

Media Review

Jonestown Documentaries on the Fortieth Anniversary

Jason S. Dikes

Reelz. “Jim Jones.” *Murder Made Me Famous*. Directed by Brad Osborne. Aired 6 May 2017.

A&E. “Jonestown: The Women Behind the Massacre.” Directed by Nicole Rittenmeyer. Aired 26 February 2018.

People Magazine. “The Jonestown Massacre.” *People Magazine Investigates: Cults*. Written by Jason Bolicki. Aired 11 June 2018.

NBC Dateline. “Jonestown: An American Tragedy.” Hosted by Lester Holt. Aired 13 July 2018.

ABC 20/20. “Jonestown: Paradise Lost.” *Truth and Lies*. Produced by Muriel Pearson. Aired 28 September 2018.

Sundance TV. “Jonestown: Terror in the Jungle.” Directed by Shan Nicholson and Richard Lopez. Aired 17–18 November 2018.

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Volume 23, Issue 2, pages 94–104. ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480. (electronic). © 2019 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2019.23.2.94>.

November 2018 marked the fortieth anniversary of the mass murder-suicides at Jonestown that ended Peoples Temple. This anniversary brought forth a crop of new documentaries on Jim Jones and Peoples Temple, with further documentaries and series still to come. Until the 11 September 2001 attacks, Jonestown represented the largest single mass death event of civilians in U.S. history. The end of Jonestown was highly visual. For the overwhelming number of Americans, their first glimpse of Peoples Temple members was film footage shot from a helicopter as it passed over a large multi-colored quilt of human bodies. Over the coming weeks, that footage would be interspersed with both scenes of a celebration at Jonestown on the night of 17 November, an airport ambush of Congressman Leo Ryan's party at Port Kaituma on 18 November, and recovery efforts as the American military began collecting and ferrying bodies out of Guyana. This story and its accompanying visuals kept Americans glued to their television sets for the rest of 1978. Although the deeper story of Peoples Temple is to be found in recordings and documents, its strong visual appeal and gruesomeness keeps it coming back to television.

Every single new documentary on Peoples Temple shows, in at least the first five minutes, that same aerial shot from 1978. While this raises concerns about what Jonathan Z. Smith calls the "pornography of Jonestown,"¹ namely the focus on the exploitative details—death, sex, drugs, and so on—most of these new documentaries move past the pornography and give a fuller picture of Peoples Temple. If nothing else, most of these documentaries dispel the notion that the members of Peoples Temple were brainwashed pawns, and instead demonstrate that these were real people who tried to make the world a better place.

It is worth noting the contrast between the Peoples Temple and Jonestown documentaries and the twenty-fifth anniversary documentaries on the Branch Davidian disaster that also aired between 2017 and 2018. Those documentaries, as analyzed by Stuart A. Wright, demonstrate that there are still hard feelings about the Branch Davidian standoff.² As Wright points out, there are numerous times when law enforcement personnel either ignored certain facts in the standoff, the post-operation reports that criticized them, or the fact that the surviving Davidians were found not guilty on many of the charges they were tried on. For Peoples Temple, there are no major disagreements and the documentaries present no real controversy about the timeline of events or their causes. This is not to say that there are not people who disagree with the narratives presented, but those people are not getting on television because so many of their counter-narratives fail to stand up under scrutiny. For example, Bo Gritz can claim in his 1991 book *Called to Serve* that U.S. Special Forces and British SAS killed most of the Jonestown residents, but he offers no proof and his tales contradict multiple eyewitnesses. Dr. David Beter can claim, as he did in Audio Letter no. 40 (30

November 1978) that the deaths at Jonestown provided cover for a U.S. military operation in Guyana to destroy a Soviet missile base and that the real Jim Jones survived and was whisked away to Israel, but again, there is no proof and these stories can live on the Internet, where they belong.

