

SONGS PRIMARILY IN THE KEY OF LIFE

JACKET

Within every collection of vinyl LPs or compact discs, two different types of records are found: those dusty with neglect and those affectionately scratched. Among my scratchiest is a light funk-gospel album recorded in 1973 by the world's most infamous suicide cult.

It's a twelve-song collection, a mix of old spirituals, gospel-inspired originals, and a couple of late '60s Top 40 hits, all performed by a full choir and an eight-piece, blue-eyed soul outfit with a hot brass section. On the record jacket, the album's title is printed in austere white lettering: *He's Able*. The name comes from the chorus of an old revival-tent anthem, a sultry little call-and-response number that leads off the record's B-side. It's the kind of song you might hear one Sunday morning in the Deep South, the kind that's sung in a sunlit place where the women carry fans and the air is heavy with hallelujahs.

In the cover photo, we see the choir standing on the far side of a small pond, ninety or so people bunched along the shore, facing forward, small and individually indistinct against a wooded background. The women wear plain aqua-blue gowns, and the men are in black pants with light blue oxfords and dark ties. Racially, they're a mixed bag, about equal numbers black and white. I count no fewer than fifteen afros, hovering like halos around dark, smiling faces.

Although the photo shows the full chorus, not all of the choir members actually sing on the album—just a couple dozen. Their voices were multi-tracked in the studio, then played back on top of one another in order to give the impression of a fuller chorus. In fact, there's only one track on *He's Able* where we hear more than a few dozen voices raised simultaneously, and that's on the eventual "bonus" thirteenth track. Except in that instance, the voices aren't singing.

There are several small photos on the back of the jacket,

including another shot of the choir, this time crowded onto a wooded path. Their arms are raised above their heads in what looks like praise but could just as easily be surrender. In another photo is a young white man, handsome in a suit jacket and tie, his black hair parted neatly to the side and glistening slightly with pomade. He stands at a lectern with his eyes cast downward, his right hand resting casually along its wooden edge. The look on his face is serene and coolly regal, like that of a general before his troops. He's clutching an object that's half-cropped out of the photo and difficult to identify. If we look very closely, we can see that it's a pair of dark sunglasses.

Beneath the photo is a caption: "Our choir consists of people from all walks of life. We are dedicated to one common cause—making the humanistic teachings of Jesus Christ part of our daily lives. Our inspiration is a lifestyle demonstrated by our pastor, James W. Jones."

He's Able is out of print. Has been since 1978, when most of the singers and musicians featured on it killed themselves in the jungles of Guyana by drinking cyanide-laced Flavor Aid in what has come to be known as the Jonestown Massacre.

SIDE ONE

I. "Welcome" (1:32)

The first track on *He's Able* starts out jauntily, with just a snare drum and eight seconds of springy piano melody. It's the kind of twinkly theme that might play over the opening credits of a kiddie show on public television, the sound of primary colors and wobbly cartoon animals. Then the children's choir comes in, and it's like someone throwing a bucket of silverware down a laundry chute. They're yelling at top volume:

*Welcome, welcome all of you!
Glad you are with us!
Shake hands, no need to be blue!
Welcome to you!*

Of the twelve official tracks on the album, "Welcome" is the only one to feature the Peoples Temple children's choir. It's a classic "filler track," like "Within You Without You" on *Sgt. Pepper's* or "Jigsaw Puzzle" on *Beggars Banquet*. Totally dis-

tinct from the album's overall sound, which otherwise has a sort of funk-rock timbre, a kind of Baptist-gospel-choir-meets-early-Doobie-Brothers vibe that involves neither school-recital piano melodies nor squadrons of screaming children. But when members of the California church known as Peoples Temple set out to record an album in the spring of 1973, they wanted to start it off in the same manner as their Holy Roller-style services, with a musical greeting from the congregation's youth. It made sense, given their expectation that the record would end up primarily in the hands of congregation members who couldn't make it to services. An advertisement for *He's Able* in the spring 1973 church newsletter reads, "Bring the service into your own home! You will close your eyes and imagine yourself right in the services of Peoples Temple with your Pastor, Jim Jones."

Don Beck directed the Temple children's choir for eight years. He says that singing "Welcome" was a tradition dating back to the church's early days in the late 1950s, when Peoples Temple was just a few dozen families gathering in a rented storefront in inner-city Indianapolis. Beck himself didn't join until 1970, five years after Jones moved his flock to rural northern California. He was a Peace Corps alum and a Bay-area seeker, a young bohemian attracted to the Temple by its commitment to racial integration and its opposition to the Vietnam War. Even today, Beck talks about *He's Able* in terms of pacifism and social justice.

