second recruit, he was already portraying himself as a guru figure. He told Fromme that he was called the Gardener because "he tended to all the flower children back in the

[3] Sanders, *The Family,* 18-9.

[4] Bugliosi and Gentry, *Helter Skelter,* 190.

Haight."[5] At this point, it seems that Manson's used his self-proclaimed guru status primarily to convince his two young followers to shed their sexual inhibitions as a form of spiritual growth.

By the "Summer of Love" in 1967, Manson was regularly prowling Haight-Asbury in pursuit of impressionable young runaways—primarily young women—whom he could coax into joining his nascent nomadic commune. As prominent countercultural writer and activist Ed Sanders observers, Manson was far from the only individual engaged in this type of activity. Sanders writes, "…[Manson] was a glib grubby little man with a guitar scrounging for young girls using mysticism and guru babble, a time-honored tactic on the Haight."[6] Sanders, who was intimately involved with the Haight's hippie community, suggests that predators like Manson were drawn to Haight-Ashbury because of the vulnerability of the young participants in the growing counterculture. Sanders writes, "...the flower movement was like a valley of thousands of plump white rabbits surrounded by wounded coyotes."[7]

Manson consistently couched his predatory behavior in the rhetoric and practices of the counterculture. He was able to attract people not through hypnosis or mind control, but rather because he was adept at framing his desires through the lens of psychedelia and spiritual growth in a way that seemed legible and convincing to the young hippies that decided to follow him. Even the Manson Family's communal living situation was closely tied to the 1960s counterculture. As Timothy Miller writes,

> In the mid-1960s communitarian idealism erupted in what was to be by far its largest manifestation ever, when hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million, of mostly young

[5] Jeff Guinn, *Manson: The Life and Times of Charles Manson,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 156.

[6] Sanders, *The Family,* 22.

[7] Ibid., 24.

Americans sought to rebuild from the ground up what they perceived as a rotten, decadent society.[8]

Throughout the rest of 1967, Manson and his small, itinerant Family continued to gradually pick up new members, including Patricia Krenwinkle and Susan Atkins. They acquired a Volkswagen bus to facilitate their frequent travels around California, which was soon replaced with a more spacious school bus that the group painted black.[9] Manson was already encouraging his followers to see him as "something more than human," and to become child-like by "completely emptying their minds of all corrupting influences."[10] By November of 1967, the Family traveled down to Los Angeles where Manson hoped to sign a record deal. Phil Kaufman—a record producer and manager that Manson befriended in prison—arranged for him to audition for Universal. Although Manson recorded some demos, Universal turned him down.

This setback did not dampen Manson's rock star ambitions, and throughout his time in L.A. he made connections with powerful figures in the music industry, including the Beach Boys' drummer Dennis Wilson. Wilson first encountered Manson in the spring of 1968, when he picked up two hitchhiking girls from the Family and invited them into his luxurious mansion. When Wilson returned from a late-night recording session, he was surprised to find that Manson and around twelve of his followers had made themselves at home. Although Wilson was initially frightened, Manson quickly befriended him.[11] The Family spent a considerable amount of time living in Wilson's mansion, and Wilson introduced Manson to many of his friends in the music

[8] Timothy Miller, "The Sixties-Era Communes," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s,* ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 327.

[9] Guinn, *Manson,* 175.

[10] Ibid., 175-6.

[11] Ibid., 238-40.

industry, including Terry Melcher, a producer that Manson was confident would be able to kickstart his music career.

Wilson was initially enthusiastic about Manson's potential in the world of popular music. Although his enthusiasm soured over time due to Manson's erratic behavior and the large expenses Wilson incurred while hosting the Family, this did not stop him from continuing to promote Manson's music career. This culminated with Wilson's reworking of Manson's song "Cease to Exist" into "Never Learn Not to Love," which was recorded by the Beach Boys and released on December 2, 1968, as the B-side to their single "Bluebirds over the Mountain." The single was a modest success, peaking at number sixty-one on *Billboard.* The song was later included on the Beach Boy's 1969 album *20/20.* The release of the single only deepened the rift between Manson and Wilson. Dennis Wilson took sole credit for the song's composition and—even more egregious in Manson's eyes—altered the lyrics at several points.

In August of 1968, Wilson's landlord evicted the Family from the Beach Boy's home, and they were forced to find new lodgings. They soon established a base of operations at the Spahn Movie Ranch, a location in the Simi Hills that had once been a popular set for B movie and television westerns but was now used primarily for horseback riding. The ranch soon became the site of the Family's frequent LSD rituals, in which Manson would personally place tabs of acid in his follower's mouths, often while remaining sober himself to better guide the proceedings. While his followers tripped, Manson would talk about himself as Jesus Christ, even going so far as to simulate being crucified on several occasions.[12]

The Family also became increasingly patriarchal and misogynistic. Women were forbidden from handling money. During meals women were expected to do all the procuring

[12] Ibid., 280-1.

(i.e., dumpster diving), cooking, and serving, while the men were allowed to eat first.[13] Manson would orchestrate orgies where he would dictate the activities and who would be partnered with who, which he claimed was a sacrament meant to "break down all the false inhibitions forced on the Family members by repressive society."[14] Manson also spent a considerable amount of time preaching. Frequent themes included the importance of submission and the need for Family members to let go of the ego. One of the ways these teachings would manifest in practice was through the Family's strict rule against the group's children being raised by their biological parents, with the justification that parents are too controlling and imprint their psychological flaws onto their children.[15]

After the move to Spahn Ranch, the Family generally became more isolated and tightly controlled, though certain guests, such as music industry figures like Wilson and Melcher, as well as biker gangs like the Straight Satans, were still welcome. The Family also began spending time at Barker Ranch, an even more isolated location deep within the inhospitable terrain of Death Valley. A critical moment in the Family's mythology occurred in November of 1968 with the release of The Beatles' self-titled ninth studio album best known as "The White Album." Manson immediately became fixated on the double album, insisting the Family listen to it over and over again with particular attention to the songs "Piggies," "Blackbird," "Revolution 1," "Revolution 9," and "Helter Skelter."[16]

Manson's interest in the White Album, the Book of Revelations, and Death Valley soon began to manifest as a racist apocalyptic prophecy, named Helter Skelter after Paul McCartney's

[13] Ibid., 281.

[14] Ibid., 283-4.

[15] Ibid., 285.

[16] Ibid., 306.

proto-hard rock song about a British fairground attraction. Manson claimed that the album was both a worldwide call to arms and a message directly specifically to the Family.[17] According to Manson, the White Album forecast a grim future in which African Americans—led by the Black Panthers—would start a violent revolution in which the white population of the United States would be killed and enslaved. During this conflict, the Family would retreat to the safety of Death Valley, the location of "the bottomless pit" mentioned in Revelation 9:1-12. Once the conflict was over, according to Manson's racist imagination, America's new Black rulers would soon discover "they lacked the intelligence and organizational skills to run the world," at which point Manson and the Family would emerge from the bottomless pit and assume the reins of power.[18] In order to prepare for the dark times ahead, the Family became increasingly focused on stockpiling weapons and dune buggies.[19]

There are conflicting accounts regarding the degree to which the Helter Skelter prophecy instigated the Manson Family's gruesome killing spree in 1969, and it is impossible to be sure whether Manson genuinely believed in this apocalyptic scenario or if it was simply a strategy to keep the Family motivated to stay with him at the remote and uncomfortable Barker Ranch.[20] Helter Skelter aside, the Family was becoming increasingly violent and were involved with several drug related murders. Whether or not Manson genuinely believed that the Family would spark a race war, it is undeniable that Helter Skelter is central to the Manson narrative that has

[17] Ibid., 307.

[18] Ibid., 309.

[19] Ibid., 321-3.

[20] FBI behavioral profiler John Douglas opines in his bestselling memoir *Mindhunter* that the Tate/LaBianca murders might have been a result of Manson losing control of the Family and being unwilling to back down first when followers like Tex Watson argued that violence was necessary to spark Helter Skelter. John Douglas and Mark Olshaker, *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995) 121-3.

been reproduced countless times in countless formats. This is due in no small part to the book *Helter Skelter* (1974) cowritten by Manson prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi, which argues that Manson brainwashed his followers into total submission and that the Family's murder spree was primarily motivated by Manson's committed belief in his vision of the coming apocalypse.[21] While there are reasonable arguments to be made against Bugliosi's narrative, it is undeniable that the book—which is still the best-selling true crime book ever published—had a considerable role in crafting the image of Charles Manson that has remained a fixture of popular culture for over forty years.

In May of 1969, Manson's musical ambitions suffered another major setback when he auditioned for producer Terry Melcher, Manson's last powerful contact in the music industry.[22] Melcher was unimpressed, and Manson was soon telling his disappointed followers that the producer had reneged on his promises of a record deal.[23] As they continued to renovate dune buggies in anticipation of Helter Skelter, the mood in the Family darkened. The Family began to break into people's homes—an activity they referred to as "creepy crawls"—and steal things. Manson and his followers also became increasingly involved in the local drug trade, which soon led to the group's first brushes with serious violence.

Their first victim was Bernard "Lotsapopa" Crowe, who Manson shot and left for dead after a drug deal gone bad.[24] Although Crowe survived the attack, the Family committed their first murder on July 25, 1969, when Bobby Beausoleil, Mary Brunner, Susan Atkins, and

[21] Bugliosi and Gentry, *Helter Skelter,* 218.

[22] Guinn, *Manson,* 347-8.

[23] Ibid., 349-52.

[24] Ibid., 357-8.

Manson murdered Gary Hinman over another drug-related dispute.[25] The group made an ill-conceived effort to frame the Black Panthers for the slaying by writing "POLITICAL PIGGY" in blood on the wall next to a paw print.[26] Despite these precautions, Beausoleil was soon arrested for the murder. Along with a desire to instigate Helter Skelter, Beausoleil's arrest was likely one of the primary motivations for the Tate/LaBianca killings that occurred a few weeks later. The logic was that if they committed murders that looked like the gruesome slaying of Hinman, the police would realize the killer was still at large and release Beausoleil.[27] Meanwhile, the Family hoped that America's Black population would be inspired by these seemingly racially motivated slayings of wealthy white citizens to take up arms and instigate Helter Skelter.

In the early hours of August 9, Tex Watson, Susan Atkins, Patricia Krenwinkle, and later prosecution witness Linda Kasabian arrived at 10050 Cielo Drive, a luxurious mansion owned by the film director Roman Polanski and his pregnant wife Sharon Tate. Watson, Atkins, and Krenwinkle brutally murdered Tate along with Wojciech Frykowski, Abigial Folger, Jay Serbing, and Steven Parent. They made a point to leave Helter Skelter-inspired messages in blood resembling those left at the Hinman crime scene.[28] The very next night the same group—accompanied now by Manson, Clem Grogan, and Leslie Van Houten—murdered Leno and Rosemary LaBianca in their Los Feliz homes in a similarly vicious manner (though Manson drove off before the killing began).

This grisly murder spree quickly became a fixture of media attention. This continued through the incarceration of Manson and his accomplices, who were initially arrested for the

[25] Ibid., 363-5.

[26] Ibid., 366.

[27] Ibid., 372-6.

[28] Ibid., 387-96.

theft of dune buggies but were soon connected to the high-profile killings. Manson remained a center of attention throughout his widely publicized and at times highly dramatic trial, which saw the mysterious disappearance of one of the defendant's lawyers, the attempted LSD poisoning of a prosecution witness, and deliberately unsettling behavior from Manson, his co-defendants, and the sizable free portion of the Family who conducted vigils outside the courtroom each day. The cultural image of the cult leader who brainwashes his followers stemmed in no small part from this trial, in which prosecutor and *Helter Skelter* author Bugliosi argued that Manson was able to completely control his followers, in part through vaguely defined hypnotic powers. This image was no doubt reinforced by the unsettling and widely publicized footage of Manson's young, female codefendants linking arms, smiling, and singing Manson's songs as they made their way to the courtroom. The Family's antics became even more disquieting when—at Manson's prompting—his followers inside and outside the court arrived with shaved heads and X's carved into their foreheads.

Manson and his co-defendants were sentenced to death, which was later commuted to life imprisonment following California's suspension of the death penalty in 1972. As shall be discussed in depth below, the publicity surrounding his arrest and trial transformed Manson into a criminal celebrity. Manson was able to use his newfound notoriety to achieve something he had repeatedly failed to do as a free man: finally release an album of his music. *Lie: The Love and Terror Cult* was released in 1970 by a small independent record label, and Manson followed up on it over the course of his lifetime with several albums he recorded in prison.