All of the documentaries reviewed here are expository, not investigatory, and since they generally are in agreement, they have to find other ways to differentiate themselves. ABC's 20/20 program combined its twentieth anniversary footage into a new show for the fortieth anniversary. NBC focused on the members of the NBC News crew who were killed at Port Kaituma. A&E zeroed in on a select group of women who made up Jones' inner circle and helped carry out the mass murder-suicides. Sundance TV partnered with Jeff Guinn and Leonardo DiCaprio to produce the longest documentary. *People Magazine* focused on a single family—whose last name was not Jones. And Reelz went for exploitation.³

Reelz' "Jim Jones" is an episode of their *Murder Made Me Famous* series, and is without doubt the worst of the programs under consideration here. This is the most sensationalistic of the documentaries and is the visual equivalent of the quickie paperback books that flooded the market right after 18 November. The music, the voiceover, and the "dramatic scenes" are all clearly intended to focus on the "pornography of Jonestown." The words "ACTUAL CRIME SCENE PHOTO" are frequently flashed on screen, along with "ACTUAL FOOTAGE OF ATTACK" and "ACTUAL AUDIO RECORDING."

The research is poor. The on-camera narrator, Steve Helling, states that no one knows why Jones wore dark sunglasses, although it is well-known that he wore them to hide evidence of his drug addiction. Basic scriptwriting rules are ignored. The camera framing is bad. The fight choreography is downright comical. Little effort is made to tell the audience why anybody joined Peoples Temple. The focus here is sex, drugs, power, and death. While scholars and survivors are interviewed for the film, only clips focusing on the salacious details are included.

A&E's program on "The Women Behind the Massacre" is a cut far, far above the Reelz film. This documentary concentrates on four women in Jim Jones' life: his wife, Marceline; his mistresses Carolyn Moore Layton and Maria Katsaris; and his personal nurse, and Carolyn's sister, Annie Moore. The thesis of this treatment is presented near the beginning. Rebecca Moore—Jonestown scholar and sister of Layton and Moore—says, "People want to blame Jim Jones for the deaths and certainly in many respects, it was his vision, but he couldn't have done it by himself."

The documentary emphasizes the last decade of growth, the founding of Jonestown, the custody battle over John Victor Stoen—the alleged son of Jim Jones—and the conflicts that led to 18 November. Woven into this overarching narrative are the four women and the roles they played in the movement. Because the spotlight is so tight on these four women

many issues are brought up that do not appear in any other documentary; but the questions raised are not necessarily answered.

For example, why did Marceline Jones fail to leave once she learned of her husband's unfaithfulness? There is no agreement on that issue. Stephan Jones, the only biological child of Jim and Marceline, believes his mother remained because she simply was not aware of the options she had in leaving; Mary Maaga, Jonestown scholar, suggests that Marceline may have felt she would have lost her Peoples Temple family and the opportunity to transform the world; Rebecca Moore speculates that Marceline stayed for the reflected glory that came from being Jim's wife and from being the "Mother" of Peoples Temple, a proposal with which Stephan disagrees.

The film also discusses the women's culpability for the mass deaths. Carolyn and Annie are implicated by memos written in Jonestown. There's no written evidence for Maria Katsaris, but multiple witnesses in the program attest to her willingness to do whatever Jim required. The sticky point is Marceline Jones, and on her, the interviewees disagree. Stephan Jones flatly states that he does not believe that his mother was involved in orchestrating a mass murder. Mary Maaga believes that Marceline was complicit by her silence and inability to stop the final White Night (White Nights were a sort of civil defense drill practiced in Jonestown), adding that Marceline may have simply been too exhausted to resist after years of watching her marriage crumble and her dreams dashed to dust. Leslie Wagner-Wilson, an African American Jonestown survivor, simply assigns blame to all four women by labeling them "enablers."

I had some concerns about the recreated scenes that featured a grainy 1970s home movie effect, but they turned out to be innocuous except for the depiction of Maria. "Marceline" is shown as she puts on make-up, "Jim" and "Carolyn" walk through the woods, "Annie" leans in a hammock writing letters. But "Maria" appears in bed playing peek-a-boo with the sheets. While this might fit with Jonestown survivor Laura Johnston Kohl's reference to Maria as "young meat," it was Carolyn who bore Jim a son, not Maria. Since she was a Temple treasurer, the filmmakers could have shown Maria counting money rather than rolling around on a bed to arouse the viewers.