"Listening to it takes you back to the days of Martin Luther King," he says. "Back to the days of singing 'We Shall Overcome.'"

After Beck joined the Temple, he dropped out of grad school at Berkeley. He moved to the church's headquarters in Redwood Valley, a small town north of San Francisco where Temple members were experimenting with communal living. Once there, he recalls being put in charge of the children's choir somewhat arbitrarily. At the time, the church pianist had her hands full with a few dozen kids in Redwood Valley, plus another seventy or so who showed up each week at the Temple's San Francisco services. Beck was a former architecture student with no musical background. He couldn't hold a tune, but he'd worked with kids in the Peace Corps, and he had a knack for corralling them, for

holding their attention. He'd been working with the Temple's tutoring program when the pianist approached him for help, and the next thing he knew, the young San Fran peacenik was the Peoples Temple's junior choir director.

"I always did love waving my hands around," he says.

Only about twenty-five kids made it onto the *He's Able* record album. We can see them in a series of photos on the back of the record jacket, a gaggle of multiracial children between four and twelve years old. They're wearing earphones, facing a set of area mics, standing and squatting and grinning wildly in the manner of an elementary school class photo. The setting is a Los Angeles recording studio called Producer's Workshop. Long-since closed, the studio was a low-rent, ground-floor affair, wedged next to an X-rated theater on a dicey stretch of Hollywood Boulevard. Its youngest sound engineer in 1973 was a twenty-three-year-old techie named Bob Schaper, whose lack of seniority got him assigned to man the boards during the half-dozen Saturdays of cut-rate, after-hours sessions that resulted in *He's Able*.

Schaper still recalls the pandemonium the night the kids' choir came in to record "Welcome." Producer's Workshop was a real geek's lair, a cramped dungeon with a nonetheless killer recording setup. It was ornamented humbly with ashtrays, carpet squares, and LP covers. The studio lacked room for even a couch or a coffee maker, much less a thirty-child chorus, so between takes, the kids would fan out across the tiny complex in search of sleeping space. They sprawled in cabinets, hallways, and bathrooms, piling up on every available surface like the cigarette butts overflowing the ashtrays.

"There were just so many bodies," Schaper says innocently. "Everywhere I looked there were children's bodies."

This is an unfortunate turn of phrase, as it inevitably calls to mind the more than three hundred children who were fed potassium cyanide when Peoples Temple self-destructed five years later, in November of 1978. It's a common problem when discussing the Temple: Even in a context that ostensibly avoids the topic of Jonestown, the 918 people who died there linger behind every conversation like the barely heard remnants of a root language. It's difficult to talk at length about the church,

its members, or its history without stumbling blindly into some sort of grisly double entendre. But this difficulty is also a central part of what makes *He's Able* such an enigmatic artifact.

"Welcome" crashes along for a couple of minutes, the pianist allowing herself a few ragtimey embellishments here and there, the kids' already shrill voices giving way to something like screaming on the higher notes. Then a quick snare roll, the satisfying chink of a closed hi-hat, and one final unison howl:

Welcome!

2. "Walking with You Father" (2:58)

There is a sound that a very fast car makes when it takes off from a dead stop with its radio blasting the oldies station. It's not the scree of squealed tires or the clangity-clang of the Lovin' Spoonful, but a precise and high-frequency tremolo that's born of their combination, just as water is formed from the mixture of hydrogen and oxygen. It's the sort of sound that prompts demure girls in letter jackets to laugh with their heads back and tug suggestively at their skirts, and it's amplified if the car in question has no top or if it's heading out on the first leg of a long road trip. "Walking with You Father" sounds a lot like this.

It's a rocker, the first track on *He's Able* to feature the full band. Culled straight from the pews, the Peoples Temple band was a rotating ensemble of amateurs who dabbled in a kind of light-FM blues-rock. The lead guitar lines on the album are twangy and clean, somewhere between the Delta and the sock-hop. The piano is tin-pan jangly. The soloists jive and croon over a tight bedrock of bass and brass, drums and organ. It's all very early seventies West Coast rock, a lot of syncopation and a sort of show-band zeal, except for the choir itself, which sounds just a twinge too earnest, just a shade too *white* to really fall in with the band's primitive funkiness. And the effect of this is totally endearing, like hearing a middling-but-enthusiastic marching band fart its way through "Proud Mary."