Manson's status as a celebrity murder and a dark American icon only grew during his incarceration. He would sporadically re-enter the national limelight in the years following his trial when free members of the Family committed crimes, such when several members had a

shootout with the police while trying to rob a Western Surplus store in 1971, or when Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme attempted to assassinated Gerald Ford in 1975. Just as important for Manson's lasting fame were the numerous representations of the Family in popular culture. Manson quickly became the subject of best-selling books, documentaries, and fictional reinterpretations in a variety of media. As his myth became more established, Manson did his part to play the role of the crazed cult leader/mass murderer, agreeing to a number of televised interviews in the mid-1980s where he gave energetic, wild-eyed performances with a consistent—some would even say rehearsed—quality that seems to suggest Manson was deliberately playing into his brand.[29] Indeed, Leslie Van Houten recalled Manson pledging that if he was arrested, he would play "Crazy Charlie" to frustrate the authorities, and felt irritation and embarrassment at the idea of people thinking she had willing followed someone so obviously unhinged.[30]

Manson remained a figure of public fascination for the remainder of his long life. In his final years he made headlines once again when reports surfaced that he planned to wed a twenty-five-year-old woman who bore a striking resemblance to a young Susan Atkins. The wedding was canceled once Manson discovered that his fiancé was most interested in eventually obtaining control of his cadaver to display it in a glass case that could tour the country as a sort of sideshow attraction. Upon hearing of these ulterior motives, Manson—in fine Crazy Charlie

[29] This becomes particularly evident when one notices Manson's determination to get up and perform an unsettling dance at the end of every interview from this time period. When viewed in succession, what at first glance seems like a shockingly strange move from one of America's most notorious madmen starts to take on the familiar quality of a comedian closing out a set with their strongest material.

[30] Ibid., 616.

form—told his ex that her plan was doomed to fail because he would never die.[31] In spite of Manson's demise in 2017, in many ways his claim to immortality has turned out to be entirely accurate.

Manson As Celebrity

Our examination of Manson's music is dependent not only on the Family's history, but also on the notoriety they gained in the aftermath of their arrest. Despite his status as a mass murderer, Manson also became something of a countercultural antihero during his trial. This is exemplified by the cover of a 1970 issue of *Rolling Stone* that featured a close-up portrait of Manson's face as if he was a rock star. This same issue also contained an extensive six-part investigative article with the sensational title "Charles Manson: The Incredible Story of the Most Dangerous Man Alive." The article not only covers the murders, but also lays out Manson's Helter Skelter prediction, his interpretations of Beatles songs, his efforts to become a professional musician, and the discourse around him in the West Coast underground press. The article discusses how some members of the underground press held up Manson as a hippie martyr or—in some cases—a revolutionary model. As journalists David Felton and David Dalton write,

> …*Tuesday's Child*, ran Manson's picture across the entire front page with the headline "MAN OF THE YEAR: CHARLES MANSON." In case you missed the point, in their next issue they covered the front page with a cartoon of Manson on the cross. The plaque

[31] Stav Ziv, "Who Was Charles Manson Married To? Meet The Women Cult Leader Had Romances With," *Newsweek,* Nov. 20, 2017, accessed Sep. 8, 2022, https://www.newsweek.com/who-was-charles-manson-married-meet-women-cult-leader-had-romances-716883.

nailed above his head read simply "HIPPIE."[32]

This is just one of the ways that Manson has been treated as an almost allegorical figure representing deep truths about the hippie counterculture. It is common to hear that the Manson murders signaled the "death of the 1960s" (often alongside the tragic murder that occurred during the Rolling Stone's set at the Altamont festival). One of the earliest cultural critics to make this argument was no less a figure than Joan Didion in her essay "The White Album." Didion writes,

> Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when the word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community, and in a sense this is true. The tension broke that day. The paranoia was fulfilled.[33]

From this point of view Manson serves as an almost perfect example of the dark side of the counterculture. This is made all the more potent by the intense—some would say naive—optimism that was so often found at the height of the hippie movement during the "Summer of Love," when people seemed to feel real hope that mind-expanding psychedelic drugs would lead to a freer, perhaps even utopian society. Manson seemed to represent a warped, "bad trip" version of all the optimistic qualities the hippie counterculture celebrated. Perhaps no one summarized the Manson Family's status as the negative image of the hippie movement better than Ed Sanders, who writes,

> At once Manson's family seemed to wound the best qualities of a generation—its sharing

[32] David Felton and David Dalton, "Charles Manson: The Incredible Story of the Most Dangerous Man Alive," *Rolling Stone,* June 25th, 1970, accessed Sept. 19, 2022, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/charles-manson-the-incredible-story-of-the-most-dangerous-man-alive-85235/.

[33] Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 57.

and self-reliance, its music and wild colors, its love of the outdoors and the natural beauty of America, its search for higher standards, its early sense of the need to protect the environment.[34]

The symbolic value assigned to Manson has served to embed him deeper into American popular culture and elevate his fame. In many ways, Manson came to exemplify what cultural studies scholar David Schmid describes as the merger between American celebrity culture, violence, and the figure of the serial murderer. Schmid writes, "In a culture defined by celebrity, serial killers like Bundy, Dahmer, and Gary are among the biggest stars of all, instantly recognized by the vast majority of Americans."[35] The circumstances of Manson's crimes, his arrest, and his trial have all played into the man's notoriety. After his arrest, the salacious details of the Manson Family which included sex, violence, and outlandish beliefs continued to fuel the media frenzy, as did his high-profile, theatrical trial. Furthermore, the symbolic meaning accorded to Manson and his crimes have helped cement his place in the public imagination beyond the time when he was active.

Schmid argues that high-profile mass murderers like Manson are not only a part of American celebrity culture but are in fact exemplary modern celebrities. Schmid writes "The serial killer both outrages and thrills us by his seeming ability to stand outside the law, to make his own law, in a gesture whose ambivalent destructiveness and creativity mirror our ambivalent response to the killer, composed of both fear and attraction."[36] This response of fear and attraction is similar to Louis Gross's discussion of the appeal of the Gothic monster. Gross writes

[34] Sanders, *The Family,* 3.

[35] David Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1.

[36] Ibid., 24.

that "what the dominant culture cannot incorporate within itself, it must project outward onto this hated/desired figure."[37] This description seems to fit the cultural response to Manson as both "the most dangerous man alive" (as *Rolling Stone* would have it) and a figure of continued fascination, if not titillation, for decades after his arrest.

Scholar Michael Bernstein argues that another reason Manson became so deeply embedded in our popular culture was because he portrayed himself as a kind of carnivalesque, Saturnalian figure whose position as a madman and an outsider makes him a familiar and strangely authoritative critic of contemporary society.[38] During his trial Manson made a widely publicized and highly performative speech in which he cast himself and the Family as a dark reflection of contemporary American society. According to Manson,

> These children that come at you with knives, they are your children. You taught them you are as much responsible for the Vietnam war as I am for killing these people… My father is your system… I am only what you made me. I am only a reflection of you.[39]

Bernstein argues that Manson's characterization of himself here puts him in line with such Saturnalian literary characters as Raskolnikov from Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) or, more recently, Randle McMurphy from Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), who use their outsider status to deliver subversive social criticism.

Manson has thus been characterized as the dark reflection of his social circumstances twice over. When we understand Manson as an allegorical figure representing the death of the 1960s, he is a dark inversion of the countercultural hippie, and when he presents himself as a

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[37] Quoted in Ibid., 7.

[38] Michael André Bernstein, "'These Children that Come at You with Knives': *Ressentiment,* Mass Culture, and the Saturnalia," *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 17, no. 2, winter 1991, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343841, 374.

[39] Ibid., 369.

product of mid-twentieth century American culture and it carceral system, he is a dark reflection of American society as a whole. Bernstein suggests that Manson's engagement with these types of carnivalesque criticisms are especially uncomfortable because of our increased tendency to see Saturnalian figures like McMurphy as heroes rather than, as is the case with Raskalnikov, anarchic, dangerous figures that disturb in part from having a grain of truth in their critiques. Manson's characterization of himself as a Saturnalian antihero adds force to the notion that he represents the death of the 1960s, and thus reinforces his status as a celebrity. The notion of Manson as a Saturanlian social critic, however, is diminished by the way Manson and other mass murderers are characterized by the celebrity culture that makes them famous. While the Saturnalian view of Manson highlights his relationship to his social environment, celebrity culture characterizes Manson and other mass murderers as monstrous figures driven by their own deviance and broadly defined abnormality.

One of most extreme and controversial manifestations of the serial killer celebrity phenomenon is the phenomenon of "murderabilia," in which artifacts connected to famous murderers or crimes are marketed as expensive collectibles. As Schmid writes, "… [murderabilia trading website] Supernaught.com charges a mere $300 for a brick from Jeffery Dahmer's apartment building, while a lock of Charles Manson's hair is a real bargain at $995, shipping and handling not included."[40] This quote not only demonstrates Manson's status as a celebrity, but also makes clear how blurry the line is between the figure of the serial killer and the figure of the cult leader in American popular culture. The fact that Manson does not fit any standard definition of a serial killer has done little to dim his popular association with famous serial killers as another example of an almost archetypical "crazy murderer." I use the vague and admittedly

[40] Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities,* 7.

problematic term “crazy” not to describe Manson himself, but rather because it best fits the catch-all way in which we imagine serial killers and cult leaders. While figures like Ted Bundy, Manson, and Jim Jones had vastly different psychological profiles and motivations for their crimes, they are grouped together as examples of a particular kind of deviant murderer whose motives (we like to think) are so inscrutable and wholly Other that they become a kind of sideshow attraction we are comfortable defining as something entirely outside ourselves.

The term murderabilia almost always refers to physical collectibles that can be bought and sold on a marketplace where they are valued in part for their rareness. For the remainder of this chapter, I would like to consider murderabilia not as a capitalistic practice, but rather as an aesthetic framework that colors our experience of not only Manson’s music, but music associated with Manson. This makes clear the ways we imagine the figure of Charles Manson as well as the role that music plays in reinforcing this narrative. Furthermore, because “murderabilia” is such an extreme and often bizarre aesthetic frame, it also makes especially clear the degree to which other aesthetic frames of this sort affect our understanding and experience of music and art. There is perhaps no clearer example of how strongly the presence of a figure like Manson colors our understanding of musical meaning than “Never Learn Not to Love,” the Beach Boy’s reworking of Manson’s song “Cease to Exist.”

“Never Learn Not to Love” Before and After Manson

As was mentioned above, in 1968 The Beach Boys released “Never Learn Not to Love” as the B-side to their single “Bluebirds over the Mountain,” and later included on the track on their LP *20/20* (1969). Although Manson was not arrested until several months after the album’s release, the song was solely credited to Dennis Wilson. Despite this, “Never Learn Not to Love”

is now associated with Manson and his crimes. The knowledge that "Never Learn Not to Love" was written by Manson deeply affects how we receive it, and as scholars such as Richard Middleton and Philip Tagg have discussed, musical meaning is co-created in the act of reception. This song is a particularly clear example of how musical meaning shifts as historical baggage accrues to a particular work. By interpreting this song first through a 1968 Beach Boys lens, and then a post-Manson murderabilia lens, we see that Manson's authorship of "Never Learn Not to Love" transforms the song from a conventional example of the Beach Boys' particular brand of psychedelic rock into an unsettling "bad trip." The presence of psychedelic influences is particularly significant because of how closely Manson is linked with the "death of the 1960s." In my analysis of "Never Learn Not to Love," I will also argue that Manson's authorship does not so much contradict psychedelic signals and meanings, but rather realigns these signs with the troubling aspects of the 1960s counterculture that Manson has come to represent.

