

The Jonestown That Won't Fade Away

Twenty-Five Years Later, a Filmmaker Examines the Lasting Consequences

by Paul VanDeCarr

In November 1978, I was a boy of 10, riding in the back seat of my father's car on a bright fall day in Boston and looking at a *Newsweek* article about the deaths of more than 900 Americans in what was called a "mass suicide" by members of a "cult" commune called Jonestown, in Guyana. (The actual nature of these deaths is still in dispute, but they undoubtedly were a mix of suicide and murder.) These deaths at the commune had almost immediately followed the murders nearby of United States Congressman Leo Ryan and three other people who had been part of a delegation to visit on a fact-finding mission.

This was the first major news story that impressed itself on my imagination. Now, I am revisiting the story of Jonestown on its 25th anniversary, co-producing a documentary film about its life, death, and legacy, *After Jonestown*. Elie Wiesel has remarked that "we can never really tell the story of the Holocaust, but we must always try." Trying to tell a story about Jonestown presents a similar challenge, and it calls on me to remain open to the story and its storytellers as they evolve. Doing so is in no small part an act of faith.

The Rev. Jim Jones founded Peoples Temple in Indianapolis in 1955. By 1961, it was known as Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church, and it became part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which ordained Jones in 1964. Soon after that, Jones moved his operations to Ukiah, California, near San Francisco, and by 1971 was active in both San Francisco and Los Angeles. Throughout these years, the Temple was controversial for its support of racial integration, lauded for its social-service programs, and politically influential thanks to its savvy pastor and dedicated, integrated membership. A project of Peoples Temple, Jonestown was intended as a socialist communal settlement far from the racism and poverty of American life; it was essentially a small village built in the middle of the Guyanese jungle in the early- to mid-1970s, and was populated primarily in 1977-78.

The residents of Jonestown, who were isolated from outside media and subjected to nearly constant haranguing

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Karen Harms, right, Stanley Clayton, and other members of Peoples Temple preparing a community meal in 1977-78.

by Jones, were led to believe that their families back home and the United States government and news media were out to destroy the community. The murders and suicides at Jonestown on November 18, 1978—after the murders of several of the outsiders who had just visited Jonestown to investigate reports of a range of emotional and physical cruelty—were conceived as a last stand to die for the cause rather than sacrifice it.

No one feels the difficult distance between experience and language in regard to Jonestown more acutely than the survivors. Of the roughly 1,000 people who were in Jonestown, just more than 900 died, and just more than 80 survived (some ran into the jungle; others had left with the investigating congressman earlier in the day and were not killed in the attack on him; others were away, visiting Georgetown, the capital of Guyana). After the deaths, many survivors were overwhelmed by grief, guilt, and what-if questions. The magnitude of the tragedy was so great, and the reach of their aspirations had been so long, that many of them just could not put their experience into words. In making the film, I am joining with a handful of survivors and relatives of those who died to try to do just that: tell the stories of their lives then and since 1978. This task presents a number of challenges, not least of which are religious ones.

Part of the difficulty lies in the abjectly painful nature of the material. One woman with whom I'm working lost nine family members in Jonestown, including her mother and a daughter—she still suffers from debilitating depression. Another man escaped Jonestown in the company of Congressman Ryan but left behind his young son, thinking that he would be able to retrieve the boy later. That moment of decision remains the single most painful one of his life. Sitting and talking with people about such moments, and staying with them through the most difficult parts, is a kind of ministry of listening. My doubts are many. Who am I to minister to these people, many of whom suffered more loss in one day than I will in a lifetime? And who is to say that they will be helped by telling their stories?

Peoples Temple originated and grew as a religious community, and its tragic end poses religious questions of loss, meaning, and responsibility. But my task is also political. About 70 percent of the people who lived and died in Jonestown were African American. The story, however, has been told primarily by white survivors who were in leadership positions, and the news media have treated these perspectives as somehow representative. The story of Jonestown is suffused with

issues of race and racism, and inasmuch as I approach this story theologically, my theology must take on these same issues. I am reminded of James Cone's message that any kind of theology that is not principally concerned with liberation is no kind of theology at all. It would be easy for me as a white man to ignore race, but in order to do justice to the story, I must do justice to those who populate that story. *After Jonestown* focuses primarily on African American perspectives and on the race issues involved in the story.

The public presentation of this story raises another problem. The pain of these losses was exacerbated by the fact that they were part of one of the most public and stigmatized tragedies of our time. In the immediate aftermath, it was hard for survivors and families to grieve because their lost loved ones were being portrayed in newspapers and television broadcasts nationwide as depraved cultists. Many survivors were hounded by the news media for the sensational "inside" story of how virtually an entire community died. In the last 25 years, the news and documentary coverage of Jonestown hasn't gotten much better in this regard. With few exceptions, it still focuses on the most lurid and sensational aspects of the tragedy; it still focuses on Jim Jones rather than on the people of Jonestown, and on the



deaths at Jonestown rather than on the community's life and purpose. One survivor put it bluntly, and he speaks for many others: "I'm trusting you with my story; don't do me wrong."

As I have come to understand, then, it is quite possible to do harm with a film such as this. The responsibilities are great—to investigate without being invasive, to take care with people's stories without avoiding the hard questions. Survivors are understandably skeptical when I approach them about participating in this documentary. They ask me about my intent and approach, how the film will be used, who else I'm talking with, my views on the life and death of Jonestown, how I plan to be of service to the community of survivors.

Their questions have become my questions. Why *am* I making this film? How *do* I as a white man deal with the race issues involved? How *can* I give back to the people who are being so generous in spirit with me? How do I turn the awful, impossible question of "what could I have done" into something more hopeful, such as "what can I do now?" without being too roseate? How do I tell their stories without presuming to tell the *entire* story of Jonestown?

I am developing some answers to these questions, albeit incomplete ones. I started making the film because of the events' place in my memory and imagination; I am continuing to make it because of my ever-growing care for the subjects of the film. I have given back to the people in the film by listening to them, and I will continue to give back to them by helping to clarify the public record on Jonestown. My answers will certainly grow and change over the course of the production. I am strongly and frequently tempted to arrive at final answers to such questions, because talking with survivors can be so wearying and sad, because I need to make more money than independent filmmaking allows, because I'm tired of waking up in the middle of the night thinking about where to film or what archival footage to use, because I want to be able

to wrap my mind around this subject, and because otherwise it sometimes feels just too difficult to hold.

Still, every time I try to answer these questions once and for all, I feel my relationships and my approach calcify. If this is to be a film that honors both the living and the dead of Jonestown, I must keep these as live questions in my mind, and remain prayerful and focused. If I was not, prior to starting work on this film, someone with sufficient faith to hold these questions in suspense, then the actual process of making the film is forging that faith in me. What Toni Morrison has said of language seems to me to apply equally to telling a story such as this on film—"its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable." Perhaps the best respect I can pay to the film's subjects is to point to what cannot ultimately be expressed in any medium. ♦



Top left: Kimo Prokes, right, and two other children at Jonestown in 1978. Above: Barbara Hoyer teaching children at Jonestown in 1977-78. Below: In the documentary film "After Jonestown," a woman named Nina, a former member of the Peoples Temple who, with her mother, lost nine family members at Jonestown. The photographs above and on the preceding page are courtesy of the Jonestown Institute, <http://jonestown.sdsu.edu>. Some were taken by Jonestown members and recovered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; others were taken by the Moore family when they visited Jonestown in 1978.