"Walking with You Father" comes in on a rollicking ten-second guitar riff, the kind that might cue a concert audience to whoop in recognition. It's the only place in the piano-, organ-, and brass-driven number where an electric guitar even appears, but it's the first time we hear an axe on *He's Able*, and the man wielding it is the man responsible for the record itself.

Jack Arnold Beam is credited as arranger and producer on the album's promo materials, but most Temple members knew him simply as Jack Arnold. His middle name was invoked to differentiate him from his dad, Jack Beam Sr., whom Jim Jones took on as his first associate pastor in 1955. Growing up in Indianapolis, Jack Arnold used to watch as his father and Jones preached to rental halls full of white folks and black folks alike, a nearly unheard of phenomenon then and there. He saw the crowds swell as Jones's star rose, witnessed the healings that made him famous—the bloody tumors passed in church bathrooms, the wheelchair-bound parishioners leaping to their feet in praise. Jack Arnold heard the sermons about brotherhood and justice, the ones that seemed to pierce you with a bright and focused light, and he heard the ones about revolution and conspiracy, sermons that always went down better when followed by an extravagant healing or two.

He was a musician and, like any pastor's kid, a bit of a rebel. When he turned eighteen in 1963, he left Peoples Temple in Indiana and moved with a bandmate to the Bay Area hinterland of Hayward, California. Jack Arnold got a job in an auto factory there, and he played guitar at night in a pop trio, gigging around San Francisco and Oakland while the California rock scene was in its infancy. The trio became a five-piece with the memorable handle of Stark Naked and the Car Thieves. Eventually, the band struck out for LA, and for four years, Jack Arnold played the SoCal club scene alongside groups that would become emblematic of the California sound: Buffalo Springfield, Love, Three Dog Night. Stark Naked never hit the big time, but they did manage to sign with a Hollywood-based label in 1967, just a few months before Jack Arnold left the band. American Variety International was also home to Liberace and Debbie Reynolds. It owned the rights to pop songs like "Tainted Love" and "Dirty Water." And it managed a slapdash but storied recording studio on Hollywood Boulevard called Producer's Workshop.

The chorus of "Walking with You Father" has this great organ part floating around in the background. It's wild and unrestrained and not completely on key, and when I hear it, I picture a googly-eyed monster from *The Muppet Show* band just wailing away on a Wurlitzer or a Hammond B-3. It's like a carnival

anthem on fast-forward, a series of whirring, scattershot chords as a pair of hands bounce with only vague intention from one assemblage of keys to the next. Above it, a pair of dueling divas channel their best Aretha Franklins, proclaiming:

*Wash us! Fill us!
Cleanse us with your power!
While we're walking with you Father!*

Jack Arnold wrote that chorus, the music and lyrics. In his eventual capacity as Peoples Temple's band and choir director, he wrote about half the songs on *He's Able*. The Temple had been in California for five years already when Jack Arnold abandoned a post-Stark Naked project to head to college in the Bay Area in 1969. He settled near Redwood Valley to be close to his family, and his takeover of the Temple's music program was almost a foregone conclusion. If *He's Able* sounds like an obscure '70s gospel-soul LP plucked from a crate at a retro-hip vinyl shack—and not like a plodding liturgical sing-along—this can be attributed almost solely to Jack Arnold.

A case in point about those awkward double entendres: It's hard to listen to "Walking with You Father" without suspecting that the choir is singing not about a god-in-heaven, but instead about their pastor Jim Jones. By 1973, Temple members were already referring to Jones as "Father" or just "Dad." The young, raven-haired preacher had not yet begun claiming to be a god himself, but he was regularly described in church materials and members' testimonials as having god-like abilities. In the same Temple newsletter that first announces the release of *He's Able*, Jones is alternately attributed the power of telepathy, the ability to speak in several languages at once, and the ability to walk on water. Of course, he's credited with a number of miraculous healings as well, and several of these flirt rather provocatively with necromancy.

Whoever they're singing to, the soloists on "Walking with You Father" hold forth with a furious enthusiasm. It's easily the record's most upbeat track. I like to picture the choir while they're belting out the song's crescendo, the last four syllables of the title held for a few measures and flourishing at forte while the band pounds out an Allman Brothers-style, cacophonous

ending. They've got their arms raised, their eyes lifted to the studio's dingy tiled ceiling. Jack Arnold stands in front, waving his arms like a half-mad maestro, demanding *more, more!* The sound swells until it fills the room, until the coffee mugs atop nearby amps begin to tremble and clink. A wisp of cigarette smoke curls out of the booth, where the young engineer Bob Schaper looks on appreciatively. Then Jack Arnold makes a quick circular motion with his hands, closes his palms to fists, and the room goes silent.