To examine how Manson's authorship affects our understanding of "Never Learn Not to Love," it is first necessary to consider how music constructs meaning. Indeed, many scholars have created sophisticated apparatuses that attempt to, in one way or another, decode musical meaning. This ranges from functional harmonic theory in the Western classical tradition to efforts to adapt linguistic semiotics to music. What is often left out of these conversations, however, is the crucial role that reception plays in creating these meanings. As Richard Middleton writes,

> Existing models of musical communication, though a useful starting-point, often understate the plurality of codes involved and the multiplicity of variables affecting every component: sender, channel, context, message and receiver. If 'encoding' and 'decoding' are to be conceived not as abstractly predictable but as culturally situated (that is,

> participant-orientated), the question of *competence* is crucial. And since competence varies—participants use and respond to codes in different ways—this directs maximum attention to the question of *pertinence,* that is, to finding those levels and types of coding which actually signify.[41]

As Middleton observes, musical meaning is dependent on who is doing the listening, and the level of "competence" the listeners have with particular musical codes. For example, a highly competent listener may be able to not only identify specific leitmotivs in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* (1876), but also understand how their settings affect their meaning, all things that may be lost on a listener who does not have a competent fluency in Wagner's musical language. Less attention has been paid to how the standards of a competent reading change with the passage of time. This reading of "Never Learn Not to Love" will explore how historical baggage can alter the pertinent musical signals and alter our notion of what constitutes a competent reading. By looking at "Never Learn Not to Love" through two historical lenses, I aim to shed light not only on this song, but also on the ways cultural and historical circumstances can alter our reception, and therefore the meaning, of music.

Unsurprisingly, the discourse surrounding "Never Learn Not to Love" has shifted dramatically since it became associated with Manson. In a 1969 *Rolling Stone* review of *20/20* written before Manson's authorship of the song was known, Arthur Schmidt writes, "'Never Learn Not to Love' is a fine vocal, though the material itself is an uncertain mixture of pop and soul influences."[42] These innocuous, low-key remarks stand in sharp contrast to the tone writers have taken when discussing the song since it became connected with Manson. In his biography

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[41] Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 173.

[42] Arthur Schmidt, "*20/20*," *Rolling Stone,* April 19, 1969, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/20-20-19690419.

of Brian Wilson, Peter Ames Carlin writes that *20/20* falls into "a spiritual black hole with Dennis's Manson adaptation."[43] In *Magic Circles: The Beatles in Dream and History,* Devin McKinney writes,

> [The Beach Boys] sweetened Manson's hemlock with their trademark swirls of California harmony and conventionalized the Svengali lyrics, but otherwise the song came through remarkably intact—i.e., still a bummer. Sinister has never been the sound of the Top 40. Hidden on the B-side of an unsuccessful single and the middle range of an unsuccessful album, 'Never Learn Not to Love' sank into the oblivion reserved, in 1968, for the morbid and ungroovy leftovers of last year's hippie-think.[44]

In his brief review of *20/20* for AllMusic, Richie Unterberger's evaluation of the song pinpoints the precise reason for the dramatic reevaluation "Never Learn Not to Love" has undergone when he writes that it "is far more notorious, not for the music (which is average), but for the fact that it was, according to some sources, composed by Charles Manson (although the song is credited to Dennis Wilson)."[45] Furthermore, virtually every YouTube posting of the song mentions Manson explicitly in the title or description. The comments sections on these videos are often dominated by furious and wide-ranging debate on Manson's crimes, personality, and musicianship.[46] In all these discussions, it is clear that "Never Learn Not to Love" is now

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[43] Peter Ames Carlin, *Catch a Wave: The Rise, Fall & Redemption of the Beach Boys' Brian Wilson* (New York: Rodale, 2006), 148.

[44] Devin McKinney, *Magic Circles: The Beatles in Dream and History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 284.

[45] Richie Unterberger, "*20/20*," AllMusic, http://www.allmusic.com/album/20-20-mw0000118177. Unterberger's qualification of Manson's authorship is unnecessary, as multiple demos for "Cease to Exist" recorded by Manson before "Never Learn Not to Love" was released have been made publicly available.

[46] While there are numerous examples of this, "'Never Learn Not to Love' by the Beach Boys – Charles Manson Song," uploaded 12/28/11 by 1st rule – Question everything., accessed 5/3/15, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmtM8PaZgag, provides some particularly colorful examples of this phenomenon, including a surprising number of commenters voicing their support of Manson.

understood in ways that would have been impossible when the song was first released. If we wish to understand precisely how Manson's authorship shifts the meaning of "Never Learn Not to Love," we first must examine how the song's musical codes operated before it became associated with Manson.

To imagine how we might have heard "Never Learn Not to Love" in 1968, it is best to consider it in light of the Beach Boys' career at that time. Tagg's concept of the "museme," or minimal unit of expression in any given musical style proves useful in establishing this.[47] While the identification and analysis of musemes in "Never Learn Not to Love" could potentially fill hundreds of pages, as demonstrated by Tagg's mammoth analysis of the theme music from *Kojak* (1973), here I shall focus on the minimal units of expression that can help us understand the song's position within the Beach Boys' catalogue and late 1960s psychedelic rock. Often these musemes are not brief melodic or harmonic fragments, but rather take the form of timbres, instrumental choices, and stylistic gestures.

While the Beach Boys have always been closely associated with their pioneering surf rock records from the early 1960s, by 1968 the band had embraced psychedelic music. The Beach Boys' 1966 album *Pet Sounds* is widely considered an early milestone of psychedelia, particularly due to Brian Wilson's eclectic instrumental arrangements. This trend only grew more pronounced on the band's infamous unreleased follow-up album, *Smile.*

It is therefore unsurprising that "Never Learn Not to Love" contains a number of musemes that situate it comfortably within the Beach Boys' style of psychedelia. In her article "Progressive Rock and Psychedelic Coding in the Work of Jimi Hendrix," Sheila Whiteley connects Hendrix's psychedelic sonic codes to "a musical equivalent of hallucinogenic

[47] Philip Tagg, "Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice," *Popular Music,* 2, 1982, 48. https://tagg.org/articles/xpdfs/pm2anal.pdf.

experience."[48] Whiteley's analysis of Hendrix's noisy, overpowering guitar tone as psychedelic has a strong resonance with the opening of "Never Learn Not to Love." The song begins with what sounds like an electronically processed cymbal roll that emerges out of silence and gradually crescendos for twenty-five full seconds. Although twenty-five seconds might seem rather long for a museme, the introduction's single-minded focus on this unconventional gesture can be considered a "minimal unit of expression." The way the cymbal builds from the near inaudible to an overwhelming roar might also be heard as an example of what Whiteley describes as "upward movement (and its comparison with psychedelic flight and the 'trip')."[49] Indeed, it is easy to hear this crescendo as a sonic equivalent to the gradual onset of the LSD experience, which further suggests that the song proper does not start until the "trip" has already begun.

After this introduction, there are several other musemes that signify psychedelia. As is the case with much of the late 1960s Beach Boys output, these psychedelic elements manifest in the song's eclectic arrangement. The pseudo-baroque orchestration heard in "Never Learn Not to Love" is strongly coded as psychedelic, and similar combinations of rock and baroque instrumentation can be heard on such celebrated psychedelic records as *Pet Sounds* and the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Indeed, at times the flutes seem to mimic the sounds that open the Beatles' seminal foray into psychedelia, "Strawberry Fields Forever." This pseudo-baroque quality manifests most obviously in the flutes that are heard in the song's verses. While the flute had gained some ground as an improvisational lead instrument

[48] Sheila Whiteley, "Progressive Rock and Psychedelic Coding in the Work of Jimi Hendrix," in *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music,* ed. Richard Middleton (New York: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2000), 236.

[49] Ibid.

in the world of jazz, and even in the work of the progressive rock band Jethro Tull, the Beach Boys' use of the instrument as a background texture secures its place as a reference to the Western classical tradition. This is most obvious before the song's second chorus, in which one of the flutes holds a long, prominent trill.

Part of what defines these orchestral choices as "psychedelic" is their surreal contrast with seemingly mismatched musical genres. For example, the rhythm guitar heard throughout "Never Learn Not to Love" has a hard, distorted tone, reminiscent in many ways of Hendrix. This psychedelic genre-clashing is further emphasized by the song's surf-tinged backup vocals. This is most obvious in the song's chorus, in which the Beach Boys harmonize on the nonsense vocables, "mama mow, mama mow, mama mow mow mow," a gesture found in many of the Beach Boys' earlier surf-rock classics like "Surfin' USA" and "California Girls." The song's genre mixing suggests a "trippy" blurring of lines and boundaries that resonates strongly with the distorting effects of LSD. While many psychedelic rock musicians combined rock, classical, and experimental influences in their work, the Beach Boys' engagement with surf rock was relatively unique. These surf rock references give "Never Learn Not to Love" an association with their light-hearted earlier work and helps to characterize the song's particular mode of psychedelia as an uplifting "good trip."

This sense of positivity is destroyed when we hear the song with Manson's authorship in mind. Part of what makes Manson's "Never Learn Not to Love" so unsettling is how easily these psychedelic elements sit with Manson's hippie persona. While Manson's beliefs grew increasingly bizarre in the lead up to the murders of 1969, these beliefs were consistently couched in the language of the psychedelic movement. Indeed, Manson's musical efforts and

association with the Beach Boys further deepened his connection to the counterculture, and no doubt aided his efforts to manipulate vulnerable young people.

Thus, the song's psychedelic markers do not clash with our conception of Manson, but rather are transformed by the association. The song's opening crescendo carries the same "trippy" psychedelic resonances, but Manson's presence now suggests that this will be a "bad trip." Manson is something of an icon of the "bad trip," as demonstrated by a memorable quote from another iconic bad trip, Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* in which the narrator worries that he and his drug-addled companion will frighten a young hitchhiker they just picked up:

> How long could we maintain? I wondered. How long until one of us starts raving and jabbering at this boy? What will he think then? This same lonely desert was the last known home of the Manson Family; will he make that grim connection when my attorney starts screaming about bats and huge manta rays coming down on the car?[50]

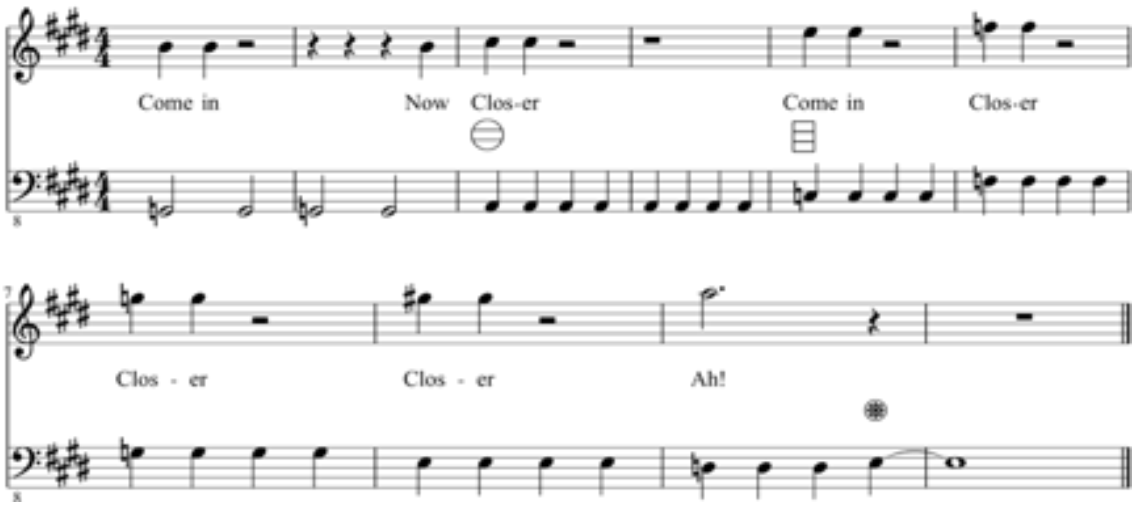
LSD was first popularized by figures like Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey, who presented the drug as a spiritual and psychological tool to lead a more fulfilling life. Manson, and in a less extreme way Thompson, both represent the grim underbelly of the psychedelic drug culture, the flip side of Kesey and Leary's optimism. As a result, Manson's involvement with "Never Learn Not to Love" realigns the song's psychedelic signifiers with the dark side of the 1960s counterculture.

The revelation of Manson's authorship brings different elements to the musical foreground, particularly the song's lyrics and bridge. It is telling that Schmidt's pre-Manson *Rolling Stone* review focuses exclusively on the song's vocal performance and stylistic choices,

[50] Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 4.

while post-Manson writers such as McKinney single out the song's unsettling lyrics. Indeed, it is difficult not to connect the lyrics to Manson's psychological manipulation of his followers—most of which were young women—and the Family's deeply patriarchal power structure. In this light, lines such as "Cease to resist," "Give up your world," and especially "Submission is a gift/Give it to your lover," evoke the image of Manson seducing vulnerable young runaways.