While I appreciated the depth the film attempted, questions remained. This documentary spends a considerable amount of time postulating what the women got out of their sexual relationship with Jones. But men's relationships with Jones were never investigated. How many of Jim's guards, the ones who went to kill at Port Kaituma or the ones during the final White Night, were sexual partners? Why is there only a focus on women and sex? Will there be a "Men of Jonestown" documentary? Larry Schacht, Jonestown's doctor, bought the cyanide and figured out the proper proportions needed for a mass murder/suicide.

Jim McElvane, one of Jones' main enforcers and bodyguards, shut down Temple member Christine Miller's arguments against mass suicide.⁴ The identified shooters at the airstrip—and Temple member Larry Layton, the only person who faced any kind of prosecution for the events in Jonestown that day—were all male. And the armed security guards who stood around while three hundred children were murdered were primarily male. I think the filmmakers focused on these four women only because they were part of the inner circle who got the process rolling and, if the producers are honest about it, because of the shock value of the perpetrators' sex. Men committing atrocities no longer astonish us. But women who organize and plan mass murder? That still has the capacity to shock and titillate.

While A&E focuses on four women, *People Magazine's* investigation into *Cults* concentrates on a single family. The documentary tells the story of the Parks family: Jerry and his wife Patty, Jerry's mother, and the three Parks children, though only Jerry and one daughter, Tracy, appear for interviews. The Parks family joined Peoples Temple in the 1950s when it was in Indianapolis and remained with it until literally the last day, when they left Jonestown with Congressman Ryan and Patty was killed during the Port Kaituma ambush.

The show does an excellent job showing why people joined Peoples Temple. Jerry and Tracy Parks and Laura Johnston Kohl all mention the importance of family, civil rights, an integrated church, food pantry, elder care, and even "heaven on earth," when they describe the early movement. This reinforces the normality of the people and the humanity of their goals. If Jim Jones had died sometime in the mid-1960s, he *might* be remembered as an obscure civil rights pioneer with some eccentricities and control issues.

The surveillance system that eventually encompassed Peoples Temple is one example of Jones' obsession with control; no other documentary covers this. According to Johnston Kohl, "visitations" started out as a church program to follow up with visitors or to make sure members in the hospital or who were going through hard times did not fall between the cracks. Every large church has a similar team of people who do this. Eventually, Jones' need for domination led the previously innocuous visitations to becoming a spy operation to find out who had negative feelings about Jones or Peoples Temple. This kind of denunciation could come from anywhere. Jerry Parks relates the beating he received in Jonestown as a result of telling his cousin that he did not like it there. This breakdown of familial relations is barely touched upon in some of the other documentaries.

NBC's *Dateline Jonestown: An American Tragedy* pays tribute to the journalists who traveled to Jonestown with Congressman Leo Ryan. Three of those journalists—reporter Don Harris of NBC News, cameraman Bob Brown of NBC News, and *San Francisco Examiner* photographer Greg

Robinson—were killed in the Port Kaituma ambush while others were wounded. Their deaths have long been overshadowed by Ryan's murder and the mass murder-suicides that took place later that day, so highlighting their lives, instead of the man who ordered their murders, is a necessary and welcome endeavor.

Because the program is only 41 minutes long, it opens with a quick history of Peoples Temple and an overview of the journalists' backgrounds and their preparation for the trip to Jonestown. Once this is done, the account moves to the events of 17–18 November with narration provided by the four surviving journalists—Tim Reiterman, Charles Krause, Steve Sung, Ron Javers, and Ryan's aide (and now Congresswoman) Jackie Speier. A great deal of footage, some unseen until this airing, is shown from the party on the evening of 17 November and the story of Temple member and survivor Vernon Gosney slipping a note to Don Harris is included as part of this evening's events.