3. "Set Them Free" (2:31)

4. "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" (3:29)

5. "Hold On, Brother" (2:29)

The next three tracks on *He's Able* collectively make up the heart and soul of the record. Together, they form a sort of social justice triptych that reflects not just the Temple's commitments, but also the musical environment from which *He's Able* emerged. Soul music in 1973 was at the height of its influence as both a pop music format and an outlet for social justice rhetoric, particularly for black America. Albums like Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* soundtrack and Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* had cemented soul as a genre distinct from the rhythm and blues that had dominated black popular music since the 1950s. Soul embraced aspects of gospel music that were understated or wholly lacking in R&B—a penchant for call-and-response, a fondness for pitch-wavering melisma. But above all, soul music took on gospel's agency, its testimonial mission. The music of artists like Mayfield, Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown sermonized on secular themes of civil rights and social justice, just as surely as gospel music praised the Lord and doled out the divine revelation. If gospel was the wailing preacher at his pulpit, then soul was the street-corner prophet, hopped up on rhythm and clutching his microphone in a clenched fist.

All of which dovetailed nicely with the mission of Peoples Temple. From its inception, the Temple had been as much a social enterprise as a spiritual one, founded on principles of charity and racial equality—its unofficial motto was "Brotherhood Is Our Religion." Back in Indianapolis, the church had been as renowned for its soup kitchens and nursing homes as it was vilified for its integrated congregation. Temple members had organized

high-profile boycotts of the city's segregated businesses. They'd funded mission work abroad. In 1960, Jones was even appointed chair of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission.

Almost as soon as they'd settled in California, Peoples Temple became a leader among the state's charitable and social justice organizations. They were awarded government contracts to run in-home care programs for recovering addicts and the elderly. The church established foster homes for Bay Area orphans and delinquents, paid college tuition for its younger members, even established its own Temple-run dorms. When members organized write-in campaigns supporting civil rights and other causes, they churned out letters to newspapers and state leaders with a fervor that made the ACLU look like the John Birch Society. By 1973, the Temple had a reputation throughout California as an offbeat but powerfully benevolent social force.

All of this noble ambition is distilled into a certain silkiness, a serenity and confidence that characterizes the vocals on "Set Them Free" and "Hold On, Brother." The female soloist on the former track sounds a lot like Maureen McGovern, tightrope-walking a thin line between innocent and coquettish as she sings about how love will set us free, about "giving to those who need a change of mind." There's a saxophone solo in "Set Them Free" that might have come right off a film noir soundtrack—it's slow and deliberate, almost erotic in its hesitancy. In "Hold On, Brother," another soprano soloist builds gradually to a climactic trilling of the title line, a near-orgasmic a cappella cry that would have Paula Abdul weeping through her mascara. If there's a theme running through these tracks, it's that social justice is *sexy*.

Far and away, though, my favorite track on *He's Able* is "Walk a Mile in My Shoes." It's the record's first cover, a hot-buttered soul spin on the Joe South country rock tune that reached #12 on the pop chart and eventually fell into Elvis Presley's Vegas repertoire. This kind of dabbling in the Top 40 canon was common in Peoples Temple liturgy. Their typical songbook looked like a cross between a Baptist hymnal and a playlist on the oldies station, accommodating, for example, Burt Bacharach's "What the World Needs Now" and Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." Still, it's not the song choice that makes this track a winner. It's the singer.

Melvin Johnson was in his mid-twenties and living on the streets in San Francisco when a shoestring cousin brought him to Peoples Temple around 1969. He'd spent most of his young adulthood behind bars. With a set of parole papers, an estranged daughter, and nothing to lose, Johnson gave himself to the church. He became a constant presence at the San Francisco temple, volunteering as a driver for the Temple's bus fleet and eventually joining the choir. He found a job driving a cab, and he saved his paychecks while members in the Temple communes signed theirs over to the church. Most importantly, Peoples Temple gave Johnson a family again. By the time he was singing on *He's Able* in 1973, Melvin Johnson had married long-time Temple member Wanda Kice. And not only was his daughter back in his life, he had three new stepsons too, from Wanda's previous marriages.