The image of Manson as a sexual predator also reinterprets and highlights the song's bridge, which is heard twice. Over a relatively adventurous harmonic sequence, Dennis Wilson sings "Come in/Now closer/Come in/Closer, closer, closer," as can be seen in Example 3. This section of the song is clearly intended to musically represent a male sexual climax. This is expressed both through the rising melody, and the increasingly fast-paced harmonic rhythm. The section begins with the drums, bass, and piano playing a half-note accompaniment, while Wilson's two-note vocal entries are separated by nearly two full measures of rest. As can be seen at the first circular symbol in Example 3.1, the rhythm section soon doubles to a quarter note pace, creating a musical image of rising sexual excitement. The quicker harmonic rhythm and shorter distance between vocal entries seen at the rectangular sign in Example 1 continue to build this sexual/musical tension, which is released on Wilson's delivery of the vocable "ah." This is mirrored by the release of tension in the rhythm section, which moves from a pulsating bVII chord to a sustained tonic chord, as seen at the final circular sign.



Example 3.1: "Never Learn Not to Love" Bridge; the bass staff represents the rhythmic and harmonic motion of root position major triads in the rhythm section

This is unsettling not only because of Manson's sexual exploitation of his followers, but also because of its reflection on Wilson. Indeed, Wilson almost certainly wrote this section, as demonstrated by the fact that it is absent from Manson's recording of "Cease to Exist." Wilson allowed Manson and the Family to squat in his mansion for months, due in large part to the free access Manson gave him to his female followers, many of whom were underage. As Carlin writes,

> Manson was even stranger and less clean than most people Dennis tended to hang around with. But he spoke of brotherhood and faith, knew where to get good drugs, and had such a hold over his flock of girls that when Charlie told them all to get naked, Dennis's living room became a writhing mass of pink, lithesome, submissive flesh. And for Dennis Wilson, this was all the transcendence he could ever imagine.[51]

[51] Carlin, *Catch a Wave,* 137-8.

In this light, "Never Learn Not to Love" does not merely reflect Manson's manipulative personality, but also reveals the dark, potentially exploitative and dangerous underbelly of the 1960s free love ideology.

Manson is such a potent symbol for the "death of the 1960s" due to both his genuine engagement with countercultural practices and philosophy, and the Family's reflection of the dark side of the hippie lifestyle. The Manson Family seem less like a total outlier from psychedelic culture than an especially potent example of its dangers. David Farber writes,

> So-called hippie enclaves throughout the United States attracted a great many hard cases interested above all in taking advantage of those who believed that "turning on" indicated a wholehearted commitment to collective harmony, a.k.a. peace and love. As one self-described "hippie drug dealer" admitted in an underground newspaper, "Dealers on the whole you know, uh, are… pretty, uh, unreasonable, uh, dishonest… thieves." …Charles Manson was not the only "acid fascist" trolling the turbulent waters in which too many turned-on youths floundered.[52]

If Manson truly helped "wreck the dream of the 1960s," it was due in part to his status as an accurate, albeit extreme, reflection of the culture that produced that dream.

Death, Pestilence, War, and Ringo: Manson's White Album

It is not only "Never Learn Not to Love" that can now be read through the lens of Manson's criminal celebrity. This is also true of the Beatles' White Album. Although the White Album is not as closely associated with the Family as "Never Learn Not to Love," it nevertheless

[52] David Farber, "The Intoxicated State/Illegal Nation: Drugs in the Sixties Counterculture," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s,* ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 35.

plays a central role in the popular narrative surrounding Manson. As such, it is worth considering how the Beatles' seminal self-titled album has been affected by its association with the infamous cult leader. Not only does this provide an opportunity to further explore how Manson's presence can bleed through into the ways we hear music, but also allows us to further refine our consideration of Manson's status as a dark icon of the Sixties counterculture.

Manson's bizarre misreadings of this already strange and somewhat eerie album are discussed in virtually every retelling of the Manson narrative. The White Album supplied the name for Manson's apocalyptic race war prophecy—Helter Skelter—which in turn became the title for some of the best-known retellings of Manson's life and crimes, including Bugliosi's true crime best-seller, it's made-for-TV film adaptation, and the remake of this TV film decades later. Of course, it was not only the song "Helter Skelter" that Manson was concerned with. The extensive article on Manson that appear in *Rolling Stone* in 1970 features Manson's hermeneutics of several songs featured on the White Album.

While interviewing Manson, journalists Felton and Dalton ask him about the "prophecies" he found in the songs "Piggies," "Helter Skelter," and "Blackbird," though Manson decided to discuss "Rocky Raccoon" as well. Manson supplemented his answer with quick abstract drawings he felt represented the song's subconscious meanings. Manson then goes on to explain,

> At the end of each song there is a little tag piece on it, a couple of notes. Or like in "Piggies" there's "oink, oink, oink." Just these couple of sounds. And all these sounds are repeated in "Revolution 9." Like in "Revolution 9," all these pieces are fitted together and they predict the violent overthrow of the white man. Like you'll hear "oink,

> oink," and then right after that, machine gun fire. [He sprays the room with imaginary slugs.] AK-AK-AK-AK-AK-AK![53]

Although Manson's claims about the presence of samples from other White Album songs in "Revolution 9" is demonstrably untrue, this has done nothing to lessen his association with the record.

Unsurprisingly, the Beatles themselves have always been adamant that Manson's outlandish interpretations of their songs have nothing to do with their original intentions and are just some of the many examples of their songs being misread. John Lennon—one of the Beatles primary singers and songwriters—was quoted in 1970 saying,

> [Manson's] barmy, he's like any other Beatle fan who reads mysticism into it. I mean we used to have a laugh putting this, that or the other in, in a light-hearted way. Some intellectual would read us, some symbolic youth generation wants it, but we also took seriously some parts of the role. But I don't know, what's "Helter Skelter" got to do with knifing somebody?[54]

All these decades after the original event, it is easy to dismiss Manson's misreadings of the Beatles as either the products of a deeply unwell mind or as a cynical attempt to gain further control over the Family. Nevertheless, it is worth considering both the presence of the Beatles in the Manson narrative, and the unsettling way the ghosts of the Manson Family and their crimes still seem to haunt the White Album today.

The White Album, originally released in 1968, is somewhat unsettling in its own right. It was recorded during a tumultuous time in the band's history. The Beatles last major project was

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[53] Felton and Dalton, "Charles Manson."

[54] John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Star, *Beatles Anthology* (San Fransisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 311.

The Magical Mystery Tour (1967), a psychedelic made-for-television film that the band wrote and directed themselves. The film was the first thing the Beatles had produced since their breakthrough in 1963 that was critically panned. The group garnered more controversy after going on a retreat in Rikishi to study Transcendental Meditation (another NRM) with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Their time in India led to an outpouring of creativity that produced songs that appeared not only on the remainder of the Beatles studio albums, but on many of their early solo projects as well. When the band returned to the studio, however, the tensions that eventually led to the group's split in 1970 first began to appear.

This tension might help explain the White Album's unusual structure compared to the rest of the Beatles' albums. All the band's previous LPs featured fourteen tracks and a runtime of roughly thirty-five minutes. The White Album, on the other hand, contains a whopping thirty songs that play out over the course of more than an hour and a half. Some commentators have suggested the album's unusually long length may have been the result of the songwriters refusing to compromise and leave any of their own tracks on the cutting room floor.

Aside from its sheer length, another unusual feature of the White Album are the songs themselves. On the broadest level, the White Album saw the Beatles turn away from the heavily produced, dreamy psychedelic soundscapes that they had first begun seriously experimenting with on *Revolver* (1966) and which had permeated *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and *Magical Mystery Tour*. Although the White Album is still very much a product of the Beatles' studio era and features overdubs orchestrated by the band's producer and collaborator George Martin, it also has a more stripped-down sounds that harkens back to the earlier days of rock 'n' roll. The Beatles were hardly alone in this, as many British rock bands participated in a rock 'n' roll revival toward the end of the 1960s. Nevertheless, it came as a surprise for fans who

expected more psychedelia from the band when the album opened with “Back in the U.S.S.R.,” a parodic tribute to the early surf rock of the Beach Boys. The fact that the album features a sound that is rawer and darker than the band’s previous two outings mirrors the general trajectory of the Manson Family in 1968 the group became more paranoid, violent, and tightly controlled.

Although the White Album features no psychedelic anthems in the style of the band’s earlier songs like “Strawberry Fields Forever” or “A Day in the Life,” it engages with an eclectic, almost disorienting range of musical styles. In addition to the Beach Boys pastiche already mentioned, the album also sees the Beatles engaging with country and western (“Rocky Raccoon,” “Don’t Pass Me By”), electric blues (“Yer Blues”), ska (“Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da”), and even the avant-garde tape collage technique known as *musique concrète* (“Revolution 9”). The album also features a number of short, somewhat comical songs such as “Wild Honey Pie” and “Why Don’t We Do It in the Road” that are a departure from the highly polished offerings that permeate the rest of the Beatles output and contribute to the album’s strange, collage-like effect. Indeed, this sense of collage can be found not only when the album is considered as a whole, but also in individual songs, such as “Happiness is a Warm Gun,” which is clearly a combination of three independent song ideas, or the end of “Cry Baby Cry,” which features a brief, ghostly refrain of Paul McCartney singing “Can you take me back where I came from” that seems fully disconnected from the song’s earlier material.

Even without the presence of Manson, the White Album already stands as a dark, unsettling contrast to the sunny optimism that characterized so much of the band’s earlier music. As such, the album’s eerie, disjointed sound lends itself in some ways to hearing the album through Manson’s ears. This is especially true of the songs like “Rocky Raccoon” and “Helter Skelter” that Manson publicly connected to his apocalyptic prophecy. Perhaps this is clearest

with George Harrison's satiric baroque-pop attack on the upper class, "Piggies." Lyrically, the song is uncharacteristically bitter and sarcastic, and this sense of the sardonic is only enhanced by faux-baroque instrumentation that heavily features the harpsichord.

The presence of the harpsichord in this context is particularly telling. As was mentioned in connection with "Never Learn Not to Love," elements from baroque music such as the harpsichord were often used as a sonic symbol of psychedelia, as can be heard on songs such as the Beatles' "Fixing A Hole" or the Beach Boys' "God Only Knows." By contrast, the harpsichord on "Piggies" is not there to create a surreal sense of the psychedelic, but rather as a mocking pastiche of the supposedly pretentious musical taste of the song's satirical target: the upper class. This is complimented by the pseudo-operatic, vibrato-heavy vocal timbre the Beatles put on for the backing vocals, which intone the lines "In their eyes there's something lacking / What they need's a damn good whacking." In the aftermath of the Manson Family's killing spree—in which the words "PIGGIES" and "POLICITCAL PIGGIES" were written in blood on the walls—the song becomes decidedly uncomfortable.

This association continues beyond the songs that Manson specifically commented on. For example, with the Helter Skelter prophecy in mind, the vague, menacing violence of a song like "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" can be all too easy to hear (through what we imagine are Manson's ears) as yet another call for violent revolution. Ironically the White Album even includes a song that indirectly comments on the tendency of Beatles fans to look for hidden messages in the group's songs on the third track, "Glass Onion." The song, which features a wide variety of cryptic allusions to the Beatles' catalogue with such lines as "Here's another clue for you all/The walrus was Paul." The album's association with Manson reaches new levels of bizarre, speculative self-referentiality in this number, which Manson never directly commented on (at

least publicly). Rather, when we listen to the White Album with Manson's narrative in mind, it is hard not to picture Manson furiously working to misinterpret this deliberately vague, postmodern song that was in fact inspired by the wide range of responses to the Beatles' music that the band had never intended or expected. It reminds us that while he is a particularly extreme example of the phenomenon, Manson was far from the only listener reading the Beatles' music "through a glass onion."

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Manson's association with the Beatles and the White Album are the ways in which the Beatles and Manson have both been codified in the mythology of the Sixties. Manson's crimes and the breakup of the Beatles are both associated with the idea of a symbolic "death of the Sixties," alongside the violence at the Altamont music festival and the deaths of several prominent rock musicians such as Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. Of course we must keep in mind that the notion of the "Death of the Sixties" refers less to the literal chronological movement into the 1970s than it does to the end of a quasi-mythical notion of "The Sixties" as seen through the eyes of the hippie movement: a time of vast social changes, including anti-war protests, shifting sexual mores, and optimism about the ability of psychedelic drugs to change people for the better, all underpinned with a soundtrack of sunny, optimistic psychedelic rock epitomized by songs like "All You Need is Love" by the Beatles.