Reporting the news can be competitive, with every journalist trying to gain an exclusive, so it is surprising when Tim Reiterman relates that on the morning of 18 November, prompted by Gosney's note to Harris, all the newsmen agreed to team up in Jonestown, gather as much information as possible, and pool it for everyone to use. The surviving reporters and Speier narrate the events of 18 November, the defections, the ambush shooting at the airstrip, the mass murder-suicides, and the discovery of the mass deaths at Jonestown.

There are a couple of genuinely eerie moments. Many years earlier, cameraman Bob Brown told his wife that he would not carry a gun when he was in Vietnam: "Whoever shoots me, I'm gonna get their picture." This prediction came true on 18 November, when Brown videotaped the shot that killed him. While several reporters talk about omens and bad feelings they had, it is impossible to know to what extent their recollections are tainted by the events, except for Ryan's aide, Jackie Speier. Her "bad feeling" was so strong that she put off signing the paperwork to buy a condominium before going to Jonestown.

The news show routinely uses the word "cult" to describe Peoples Temple. While the program does highlight the good work Peoples Temple did with drug and alcohol rehabilitation, free restaurants, pantries, and so on, the weight of the word "cult" is just too biased. Another negative point was the ending, in which the events are described as "A question with no answer." I am not sure what the question is, but there are plenty of answers. Jim Jones and Peoples Temple have been the subject of forty years of research by academics—there are a lot of answers.

Other than the unseen footage, there is nothing new here about Peoples Temple itself. The reporters are the story, not Jonestown. In this day and age where, according to polls, a good number of Americans actively hate the media, this program is a reminder that some journalists have lost their lives in pursuit of the news.

In contrast, the ABC news magazine *20/20: Jonestown Truth & Lies*, provides an excellent overview to Jonestown and Peoples Temple. At 82 minutes, enough is covered to give a broad outline of the twenty-five year history of the group. At the same time, it is not so long as to bog someone down into the minutiae of a longer documentary, or even the in-depth dives of the shorter ones discussed earlier. The program hits the right notes in the story: Peoples Temple in Redwood Valley, San Francisco, politics, sex, drugs, bus trips, investigation, exodus, Jonestown, and death. Some of the footage is from ABC's special produced for the twentieth anniversary in 1998; they make heavy use of previous interviews with Stephan Jones and Jim Jones Jr. along with the trip that the two men made to the Jonestown site that year. Also included are interview clips with other Temple members, including footage from Stanley Nelson's award-winning documentary *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (2006) that originally aired as part of Public Broadcasting Service's "American Experience" series.

One thing that sets this effort apart is that it is only one of two documentaries to spend any significant time on Jones' childhood in Lynn and his early ministry in Indianapolis. In the early ministry, the emphasis on good works, fighting racism and poverty, and other social activism attracted members and created what Stephan refers to as a "connection in spirit." But Stephan also relates that once in Jonestown, a "collective madness" took over and that whatever connected them together in life ultimately bonded them to death. The impression given here of Jim Jones is that he was a complicated civil rights pioneer. As Stephan puts it, "I think Dad always knew he was a fraud." Once the move to California is made in 1965, things get scary and weird, and this is where professional filmmaking, good production values, and storytelling come to the fore.

The editing of the California period reinforces the duality of Jones' character. Temple defector Deborah Layton discusses how kind and generous Jones was, and then, in the next edit, how he broke apart family bonds, exerting more control over people by having members sign blank confessions. When corporal punishment is described in detail, we hear in the background recordings of people being punched and slapped in meetings, with Jones' sick giggle floating over the sounds. Demonstrations of Jones' growing political power are reinforced by describing how Jones ingratiated himself into San Francisco politics by bringing in busloads of members for demonstrations or other political events. When former Temple member Yolanda Williams characterizes Jones as a "predator," a shot of a big spider in its web appears on screen. Nature itself, especially when the narrative moves to Guyana, becomes a character. There are several scenes of the jungle, reminding viewers of Jonestown's remoteness. One particular shot—an overhead shot moving upriver—is used over and over again, which evokes the trip to madness of

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (or *Apocalypse Now*), and to the "collective madness" as Stephan calls it earlier.

