

# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

## Race Utopia and the Peoples Temple



Peoples Temple leader Jim Jones speaks into the microphone.



Peoples Temple members showcase their work, the Peoples Forum newspaper.

### The life and death of Jonestown

*Editor's note: The following is from a synopsis of Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple, the 2008 documentary which will rebroadcast Feb. 15 on PBS's American Experience.*

Congressman Leo Ryan traveled to an isolated rain forest in Guyana to investigate the concerns of his San Francisco-area constituents. Their alarming stories focused on a jungle compound known as Jonestown, a group called the Peoples

Temple, and its leader, Rev. Jim Jones.

According to news filtering back to America, U.S. citizens were being held against their will in prison camp conditions. There were allegations of physical and sexual abuse and even rumors of a planned mass suicide.

Congressman Ryan, an impassioned human rights advocate, decided to get the facts for himself. Within forty-eight hours, Ryan, Jones, and over 900 Jonestown settlers were dead -- casualties of the largest mass murder-suicide in history.

In the next few days, horrifying details of cyanide-laced soft

drinks and disturbing images of children poisoned by their parents emerged from the jungle. American Experience goes beyond the salacious headlines to provide a revealing portrait of Jones, his followers, and the times that produced the calamity in the Guyanese jungle.

The film's compelling narrative is told by the people who know the story firsthand, including Jonestown survivors, Temple defectors, and the families of the dead.

Race was an important subject for the Rev. Jim Jones, who created an integrated family, an integrated congregation, and the integrated compound at

Jonestown, in a remote part of Guyana in South America.

"We saw that 80 percent or so of the people [who joined the Peoples Temple] were African American," filmmaker Stanley Nelson notes. "What were these African Americans doing in the middle of the jungle with this white man?"

Jones' son, Jim Jones Jr. acknowledges all the suffering his father caused, but struggles to remember positive aspects of his youth in Peoples Temple. "It allowed me, as a black man, to hold my head up high," he told a reporter in 1993.

Jim Jones grew up as an outsider in Indiana. He claimed his dark hair and high cheekbones came from Cherokee blood on his mother's side. His adopted children were Korean and black, and significantly, his black son shared Jones' own name.

Peoples Temple member Gary Lambrev remembers, "Jim always pointed out not only that his family, his immediate family, was interracial by adoption but that he personally was a man who was profoundly blended of many different racial and ethnic streams.

But then increasingly as the organization became blacker and blacker, he began to talk about himself as a black man, first a man of color, and then a black man."

Jones was motivated to start Peoples Temple in part because he disliked mainstream denominations that served single-race congregations.

He found a model for his new church in Father Divine's Peace Mission on trips to Philadelphia in the late 1950s. Divine, a con-

temporary of the controversial black separatist leader Marcus Garvey, was a charismatic black preacher whose meetings were theatrical and physical.

Worshippers alternately rose up or fell to their knees; one member might be healed; another might faint at the presence of the Holy Spirit. A number of Peoples Temple members noticed a change in Jones' preaching style after he visited Father Divine. Jones became more flamboyant, and his mix of Pentecostalism and Methodism appealed to the African American community.

The worship may have been familiar in style, but Peoples Temple's social and political activism was something new. It appealed to African Americans

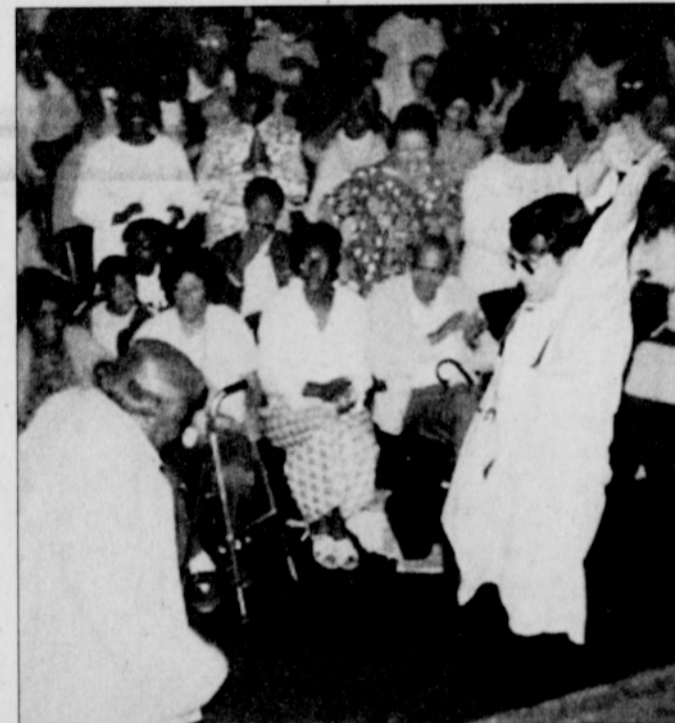
stuff a mass mailing, or enthusiastically cheer a campaign rally at a moment's notice.

Peoples Temple ran homes to care for the elderly, half a dozen foster homes for children and a ranch licensed to care for the mentally disabled. Temple social workers helped navigate the bureaucracies of the welfare system or the juvenile justice system for members. Day camps were established so that urban kids could learn to ride a horse or swim in a pond.

By 1968, a terrible year of assassinations and fear, many people who had lent their efforts to the civil rights cause found themselves wondering how to actively live Martin Luther King's dream. Jim Jones showed them how.



Bodies of Peoples Temple members surround a pavilion at Jonestown. More than nine hundred people died from cyanide poisoning on Nov. 18, 1978.



Jim Jones raises his arms up at a healing service. To the believers in the audience, they reinforced Jones' power and legitimacy. However, many of those healed looked suspiciously like Temple members wearing disguises.

looking for alternatives to their conservative churches.

Many black ministers in the late 1950s and into the 1960s were still preaching patience, asking their congregations to accept inequities and await a better future in heaven, even as forceful young leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were demanding changes in the here and now.

In many ways, Jones worked in the vanguard of these societal shifts, providing meals and home care services to the most economically distressed in Indianapolis, without discriminating by race.

He and his wife were the first white couple to adopt a black baby in the state in 1961, the year Freedom Riders trying to desegregate interstate buses were brutally attacked in Alabama.

In 1965, Peoples Temple moved its base to Ukiah, Calif. It was a tumultuous time in American history, with more than 200,000 troops fighting in Vietnam and social upheavals at home.

In this environment, Jones allied his group with progressive politicians demanding rights for minorities and the poor. Hundreds of Peoples Temple volunteers could blanket a neighborhood with fliers,

Peoples Temple welcomed people of every race and ethnicity. The racial integration became self-fulfilling at some point; the congregation itself became the draw.

Jonestown was meant to be a mixed race utopia.

In the end, Jim Jones destroyed his interracial church. The horrible end spared few members, black or white, young or old -- and the survivors were either extremely resourceful or lucky.

Perhaps the only positive thing left behind is a legacy of racial harmony. Over the years, hundreds of people joined Peoples Temple of their own free will. In hindsight, it is easy to question why individuals would join a group that became a cult and cost them their lives.

But Peoples Temple members saw things differently at the time. They joined because they believed in a society where people of all races could live and work together. They joined because they wanted their actions and examples to lead to that society.

Leaving aside, for a moment, the many ways the organization manipulated and exploited its members, it is clear that the congregants of Peoples Temple genuinely found happiness in fellowship, regardless of race.

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