Whether or not this is an accurate view of the 1960s aside, this viewpoint casts Manson and the Family as almost allegorical figures representing all the darkness and ugliness of the hippie counterculture that was veiled behind the movement's optimism. As was discussed above, Manson became a symbol for the ways that LSD and free love could lead just as easily to abuse, violence, and hatred rather than peace and love. The fact that Manson was able to taint the legacy of the Beatles during their final years as working group only elevates his symbolic status. But of

course, assigning this meaning to Manson enhances his position as a larger-than-life true crime celebrity, a figure whose actions seem to have grave cultural and historical consequences rather than the cruel, ill-conceived plans of a bitter, manipulative man desperately trying to hold onto the limited power and status he had managed to carve out for himself. Manson's particular status in our popular culture only becomes clearer when we turn our attention to the circumstances and reception of his first album, *Lie: The Love and Terror Cult.*

Lie: The Love and Terror Cult: Manson as Outsider Artist

For years Manson's debut album *Lie: The Love and Terror Cult* was extremely rare, but in the modern internet age it and other examples of Manson's music have become readily available both for purchase in physical form and for free on digital streaming services like YouTube and Spotify. This album is a clear example of musical murderabilia that is understood through a similar aesthetic frame to the way we might view serial killer John Wayne Gacy's clown paintings. The phenomenon of serial killer art is a controversial subcategory of outsider art, and I argue that *Lie* has been presented and understood as a musical version of this kind of outsider art. By analyzing the album's content, reception, and afterlife, we can see the understanding of Manson the musician as a kind of outsider artist, despite his success in networking with some of the major insiders of the Los Angeles music scene in the late 1960s.

Although Manson's music resonates strongly with the concept of outsider art, it is an uncomfortable fit for many reasons. The consideration of *Lie* as "outsider music" is interesting because it reveals the inherent subjectivity of the "outsider" label. We run into many of these same issues when we think of serial killers as outsider artists, but the specific circumstances

surrounding Manson's recorded music makes these internal contradictions particularly visible and telling.

As discussed in the introduction, the pop culture image of Charles Manson as a murderous cult leader makes him a close relative of another type of criminal, the serial killer. In many ways we see serial killers as the ultimate isolated outsiders. From this perspective, Manson is an outsider because his assumed psychological abnormality and his long incarceration in prison can be interpreted as imposing the kind of isolation that is often seen as a prerequisite for outsiders. Furthermore, his recorded music has many of the startling, unpolished, and unprofessional qualities that are held up as some of the defining material characteristics of outsider art. Most importantly, as we shall see below in a more detailed analysis of Manson's first album, it is not at all difficult to hear Manson's music as a revealing glimpse into the mind and beliefs of one of the twentieth century's most notorious cult leaders. The tendency to view the art of mass murderers as outsider art stems almost wholly from the knowledge that they are mass murders, a category that we hope makes them intrinsically outside ourselves and our social world, rather than the actual conditions of their mental health or social situation.

This is particularly true of Manson, who we still view as an outsider despite the fact that in many ways, he does not fit the outsider artist label. As Maclagan points out, any attempts by an outsider artist to deliberately succeed in the art world is a threat to their authenticity and outsider status. As we have seen, Manson was in no way making and recording music without any knowledge or influence from the broader musical world. Indeed, his deliberate efforts to gain success in the music industry by crafting songs and a persona that were legible in the world of 1960s psychedelic rock are the antithesis of what is thought to be "authentic" behavior by an outsider artist. This is only exacerbated by Manson's success in making himself something of an

insider in the musical world of Los Angeles, where he was able to network with a number of powerful figures in the music industry. How can someone be an outsider if Dennis Wilson and Neil Young are actively promoting them to major record labels? In spite of this, Manson's first and best-known album, *Lie: The Love and Terror Cult* has always been heard as the work of an outsider rather than the demos of a singer-songwriter that came very close to becoming a professional musician.

Lie: The Love and Terror Cult was released on March 6, 1970, about five months after Manson's arrest. While awaiting trial, Manson reached out to an old friend from prison—the manager and record producer Phil Kaufman—about releasing some of the music he had recorded over the last two years. Kaufman personally raised the funds to print two thousand copies of *Lie*, which was initially distributed on the West Coast by Trademark of Quality, the same group that released *Great White Wonder,* a collection of pirated Bob Dylan recordings considered one of the first prominent bootleg albums.[55] Apparently, Kaufman and Manson did not hear the album as a potential piece of outsider music, but rather hoped it would persuade sympathetic listeners that Manson was a gentle soul incapable of ordering multiple brutal homicides. Kaufman professed to believe in Manson's innocence claimed they were both motivated to release the album to counteract the media coverage of his involvement with the Tate/LaBianca murders.[56] According to Kaufman, "…it's gentle music. It's not slash, maim, kill."[57]

Lie was distributed nationally by a New York City label specializing primarily in free jazz, ESP-Disk Records. ESP owner Bernard Stollman clearly viewed the album as a piece of

[55] Mike Jahn, "Charlie called me when he was arrested.. He said 'please put out my music," *Tales of the Ancient Rocker,* Aug. 23, 1970, accessed Nov. 7, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20091027093515/http://geocities.com/theancientrocker/manson.html.

[56] Ibid., Felton and Dalton, "Charles Manson."

[57] Jahn, "Charlie called me when he was arrested…"

outsider music that could provide a window into Manson's deviant psychology. When he was asked why he would distribute Manson's album, Stollman responded,

> I believe that if Charles Manson had come to me a year or two ago with the same project, I would have put it out. Now that he's notorious, it's doubly important for the album to come out. It gives us a portrait of a human being who has been painted in the media in very one-dimensional terms. I think he should be examined, in the same way we examined Hitler. No one objects to *Mein Kampf* being published.[58]

ESP-Disk have kept *Lie* available for decades and even issued a rerelease on compact disc in 2004 that contains twelve bonus tracks (a grim reflection of the music industry's practice of releasing special editions of classic albums replete with demos, alternate takes, and studio chatter). On their website, ESP-Disk somewhat defensively claim that they continue to distribute the album because of its considered "musically and historically significant."[59]

It is not only the musical material and historical context of *Lie* that lend themselves to an outsider reading. The album's editing and presentation seem to deliberately play into the public perception of Manson as a deviant murderer. We find a particularly clear example of this tendency in the album's title and cover, both of which were adapted from the cover of an issue of *Life* magazine featuring Manson. The only alteration that was made for the album, seen in Figure 3.1, was the removal of the "F" from *Life,* changing the word to "lie," which most likely alludes to the notion that Manson was merely a scapegoat the government was using to discredit the hippie movement. The unsettling subtitle "The Love and Terror Cult," however, was adopted verbatim from the magazine cover. The subtitle is interesting in this context because rather than

[58] Ibid.

[59] ESP-Disk, "Charles Manson: Charles Manson Sings," accessed Dec. 5, 2022, http://www.espdisk.com/2003.html?search=manson.

alluding to Manson's supposed innocence, it deliberately conjures up the image of Manson the cult leader and reminds the viewer of the singer's association with the Tate/LaBianca murders. Most of the smaller text from the *Life* cover was retained as well, which labels Manson a cult leader and brings up the murder spree. The photograph of Manson's face, also unaltered from its appearance on *Life,* is even more telling. While *Rolling Stone* featured a calm—almost beatific—portrait of Manson that was stylistically consistent with their portrayal any number of psychedelic rockers, *Lie* features an extreme close-up of Manson's face. Although Manson's unruly hair and mysterious, somewhat sardonic smile add to the effect, the most unsettling feature of the album cover are Manson's wild, staring eyes. Mason's eyes in this photo are made especially unsettling by his association with hypnotism and mind control. With this context, it is not at all difficult to imagine Manson's intense stare holding his followers in sway and leading them like the Pied Piper to murder and mayhem. It naturally leads the viewer to question what is behind those eyes and wonder if the man's music will provide any further insight. In spite of Phil Kaufman's protests that the album contains "gentle music," the cover immediately conjures the specter of Manson's crimes.

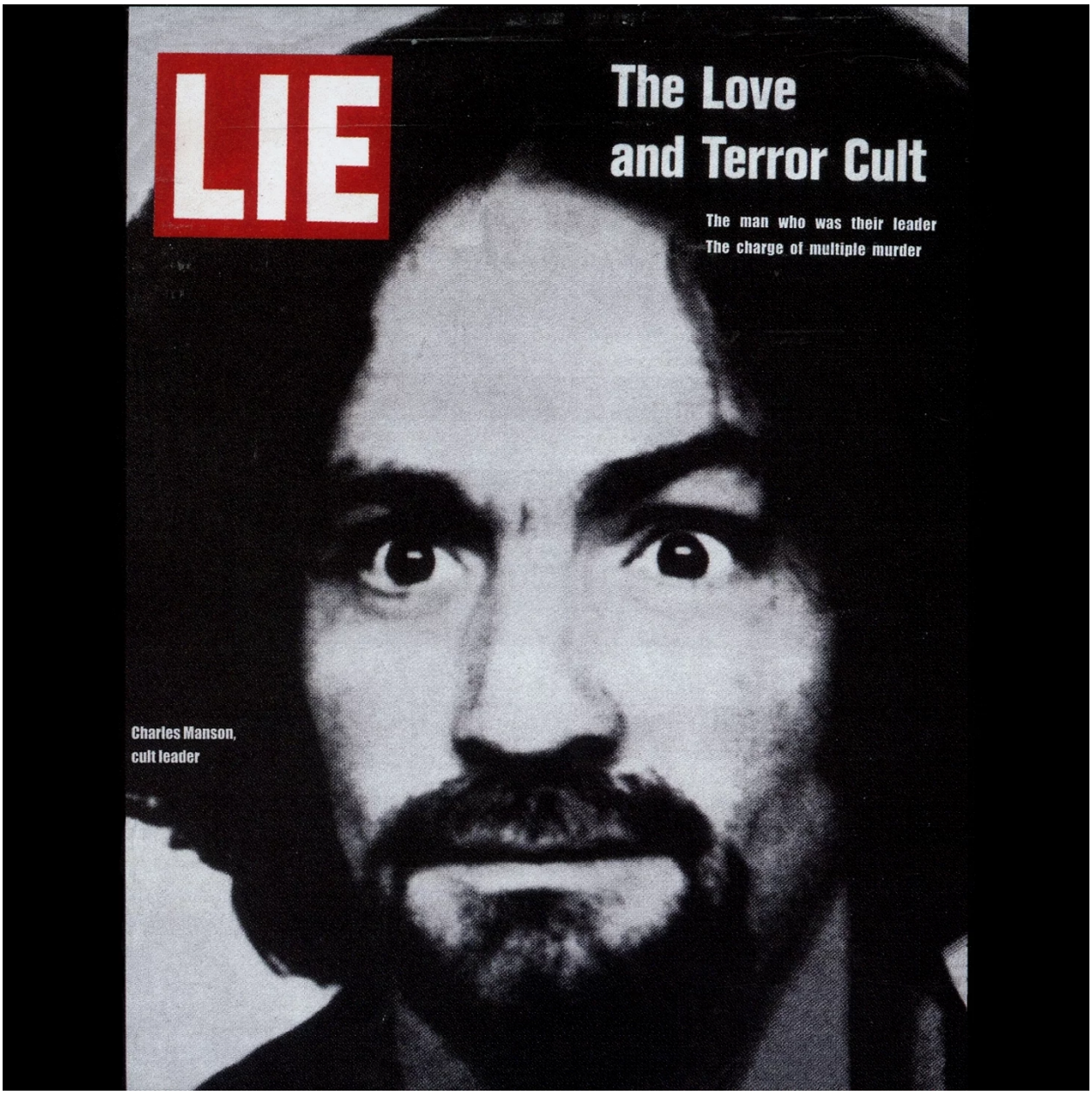

Figure 3.1: Lie: The Love and Terror Cult cover art

The musical material compiled on *Lie* was primarily recorded in September of 1967, though some overdubs were added roughly a year later. The album contains solo performances by Manson accompanying himself on acoustic guitar as well as tracks where Manson plays with a ramshackle group of musicians from the Family. The group includes conventional rock instruments such as acoustic, electric, and bass guitars, but also contains eclectic orchestration

featuring violin, the recorder, the flute, and the French horn played by none other than Tex Watson, who is clearly only capable of playing a single droning note with any degree of reliability. Although they are not credited on the ESP-Disk release, the album also features sitar and tabla, staples of the Hindustani and Carnatic musical traditions of India that were often adopted by countercultural rock groups as sonic signifiers of psychedelia. These loose, improvisational group numbers with their idiosyncratic instrumentation and amateurish musicianship—while still recognizably based in the world of psychedelic rock—provides the album with musical moments that can easily be read through an outsider lens.