It takes half of the program to get to the exodus to Jonestown, which means that viewers have received a solid foundation for understanding this group and these people. Once things move to Guyana, it is just plain scary. Jones is able to drop his façade as he rules over a work camp full of people who are terrified and are turning on each other and reinforcing Jones' delusions. Stephan describes it as "peer pressure run amok" and the "collective madness" settles over Jonestown like a fog. The documentary runs to the tragic conclusion.

The program does do some curious things, however. Rather than name people, it just says "someone," as in "someone" handed a note to NBC reporter Don Harris, and "someone" shut down Christine Miller's arguments. There is no mystery about who did those things. Vernon Gosney handed the note to Harris, and Jim McElvane talked over Christine Miller. I assume this shorthand was used to keep the number of names a viewer has to juggle to a minimum, but it was off-putting for anyone familiar with the history of the movement. The film attributes the "Last Words" document to an anonymous person, but the general conclusion is that it was written by Jonestown resident Dick Tropp.

While the documentary asserts that Jonestown could not feed its population, it does not say anything about the millions of dollars stashed in bank accounts and why that money was never used. In fact, very little is mentioned about money in any of these shows. Until the credits, there is no reference made to the group of people who sneaked out of Jonestown during Ryan's visit and left via the railroad tracks. And no mention is made of Larry Layton's attack on defectors in the second plane, or trusted member of Jones' inner circle Sharon Amos' decision to murder three of her children, Christa, Liane, and Martin before killing herself.

ABC's efforts here are fine, just incomplete. It seems that the producers, running short on time, made cuts where necessary. Because it was produced for a commercial station and the competition for viewers is fierce, every time the show goes to a commercial, it uses a film clip or audio recording clip to remind the viewer that there is a mass murder-suicide coming, so do not change that channel!

The longest program is the Sundance documentary, *Jonestown: Terror in the Jungle*, which goes into more detail than any of the others under review. At three hours in length, it is twice as long as its closest competitor. Produced by Leonardo DiCaprio's Appian Way Productions, and based on Jeff Guinn's 2017 *The Road to Jonestown: Jim Jones and Peoples Temple* (Guinn is interviewed and on-screen during this documentary) it follows the narrative that the other shows have followed, but gives some areas greater attention, while introducing some unique elements.

The documentary discusses how Jones created enemies where none existed, thus allowing him to tighten his control and increase the group's isolation. This is hinted at in other programs, but it is clarified here through highlighting Peoples Temple newspapers and discussing a fake assassination attempt in May 1972 at the church's Redwood Valley location. Some members recognized what was going on, but as Jonestown survivor Tim Carter puts it, red flags were ignored because of the overarching mission. As Jones' desire for control grew, the amount of time spent to maintain that control exponentially escalated his drug use.

The most unique part of this documentary is the participation of Grace Stoen who, to my knowledge, has never contributed to any film about her experience in Peoples Temple.⁵ Stoen had begun attending Temple services in 1970 with her boyfriend, later husband, Tim Stoen. On 6 February 1972, Tim signed an affidavit identifying Jim Jones as John Victor Stoen's biological father. After Tim and Grace left the church, a protracted legal battle broke out over custody of John Victor.

Because of Grace Stoen's presence, the custody battle over John Victor Stoen is laid out in more detail than anywhere else. The rulings by U.S. courts, the effect that had on Guyana's courts, and the Six-Day Siege,⁶ are all carefully presented. They explain Jones' deep concern about the ramifications of legally removing any child from Jonestown. If a precedent was set by John Victor's removal, then a cascade of removals could follow, and Jones knew that if children started leaving, adults would too. Wherever the children went, the adults would follow. Knowing this, Jones had the children murdered first on 18 November. His biological son Stephan believes that many people in Jonestown were putting up with the problems because of the children; when they died, their deaths deflated the adult community. This is a key point and it is spelled out plainly. The filmmakers then serve up the most heartbreaking sequence in any of these documentaries. Photographs of the children of Jonestown—sunshine and smiles, laughter and playing—are juxtaposed against the voice of Jim Jones on the last day: "Adults, adults, adults, I call on you to stop this nonsense. I call on you to quit exciting your children when all they're doing is going to a quiet rest."