It is not merely the album's strange orchestration, Manson's lyrics, or Watson's incompetent horn playing that associate *Lie* with outsider music. As was mentioned above, the album's production and editing also play an important role in reminding the listener that they are not listening to a slick professional product from the music industry. In terms of production, the album was cobbled together from auditions and demo tapes that were not intended to be released as finished products, thus resulting in the uneven, low-fidelity sound quality that permeates *Lie.* While these circumstances lay outside Kaufman's control as he prepared the album for release, his decision to include studio chatter from Manson and other Family members seems like a deliberate attempt to reinforce the album's raw, unpolished quality that is so often a sonic signifier of outsider authenticity.

We find a clear example of this at the end of the album's third track, "Mechanical Man." The song itself features the same unconventional instrumentation of the other ensemble tracks on the album. This unusual soundscape is made all the stranger by the vocal performances. Mansons' largely spoken delivery of the song's opening lyrics are accompanied by numerous overlapping vocalizations that imitate the sounds of machines, trying to sonically evoke the

"mechanical man" the song centers around. The effect is chaotic and arrhythmic. As the song winds on, Manson begins to sing a pitched melody and the background vocalists shift to singing overlapping, droning notes over an unchanging tonic chord. Toward the end of the song the tempo and intensity of the song increases, and when it finishes, we hear Manson ask the recording engineer "did you get a level?" This brief bit of studio chatter is particularly revealing because of how clearly it characterizes Manson as an amateur, and thus an outsider. It suggests that this unconventional performance was a highly unprofessional response to the engineer's request to check the balance of the mic levels and highlights Manson's lack of knowledge and experience in the recording studio.

Although the album deliberately portrays Manson as an outsider, it is still highly dependent on the listener's knowledge of the album's context and the singer's notoriety. It is worth keeping in mind that many rock musicians who entered the studio for the first time in the 1960s had very little knowledge of the ins and outs of the recording studio. Manson's chief problem was not that he lacked the prerequisite knowledge to succeed in the studio when he first arrived, but rather his unwillingness or inability to take instruction from producers and engineers who could have helped him become a professional recording artist. If we consider *Lie* outsider music, its effect as always comes less from the musical material itself than from the listener's expectations and framework.

This is why we think of Manson's amateurish recordings in a very different light to similarly unpolished musical projects from the 1960s and beyond. We find a clear example of this in the work of Manson's ESP-Disk labelmates the Fugs. The Fugs were a politically charged and lewdly comedic rock group founded by the countercultural poets Ed Sanders (also the author of a well-known book on the Manson Family) and Tuli Kupferberg, who later rounded out their

group with additional musicians. The Fugs are known not only for their explicit lyrics discussing sex and their opposition to the Vietnam War, but also for their raw, unpolished musicianship and recordings. The rough vocal takes, moderately out-of-tune guitars, and low-fidelity sound quality on Fugs tracks like "CIA Man" and "Slum Goddess" might be seen as a performance of authenticity that highlights the band's disinterest in commercial success in favor of producing confrontational artwork replete with subversive political messages.

Despite the idiosyncratic and unprofessional qualities of the ensemble tracks on *Lie,* which include "Machine Man," "Ego," and "Don't Do Anything Illegal," many of the more unusual choices on these songs are legible within the context of psychedelia. At times aspects of the music that are easily understood through the lens of outsider art can also be read as psychedelia, depending on the listener's perspective. For example, all three of these songs are based around a single droning chord. This is unusual for rock and folk music and could be understood as a choice that reflects Manson's status as an outsider. On the other hand, the use of a single chord, along with instrumentation that includes sitar and tabla as well as droning backup vocals, could be understood as a reference to one of the most common tropes in 1960s psychedelic music: the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions of northern and southern India that are often collectively referred to as Indian classical music (ICM).[60]

Manson's musical idols the Beatles employed a similar tactic for coding elements of ICM as psychedelic on their song "Tomorrow Never Knows." Just like the Beatles, Manson reserved references to ICM for songs that contain psychedelic lyrics and countercultural critiques of the government and square society. Again, this is very similar to the role of ICM in such Beatles songs as "Tomorrow Never Knows," "Within You Without You" and "Inner Light." For

[60] William Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History through Musical Topic Theory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), 5-6.

example, Manson's repeated cry that "Old ego is a too much thing" on the song "Ego" resonates with the psychedelic notion that hallucinogenic drugs can bring on "ego death," or a temporary loss of identity that can either be terrifying or spiritually powerful (or both). As such, the use of one chord, droning background vocals, and Indian instrumentation in "Ego" align with the frequently orientalist use of elements from ICM to convey supposedly deep, "heady" psychedelic messages in countercultural rock music.

From this perspective, Manson's use of elements from ICM to convey what he felt were deep and challenging lyrics that reflected his psychedelia-influenced critiques of society does not make him an outsider, but rather aligns him with the practices of the most popular contemporaneous rock group on the planet. This resonance is distorted, however, when we hear the album as a piece of musical murderabilia made by one of rock's most notorious outsiders. Just as we heard on "Never Learn Not to Love," Manson's presence does not erase his music's psychedelic resonances, but rather realigns them with Manson's iconic status as a symbol of the dark side of the 1960s counterculture. When we think of the song as murderabilia, moments of lo-fi psychedelia like we hear on this track either seem to signify nothing other than creepiness or call to mind the image of acid-soaked brainwashing sessions. His psychedelic gestures turn in on themselves and seem to become critiques of psychedelia itself.

A mass murderer like Manson is a very different kind of outsider than Henry Darger, Adolf Wölfli, or the Shaggs. While the framework of outsider art encourages us to experience all of this as a glimpse into psychological states we perceive as far different from our own, in the case of musical murderabilia like *Lie* we also imagine the music provides insight into Manson's deviance and crimes. The fact that many of Manson's songs resonate with the image of the man manipulating and sexually exploiting his followers only heightens the effect.

While this theme reoccurs in a number of songs featured on *Lie,* we find a clear example on the album's fifth track, "Home is Where You're Happy." Lyrically, the song stresses the importance of finding a home where you are free and can act like yourself, in contrast to the strictures of "square" society and families that only value materialism and conformity. The song's most unsettling moment comes during the bridge with the lyrics "So burn all your bridges/Leave your whole life behind/You can do what you want to do/'Cause you're strong in your mind." These lyrics are given extra musical emphasis by the break from the syncopated guitar ostinato that permeates the rest of the song in favor of emphatic, accented chords played at a quarter note rhythm exclusively with downstrokes. With the context of the Manson Family in mind it is hard to hear these lyrics and not immediately associate them with Manson's practice of requiring new followers to cut all ties to their families and previous lives, and often to "burn bridges" by stealing money or credit cards from their parents.

Of course, these lyrics were hardly chilling to the young runaways who were drawn to Manson's persona, lifestyle, and music. For example, while Squeaky Fromme admits that some of the lyrics for "Home is Where You're Happy" are "embarrassingly vacuous," and that her "English Lit teacher would've snarled at them," she nevertheless describes the song as "hopeful and timely" in part because "the notion that we might be born simply to experience existence was not mainstream thinking at the time."[61] With hindsight knowledge of the Manson Family's crimes, the song is a deeply unsettling look into the arguments Manson made to convince his followers to abandon their previous lives, but for the people who found this message convincing

[61] Lynette Fromme, *Reflexion,* kindle edition (Cobb, CA: The Peasenhall Press, 2018), 14. Fromme's book is a particularly interesting look into Manson and the Family because—unlike other memoirs by former Family members devoted to denouncing Manson—Fromme sets out to capture "the Charles Manson I perceived and a gathering of people like me preparing to survive either a revolution or the static institutions that were systematically trading all of our vital necessities for money." Ibid., 1.

it was a warm, uplifting song about found family that reassured them that they could leave their unsatisfying home lives for something more exciting and fulfilling. The meaning, as always, is dependent on who is doing the listening.

Conclusion: The Pop Culture Afterlife of Manson's Music

When we understand *Lie* as musical murderabilia, it not only positions Manson as an outsider, but as a particular kind of larger-than-life deviant outsider that does not seem entirely real. Manson has become a sort of pop culture monster who both inspires fear and yet who we do not always seem to take entirely seriously.[62] This perhaps accounts for the strange afterlife of many of the songs featured on Manson's album. Although *Lie* did not sell well and was difficult to hear for many years, a number of bands—particularly those operating in the hardcore punk subculture that emerged in the 1980s—made the somewhat shocking decision to record covers of Manson's music. For example, the punk band Redd Kross feature a cover of "Cease to Exist" on their 1982 album *Born Innocent.* Other recorded and released covers of Manson's music include "Garbage Dump" as performed by the controversial shock rocker GG Allin, "Home Is Where You're Happy" performed by the Lemonheads, and "Never Say 'Never' To Always" performed by the actor and experimental filmmaker Crispin Glover.

The early 1990s may have seen the height of this phenomenon among popular alternative artists. Marilyn Manson incorporated some of the lyrics of "Mechanical Man" into "My Monkey" in addition to deriving half his stage name from the mass murderer. The most infamous and widely distributed example of this phenomenon is the Guns N' Roses version of "Look at

[62] This does not seem entirely out of line with the cultural reaction to other high-profile mass murderers whose crimes are seen as particularly bizarre and deviant. For example, when the murderer and grave robber Ed Gein was arrested in 1957, people soon started telling black humored jokes about his crimes; Harold Schechter, *Deviant: The Shocking True Story of Ed Gein, the Original "Psycho,"* kindle edition (New York: Pocket Books, 1989), 175.

Your Game, Girl" that was released on *The Spaghetti Incident* (1993), an album of covers drawn primarily from the early years of punk rock. Manson's presence can even be felt in the work of some musicians who did not cover his songs. For example, Trent Reznor recorded the Nine Inch Nails album *The Downward Spiral* (1994) in the mansion where Sharon Tate was murdered. Although Reznor claimed he did not initially realize this when he purchased the property, he promptly named his studio "Le Pig," a reference to the message left in blood after the murders. While songs on *The Downward Spiral* like "Piggy" and "March of the Pigs" make no explicit reference to the Tate/LaBianca murders, the connection to the grim history of the building where the album was recorded adds a disturbing new layer to the songs.

This phenomenon raises some obvious questions: why do these artists want to associate themselves with Manson, and what do they hope to get out of his songs? Perhaps the most revealing example here comes not from a cover itself, but rather from Black Flag and Rollins Band frontman Henry Rollins. Rollins—one of the major figures of the American hardcore punk underground in the 1980s—never released any Manson covers himself, but he did devote considerable energy to a failed effort to get his independent record label SST Records to release one of the albums Charles Manson surreptitiously recorded in prison. This was apparently the result of a long correspondence Rollins conducted with Manson, though accounts of who initiated this relationship vary. Although Rollins completed his edits of the tapes Manson sent them and pressed a total of five copies (two of which are still owned by Rollins), ultimately SST decided to discontinue the project because of the number of death threats they received. Reflecting on the project and his relationship with Manson years later, Rollins commented, "At the time I was very young and having him write me letters made me feel intense and heavy."[63]

[63] Sean Michaels, "Henry Rollins produced Charles Manson album," *The Guardian,* Dec. 15, 2010, accessed Dec. 5, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/dec/15/henry-rollins-charles-manson.

Ultimately, the strange afterlife of Manson's music speaks to his slightly unreal presence as a pop culture boogieman. Musicians as diverse as GG Allin, Henry Rollins, Marilyn Manson, and Axl Rose all use Manson to perform a particularly edgy mode of outsider authenticity. To borrow a phrase from Rollins, a figure like Manson could make these artists appear "intense and heavy," and gives them a chance to flout a social taboo without facing serious consequences. It reveals a desire to engage with the pop culture figure of Manson as a larger-than-life monster who has been made somewhat unreal by time and fame. There is no desire to reckon with what Manson did or the lives that he ruined. Rather, it reveals an attitude that Manson is merely a name to drop as a performance of edginess, as though the man were a horror icon only slightly more serious than Leatherface or Freddy Kruger. It is a clear demonstration of how our desire to view celebrity mass murderers like Manson as inhuman monsters is ultimately a defensive mechanism that protects us from the disturbing truth that Manson and the Family were perhaps not so greatly removed from the life and social currents of their time and place and that, perhaps, a closer look would reveal something not alien and inhuman in Manson, but rather something disturbingly familiar.

Conclusion

By the dawn of the 1980s the modern conception of the cult was crystalized in the popular imagination. This process was sparked in no small part by the shocking spectacle of the Manson trials and the emergence of the anticult movement. By the mid-1970s, there was already considerable anxiety around the explosion of new religious movements stemming from the counterculture and the potential for manipulation and abuse within these organization. No single event had as great an impact on the concept of the cult as the Jonestown Massacre. The grim image of Jonestown instantly became a staple of anticult rhetoric, and the narrative of the psychotic Jones leading his brainwashed followers to their bizarre deaths became not an extreme outlier in the largely benign world of new religious, but rather the platonic ideal of what it means to be a cult.[1] Throughout this dissertation, I have examined the role music played in the lives of members of these groups and considered what it reveals about the experience of living, working, and believing in a controversial NRM. Let us turn our attention back to the music created by the Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family for a final discussion of what this music tells us about these groups and the role of music in new religions more broadly.

Music, NRMs, and Cults in the 1960s and 1970s

The Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family are in many respects profoundly different groups. Although all three of my case studies first came to prominence in the countercultural hotbed of California in the late 1960s, and all took elements of Christianity as the basis for their new faiths, their beliefs, practices, and values differed widely. Throughout their many incarnations, the Children of God have remained firmly centered on their mission of

[1] Rebecca Moore, *Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, kindle edition (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009), loc. 321.

winning over converts to Christ in the face of what they believe to be the imminent End Times, while Peoples Temple focused on Pentecostal Christianity as a vehicle for spreading their socialist politics, particularly after their move to the West Coast. Manson, on the other hand, was primarily interested in Christianity as a way of portraying himself as a Jesus-like figure to his followers, and later in adapting elements of Christian eschatology into his apocalyptic Helter Skelter scenario.

In terms of their values and lifestyle, the Children of God initially adhered closely to other evangelical, fundamentalist Christian groups, but became increasingly interested in a free love-inflected understanding of sexuality as a means of experiencing God's love. Peoples Temple, on the other hand, always placed social work and radical leftist politics at the forefront of their priorities. The Manson Family was more interested in Manson's version of counterculture philosophy, including mind-expanding psychedelic experiences, casting off society's sexual mores, and shifting toward off-the-grid communal living, though their primary goal for almost all their brief existence was helping Charles Manson achieve success as a pop musician.

In spite of these differences, one thing that these groups have in common is their emphasis on music making. Throughout their histories—including moments of genuine existential crises—all three of these groups continued to devote time and resources to their musical activities. In this dissertation, I have made three broad arguments about the musical practices of my case studies. I argued that the music of these groups reflects their beliefs and provides insight into what attracted and retained the followers of these groups beyond theories about mind control, that these groups attempted to use music as a means of managing their relationship with a sometimes hostile outside world, and that ultimately the meaning of the music

created by these groups is highly dependent on how it was framed by the listener. Although all three of these groups engaged with the popular music styles of their era, each was influenced by a different musical milieu. The Children of God, much like the broader Jesus People movement they emerged from, initially took their cues from folk and rock music, much like other early pioneers of Christian contemporary music (CCM), though by the 1990s they also incorporated influences from alternative and hard rock. Peoples Temple were musically influenced by Black Pentecostal gospel, anthems of the Civil Rights Movement, and the R&B and rock of the Sixties and Seventies. Indeed, Temple musicians recorded and performed covers by a wide-ranging group of popular musicians, including the O'Jays, Bob Dylan, Earth Wind and Fire, and Sam Cooke. The music recorded by the Manson Family, on the other hand, bore the strong imprint of experimental, psychedelic folk and rock music, and sometimes featured a raw, almost anarchic sound, though Manson's solo acoustic material also reflects the more mellow musical styles of the crooners who were popular during his childhood. Just as was the case with their beliefs, social structure, values, and actions, all three of these groups eschew an overly simplistic model of the "religious cult" in their differing musical practices and repertoires.

Despite these differences, all three of these groups used music in ways that are in some respects strikingly similar. In addition to drawing on the popular secular styles of the day, COG, Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family commercially distributed recorded music as a means of further spreading their message. Peoples Temple did this in a particularly low-key, explicitly religious setting when they would sell their album, *He's Able,* at churches and meetings where their choir was performing. Both the Children of God and the Manson Family had their sights firmly set on popular commercial success. Several COG groups managed to get hits on the radio in South America and Europe, and their founder David Berg was adamant about promoting the

fact that many of their groups featured Jeremy Spencer, one of the founding members of Fleetwood Mac. Although Manson ultimately failed in his efforts to obtain a major label record deal, he nevertheless managed to get the Beach Boys to record one of his songs.

All three were also clear about the fact that they did not want to distribute music merely as a means of making money or establishing careers in the music industry, but rather as a way of further promoting their message and ultimately attracting new members to their groups. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, all three of these groups made efforts to musically express their core religious values through the music they made while simultaneously making a conscious effort to tailor their musical message to appeal to listeners who were not already true believers. For example, that is why *He's Able* is replete with songs emphasizing their belief in social justice and antiracist work but stops short of full-throated musical declarations of the divinity of Jim Jones or their hardline communist ideology that would likely repel potential recruits. In spite of the effort all three of these groups put into making their music as widely appealing as possible while still retaining their core values, we have also seen how easily these musical messages can seem to become distorted and macabre when listeners approach the music hoping to hear the sounds of a dangerous, fanatical religious cult, as we have discussed in regards to both the post-Jonestown massacre reissue of *He's Able* and the strange history of the Manson Family's album, *Lie: the Love and Terror Cult.* As I hope this dissertation has demonstrated, the music of NRMs has much to tell us not only about the groups themselves, but also about how these groups interact with their broader social and musical world and even the ways that listener's knowledge and attitude about the artists affects how that music creates meaning.

By putting the Children of God, Peoples Temple, and the Manson Family into dialogue with one another, this dissertation has also traced some of the key historical flashpoints that affected the popular understanding of what it meant to be a cult. The notion of the "cult" thus shifted away from its original definition most often used in anthropology or in the discussion of antiquity meaning a group worshiping a particular idol or person. The term now centered on the idea of false religions led either by fraudsters or madmen who set out either to financial exploit their followers, manipulate them toward violent ends, or both. The stage was now set for a full-blown moral panic around cults.

The Satanic Panic, QAnon, and Shifting Conceptions of the Cult

Interestingly enough, the most far-reaching moral panic surrounding cults was centered not around a particular NRM, but rather focused its attention on an entirely fictitious and bizarrely outlandish cult. This episode is best known today as the Satanic panic, and it revealed not only the deep fear many Americans felt around religious difference, but also the paranoia sparked by the seemingly innocuous aspects of youth culture such as heavy metal music and the tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons.

The panic was sparked by the convergence of several different forces on the rise in American culture during the 1980s. In addition to the wave of anticult sentiments still resonating from the Jonestown massacre, there was also what Jenkins terms the "recovered memory" movement in which people would recount supposedly suppressed memories concerning ritual abuse at the hands of cultists. These "memories" were usually uncovered during therapy, such as was described in the largely discredited 1980 best seller *Michelle Remembers.*[2] Another major

[2] Philip Jenkins, "Satanism and Ritual Abuse," *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements,* ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 232-3.

flashpoint in the panic was the criminal case surrounding the McMartin preschool that began in 1984, in which prosecutors alleged that "hundreds of small children attending this school had been sexually abused by a ring of teachers, often in ritualistic settings involving robes, pentacles, and church altars."[3]

The hysteria around Satanism was at its peak from the years 1985 through 1992. Although the Satanic panic is now remembered as bizarre and unfounded, it nevertheless disrupted and damaged the lives of many, including many McMartin preschool teachers, as well as the West Memphis Three, a group of teenagers accused and convicted of a heinous series of murders based on no greater evidence then their interest in heavy metal music and the occult. Skepticism about the panic increased throughout the 1990s and was largely seen as discredited before the end of the decade.

Although the Satanic panic faded out of the mainstream in the 1990s, its influence has continued to reverberate throughout the culture of the United States in ways that have had a distinct and dangerous impact on the nation's political climate. The moral panic surrounding a vast, underground, and ultimately non-existent Satanic cult had a relatively brief heyday in the forefront of the mainstream media, but it never disappeared entirely. Belief in a Satanic cult continued to survive in conspiracy theory circles long after they stopped appearing on the evening news. Although a comprehensive discussion of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it must be mentioned that theories about Satanic cults became a part of the fringe world of conspiracy theories as the conspiracy theorist subculture (for lack of a better term) was undergoing a gradual but decisive turn toward extreme rightwing politics. Amongst other factors, this was a response to the federal government's disastrous handling of another

[3] Ibid., 223.

high-profile cult incident in 1993, when a prolonged standoff between government agents and the Branch Davidian NRM in Waco, Texas ultimately resulted in a fire that left more than seventy people dead.[4]

As the American conspiracy world was becoming more rightwing it was also increasingly moving online. Satanic conspiracy theorists began meeting on internet forums and the theory became increasingly intertwined with far-right conspiracy beliefs positing that many politicians in the Democratic Party were heavily involved both with the Satanic conspiracy and ritual child abuse. These theories did not emerge back into the mainstream, however, until the rise of Donald Trump to the forefront of national politics during the 2016 presidential election.

The most widespread theory to emerge during this time frame has come to be known as QAnon. This modern incarnation of the Satanic panic first took root on the website 4chan, an anonymous imageboard infamous for its controversial content. As Miroslav Vzral writes,

> This person, dubbed "QAnon" for their supposed Q clearance credentials, began to slowly unveil a vast conspiracy involving a cabal of Satanic pedophiles. QAnon claimed that these conspirators, many of whom were preeminent members of the Democratic Party, were asserting control of the U.S. government and the mainstream media to continue their nefarious crimes against children (Hannah, 2021). The "Q" worldview has expanded considerably since those first days in 2017, incorporating the core tenets of other conspiracies, including Covid-19 trutherism, anti-vaccine beliefs, and even alien "lizard people" stories into the canon (Hannah, 2021). This dramatic dilation of scope has led journalist Mike Rothchild (2021) to dub QAnon 'the conspiracy theory of

[4] For a critical take on the role of the anticult movement in the Waco siege, see Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate* ((New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2000).

everything.'"[5]

While the movement shares the Satanic panic's underlying fear of a powerful underground Satanic cabal, it has grown to incorporate a number of other conspiracies and taken on a much more explicitly rightwing tone in the 21st century.

As the QAnon conspiracy grew, its critics became increasingly vocal. In an ironic twist, this group that can trace its roots to a decade's old panic spurred on in part by the anticult movement is now often referred to as a cult itself.[6] The perception of QAnon as a cult is widespread enough that some believers have even gone through the kind of "deprogramming" that was pioneered by figures such as Ted Patrick during the early years of the anticult movement in the 1970s.[7] While it is outside the scope of this dissertation to fully unpack this recent historical turn, the view of QAnon as a cult is representative of a subtle but significant shift in the popular understanding of the cult label. The term cult is now often associated with intense, abusive groups that are not necessarily religious. Another high-profile example of this is NXIVM founded by Keith Raniere. The group is widely viewed as a cult for its violent, abusive practices, although it was not a church but a series of personal growth courses and multi-level marketing schemes. Although QAnon features a highly complicated and evolving belief system, and though many QAnon supporters intertwine their investment in conspiracy theories with their evangelical worldview, it is difficult to argue that QAnon is itself a religion, let alone a religious

[5] Miroslav Vzral, "QAnon as a Variation of a Satanic Conspiracy Theory: An Overview," 31-2.

[6] For just a sampling of the writers, journalists, and commentators who refer to QAnon as a cult, see Jason Blazakis, "Op-Ed: Why QAnon's similarity to other cults makes it a significant national security threat," *Los Angeles Times,* Feb. 21, 2021; Mike Rothschild, *The Storm is Upon Us: How QAnon Became a Movement, Cult, and the Conspiracy Theory of Everything* (Brooklyn: Melville House Books, 2021); David Gilbert, "The JFK QAnon Cult is Finally Collapsing: 'Shit's Falling Apart,'" *Vice,* March 22, 2022.

[7] Katie Campbell & Angela King, "This former cult member is helping 'deprogram' QAnon believers," *KUOW: NPR Network,* March 18, 2022, accessed May 22, 2023, https://www.kuow.org/stories/this-former-cult-member-is-helping-deprogram-qanon-believers.

institution. Furthermore, it does not feature hands-on leaders like Jim Jones or Charles Manson personally making demands on its followers, or an isolated space where members may have difficulty maintaining contact with the outside world. Rather, QAnon is considered a cult because it is centered around a belief system that the mainstream considers outlandish, but is nevertheless so attractive to believers that family members have reported it entirely changing their loved ones' lifestyles and personalities.