The Sundance program also supplies one of the better post-mortems on the Temple in the aftermath. Things got worse for survivors. The media attention was overwhelming; FBI agents grilled survivors on their return; and people made terrible jokes. *Terror in the Jungle* shows the emotional turmoil that followed for years. For example, Vernon Gosney talks about his experience of PTSD, where he felt that he was still in Jonestown despite his escape; Jim Jones Jr. frankly discusses his suicidal fixation; and Stephan Jones obliquely references substance abuse problems.

CONCLUSION

The fortieth anniversary of the end of Peoples Temple brought forth more than a half dozen documentaries, some of which did not air until 2019 and some of which are still in production. Clearly, much work went into the documentaries, even the bad ones. Interviews have to be held, audio and film footage has to be acquired, recreated scenes have to be filmed, and then the whole thing has to be put together. Time, money, and effort were expended on these mostly commendable efforts.

It is difficult to recommend one documentary over another, because a film that works in a history class may not work as well for a psychology or a religion class. Nevertheless, despite this year's crop, the single best overall introduction to Peoples Temple and Jonestown, is still the 2006 *Jonestown: the Life and Death of Peoples Temple*. ABC's *20/20: Jonestown Truth & Lies* runs a close second because of its curious habit saying "someone," as in "someone" handed a note to NBC reporter Don Harris, and "someone" shut down Christine Miller's arguments when the names of people who did those things are known; but the teasing of death every fifteen minutes when the program goes to commercial is truly annoying. After that, Sundance's would be the next one since it expands the story. The remaining two can be screened in any order, since Reelz's efforts should not be watched at all.

I cannot imagine that the subject of Jonestown will ever fade from television, so to the future writers and producers, let me say: enough Jim Jones. Other than his theological beliefs, it seems like we have a pretty good handle on this complicated person, as much as one can get forty years after his death. Toward the end of ABC's *Truth and Lies* Laura Johnston Kohl says, "917 other people died, and I think it's criminal that we know so much about Jim Jones . . . what about these other people?" How about programs on the people of Peoples Temple? One of the things I appreciated about *The Women Behind the Massacre* was that it focused on other people, as did *People's* presentation of the Parks family, and NBC's highlighting the journalists. Even Sundance's program, due to its length, put the spotlight on other people.

If future writers and producers are going to continue focusing on Jones, then another suggestion is to stop treading the same ground and try to investigate areas that these shows missed such as: Father Divine's influence on Jones and the idea of the leader as "Father," Peoples Temple's association with the Disciples of Christ, Jones' Brazil years, Peoples Temple's help in getting George Moscone elected mayor of San Francisco, Jones' relationship with other politicians in California, many of whom are still alive and have never been asked hard questions about their relationship to Jones, private investigator Joe Mazor, the role of Temple attorney Mark Lane, visits by Soviet officials to Jonestown,

Jones' declining health at Jonestown, and Temple spokesman Mike Prokes' suicide shortly after a press conference he held on 13 March 1979.⁷ There are many untold stories. It is time to tell them.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Devil and Mr. Jones," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, 102–20 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109.

² Stuart A. Wright, "Media Review. Waco After Twenty-Five Years: Media Reconstructions of the Federal Siege of the Branch Davidians," *Nova Religio* 22, no. 3 (February 2019): 108–20.

³ A word about recreated footage. All of the documentaries use re-enactments to some extent. It would have been helpful to have some on-screen notice that the footage being viewed was recreated.

⁴ Christine Miller was a sixty-year-old African-American member of Peoples Temple. Her arguments against mass suicide can be heard on Q042, the so-called "death tape" recorded on 18 November 1978.

⁵ Stoen did give interviews to Mary Maaga for *Hearing the Voices of Jonestown* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998).

⁶ The Six-Day Siege was an event in Jonestown manufactured by Jim Jones and the leadership cadre in September 1977 in response to an attempted visit to Jonestown by the Stoens' attorney.

⁷ This catalog comes from "100 Events in the History of Peoples Temple," *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple*, <https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Timeline100.pdf>.