Although the mainstream media has never embraced QAnon in the same way that it bolstered the fears of the Satanic panic at its height, the movement has been given some degree of legitimacy and momentum by the former president Donald Trump. Trump plays a major role in QAnon's beliefs, where he was held up as a hero who would soon publicly expose the pedophilic Satanists in the government. Although Trump never explicitly endorsed QAnon, he has been widely criticized for refusing to condemn the movement outright. Furthermore, critics have argued that Trump has publicly but covertly indicated his support for the QAnon movement through number of dog whistles. One of the most recent of these dog whistles was purely musical, and an extremely clear demonstration of the degree to which framing and context influences meaning in music, particularly when that music is associated with the cult label.

The piece of music in question is "Wwg1wga" (2020) by Richard Feelgood, which Trump was accused of playing at a campaign rally in March of 2022. The instrumental piece's title references the QAnon slogan "Where we go one we go all." The Trump campaign insists that they were simply playing royalty-free music they found on the internet, specifically a piece entitled "Mirrors" by the composer Will Van Der Crommert. Indeed, these pieces appear nearly identical, raising the strong possibility that "Wwg1wga" is simply a plagiarized retitling of "Mirrors." This hypothesis is given further credibility by the fact that over the course of

researching this topic, Feelgood's "original" version of "Wwg1wga" has disappeared from his YouTube and Spotify pages. Intrepid listeners are still able to find Feelgood's "Wwg1wga Megamix" as well as "Wwg1wga Trump Megamix." The former features the full disputed instrumental track supplemented with sound effects of rain and thunder. These effects are themselves a reference to another popular QAnon slogan, "The storm is coming," which is understood by believers as a reference to a Trump-led purge of the child-abusing Satanists that have infiltrated the government, a major part of the QAnon lore that was repeatedly and (for believers) disappointingly predicted by Q a number of times during the Trump administration. The "Wwg1wga Trump Megamix" is identical but also includes repeated audio clips of Trump criticizing Democrats, the mainstream media, and generally bemoaning the state of the nation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, "Wwg1wga" does not feature any concrete references to the QAnon movement other than its title. The piece itself is primarily scored for a string ensemble and piano, though it also features some light percussion. Most of the piece features a relatively unadorned chord progression moving in even whole notes at a leisurely adagio tempo. The reverb-heavy solo piano doubles the string section's chords and adds a distinctive, melancholy timbre and texture to the ensemble. The track is rather brief, only two minutes and twenty-two seconds in length. The piece begins with slow block chords moving in unison. At the 00:34 mark, a solo violin plays a brief, five-note motif that begins with a leap upwards of a fifth before descending back a half step below the starting pitch. This motif provides the only melodic material in the piece. The piece gradually swells in volume for much of its duration, though after reaching a peak that is punctuated with cymbal rolls at the 1:45 mark it gradually fades in intensity as it reaches its conclusion.

The piece's gradual rise and fall in volume and intensity lends a certain stirring quality to the relatively melancholy mood created by the slow, steady harmonic motion and falling violin motif. The piece's emotionally evocative musical language and relative unobtrusiveness lends it a certain cinematic quality, particularly when it is used as a backdrop to speech. Feelgood employs this in the "Trump Megamix" version of the piece, but this itself may have been inspired by the Trump campaign's use of the music. Trump did not merely play the piece before or after his appearance, but rather used it as the sonic background to his own speech. Although Trump does not explicitly name or reference QAnon, he made use of "Wwg1wga" while discussing how his followers were "one movement" that would never give up in their fight against an unspecified tyranny. Although the piece's most likely original composer Crommert has vocally objected to his music being co-opted by QAnon and Trump and certainly did not write it with any sort of rightwing conspiracy narrative in mind, Feelgood and the Trump campaign were able to reframe the piece as political theater. Its cinematic quality, particularly when paired with a live speech from QAnon's messianic savior figure, lends an easy emotional credibility to QAnon followers who imagine themselves as foot soldiers in an epic, apocalyptic battle against the forces of evil. Once again, we see that it is not the musical content itself, but rather the context in which it is played, that imbues "cult" music with meaning.

New Religious Movements and Musicology

As I hope this dissertation has shown, there is much to be learned from the complex relationship between music and faith, particularly in the context of new religious movements. Not only can music help us better understand the values and embodied emotional experience of life in a NRM, but it also makes it clear how important the perspective of the listener is in the

process of creating musical meaning. This music also provides an illuminating lens into the different ways new religions interact with the broader cultural and religious world, and how they see themselves fitting into that world.

Of course, my work here was far from a comprehensive study of the interrelationship between music and NRMs. Due in no small part to the fact that my primary training is in musicology, this dissertation relies heavily on musical analysis that is informed by the relevant theology and historical context. Although I believe this approach has provided fruitful results with regards to my chosen case studies, they are many other research methods that would doubtlessly provide fascinating new insights into NRMs and the music they make.

One potential avenue of future research might involve field work of the sort that is often performed in ethnomusicology and anthropology. Although recording and videos supplemented with primary and secondary sources can provide a fascinating look into the world of new religious movements, participant-observation research could no doubt provide a nuanced, on-the-ground view of both the practice of making music in a NRM and the shades of meaning that different worshipers bring to these practices. Many scholars who specialize in the study of NRMs have already employed this method with insightful results. To give just a few examples, the work of scholars such as David Van Zandt and James Chancellor have benefitted from their respective experiences conducting fieldwork on the Children of God.[8] While fieldwork of this sort has led to interesting revelations about the sociology, theology, and day-to-day life in NRMs, very little of this work has directly addressed the experience of music. Participant-observation work and interviews with musicians and other NRM members could provide

[8] James D. Chancellor, *Life in the Family: An Oral History of the Children of God* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000); David E. Van Zandt, *Living in the Children of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

valuable insights into the logistics of creating music within a new religion and the different shades of meaning participants glean from their musical practices.

This dissertation has also maintained a focus on a very small and particular subset of new religious movements. All three of my case studies had direct ties to the West Coast countercultural milieu of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, they were all rooted in Christianity, and ultimately wound up informing the broad cultural construction of what it means to be a religious cult. As I hope I have already demonstrated, even with all these similarities these groups had very different religious and social structures and wound up producing very different bodies of music. Of course, there are countless other fascinating NRMs with distinctive beliefs, social structures, and musical practices that were beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Indeed, there are several particularly well-known NRMs with fascinating relationships to music that I did not cover here. Some NRMs with especially interesting musical practices became household names after a variety of violent incidents that occurred throughout the 1990s. For example, the Branch Davidian movement became infamous after they became involved in an extensive siege with a variety of federal law enforcement agencies in the early months of 1993 that eventually culminated in a fire and dozens of deaths. David Koresh, their leader at the time of the siege, was a guitarist and singer-songwriter who wrote and recorded religiously inspired music, preached in front of a rather impressive collective of Marshall amplifiers, and reportedly spoke about his unfulfilled desire to fully capture his religious message in rock music.[9]

Another group with an interesting and understudied relationship to music is the infamous Japanese NRM Aum Shinrikyo. This group was intensely abusive and lethally violent to both its own members and the broader public. They became internationally notorious in 1995 after

[9] David Thibodeau with Leon Whiteson and Aviva Layton, *Waco: A Survivor's Story* (New York and Boston: Hachette Books, 2018), 92-3.

committing a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway that left thirteen dead and dozens seriously injured. Their belief system was syncretic and complex, borrowing from Japanese new age culture, Buddhism, apocalyptic Christianity, and science fiction. Although the group was not well-known outside of Japan before the gas attacks, their founder Shoko Asahara had long since obtained a level of national recognition after an unsuccessful campaign for public office and repeated appearances on daytime talk shows. Over the course of its existence Aum Shinrikyo not only created music connected to their faith, but also produced full-blown anime—complete with original songs—centered around Asahara. It would be fascinating to study where these texts sit within the complex web of the group's belief system, the public image they wished to project, and the broader world of Japanese music and animation at the time.

To give one final example, there is also the case of Heaven's Gate. This group emerged out of the West Coast new age milieu in the late 1970s and is best remembered today for their dramatic and widely reported mass suicide in 1997. Heaven's Gate was known by a wide variety of monikers, and their theology and religious practices underwent a number of significant shifts over the years. At its core, the group's beliefs were centered around a reading of Christian theology and eschatology through the lens of UFOs, with a strong emphasis on a coming millennial moment in which an alien spacecraft would abduct and thus save the group. Heaven's Gate has a particularly unique and fascinating relationship with music. Although one of their founders, Marshall Applewhite, was himself an accomplished vocalist and former music professor, the group placed very little emphasis in what we commonly think of as religious music of any sort. I am aware of only one recording of Heaven's Gate members singing a song inspired by their religion, which is a tongue-in-cheek parody of "Do-Re-Mi" from *The Sound of Music*

rewritten to reflect the beliefs as laid out by the group's founders Bonnie Nettles (Ti) and Applewhite (Do).

The group's relative lack of emphasis on musicality is perhaps less surprising when we consider their strong theological emphasis on distancing themselves from their own bodies and humanity. Members were discouraged from seeing themselves as gendered, from taking pleasure in food or sex, and from maintaining relationships with nonmembers. Heaven's Gate preached that these behaviors would tie members to their humanity and prevent them from transcending to T.E.L.A.H., or The Evolutionary Level Above Human, which was one of the NRM's core religious goals. It would be fascinating to study whether the heavily embodied practice of music making and singing was seen as yet another activity that would further root members in their own humanity.

Although the group did not place a heavy emphasis on producing songs or conventional instrumental music inspired by their faith, they nevertheless invoked musical metaphors and music-adjacent practices as part of their religious life. For example, the group's founders took the names "Do" and "Ti" from solfège, where "do" is the syllable assigned to the tonic pitch and "ti" is the syllable assigned to the seventh scale degree. While one versed in music theory might assume that this named connoted that Do was the group's supreme authority, the founders themselves explained that they took these names because Do must always follow Ti, which reflected the group's hierarchy in which Applewhite made it clear that he viewed Nettles as his superior. Heaven's Gate members would also practice a ritual in which they would spend great deals of time listening to a tuning fork sound the pitch A at 440 hertz with the goal of internalizing the sound of the pitch (a task any musician without perfect pitch knows is extremely challenging). It would be fascinating to study the unconventional role of music within

Heaven's Gate and the function of musically informed rituals of this type within the group's life and belief system.

The study of other NRMs widely understood as cults would likely involve answering similar research questions to the ones I have posed throughout this dissertation. One particularly understudied topic, however, is the vast number of new religious movements that never becoming publicly known for incidents of violence and abuse. It would be very insightful to probe deeper into the musical practices of relatively established and long-lasting NRMs like the Self-Relation Fellowship or Eckankar to look at how these groups have settled into their communities and how their musical practices have changed and evolved over the decades of their existence. It would also be fascinating to gain a better understanding of how these groups have interacted with the anticult movement and whether they have been targets of suspicion. Although well-known cults such as Peoples Temple provide a unique window into how highly public incidents of cult violence are crystalized in the popular imagination, NRMs that never implode in this manner are more likely to provide a look into how young, relatively unestablished new religions shift and change over time as they gradually accrue a lengthier history, set of traditions, and establish themselves more deeply into their surrounding social fabric. In short, they likely have more to teach us about the role music plays as NRMs slowly but surely morph into established religions.

Finally, on a somewhat broader note, I hope that this dissertation has done some early work on looking at not only the complex relationships between music, faith, and NRMs, but also on the ways in which highly publicized incidents of violent crime are imagined and memorialized in popular culture. At a time when true crime continues to ride a wide of commercial popularity, there is a strong interest in cults, serial killers, and violent incidents that

are seen as particularly bizarre or outlandish. I feel there is still much more work to be done with regards to how these types of violent incidents and criminal figures are turned into pop culture that is seen as outside the bounds of serious historical study and in some ways outside the bounds of real lived human experience. What are we hanging on to and what are we trying to ignore when we put Charles Manson on a t-shirt or turn the saying “Don’t drink the Kool-Aid” into a shopworn cliché? While I hope that this dissertation has taken some early steps in answering these questions, it is my hope that future studies will bring us closer to finding what is at the root of this phenomenon.

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