But the singer who pours himself into the mic on "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" is no work-a-day churchgoing family man, no meek Sunday-morning Joe. From the second he lets loose with his first melodic moan—a velvety *oooh yea-eah-eah*—you can tell that this is a brother who's been there. Somebody who's worn a pair of shoes you might think twice about stepping into. Johnson's got pipes, channeling a non-falsetto Al Green when he sings lines like

*Well, I may be common people but I'm your brother
and when you strike out and try to hurt me, it's hurting you.*

As a listener, you just can't help but buy it. You can't help but think that this is a guy who believes every word he's singing, that the lyrics mean more to him than they did to Joe South or Elvis. Even Johnson's breathy vocalizations come from someplace deeper than those of any polished radio crooner. The band is cooking too, and musically, this rendition gives the others a run for their money. It's a straight-up specimen of authentic soul, and it banishes for a time even the hint of a thought about Kool-Aid or cults or bodies piled up in the jungle.

That's what's ultimately so impressive about the church-choir proto-funk on *He's Able*. You put it on bemused, expecting some sort of haunting historical document. Then you press play, and the music comes at you like a confetti explosion, all

crashing piano chords and fret-shimmying electric guitar. And you don't hear a group of religious fanatics whose zealotry will culminate in the Jonestown Massacre. You don't hear a cult at all—just a great gospel-rock band and choir who sound like they're having a hell of a time.

Which is kind of a big deal, when you figure that there are stacks of Peoples Temple literature out there devoted to drumming up just that kind of empathy. Since Jonestown, dozens of books, articles, documentary films, and even theatrical plays have attempted to fix their audiences' gaze beyond the Jonestown suicides, banishing the image of the cult in favor of portraying real people with real motivations. It's just a tough cerebral move to make, blocking out all those corpses in order to understand the Temple members as something other than sinister zombies or tragic sheep—as passionate, fallible, well-intentioned individuals.

But put on the record and play a couple of tracks, and with the right ear, you understand it instantly. All that good intention, all that humanity that struggles to make itself known in the books and the movies, you can hear it plain as day in the first up-tempo boogie-woogie piano scale; you can hear it in the tinny snare rolls of an overeager drummer, and in the cool, throaty *mmm hmmm*s and *oh yeahs* of a riffing soloist. It's all right there—everything that drew these people in, everything they wanted to accomplish, everything they failed at. It comes out of your stereo speakers like a sunbeam through a stained-glass window. And it sort of breaks your heart.

6. “Down from His Glory” (2:58)

There are fewer degrees of separation between *He's Able* and mainstream rock-and-roll history than you might immediately suspect. Consider, for example, that a post-Steely Dan, pre-Doobie Brothers Michael McDonald took a turn as a keyboardist for Stark Naked and the Car Thieves just two years after Jack Arnold left the band. Or that Producer's Workshop, where Temple members pulled all-night recording sessions, once hosted Elvis Presley and would later capture several tracks for Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. By the time he went into the studio with the Temple band and choir, the young recording engineer Bob

Schaper had already rubbed shoulders with folks like James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt, and Carly Simon.

Schaper still recalls the *He's Able* sessions fondly. By 1973, the Temple had expanded into Los Angeles, and the band and choir members spent weekends busing between services in Redwood Valley, San Francisco, and LA. They'd file into the LA studio on Saturday nights, road-weary but well-rehearsed. Jack Arnold directed the group while Schaper settled into the booth to man the console. As Schaper tells it, Producer's Workshop was sort of the *Millennium Falcon* of recording studios. It was jerry-rigged from top to bottom, the equipment stripped down, tinkered with, and rewired by one of the studio's brilliant-but-unorthodox engineers. The resulting sound was the envy of audio geeks across LA, but the postage-stamp studio was no Abbey Road. It was crudely soundproofed and absurdly located, so that people working elsewhere in the building had to cut through on their way to the bathroom. During takes, Schaper had to turn off the air conditioning so the mics wouldn't pick up the sound of its sputtering motor.

In that chaotic atmosphere, the Temple members put down a couple of tracks each week, sometimes working until dawn while Schaper cut and spliced the tape by hand. It was a scene set for flaring tempers and impatient outbursts.

"But they were all just sweethearts," Schaper remembers. He had never heard of Peoples Temple before he was assigned the job, and he was struck by their attitude and behavior. "Honestly, they seemed to embody everything you would want in a religious community. They were integrated. Their attitude was loving. They were relaxed, with no 'cult' qualities at all—not paranoid, not off-putting, not exclusive."

Then something changed. After an initial couple of weeks in the studio, Schaper started noticing that the demeanor of the ordinarily laid-back band and choir members would transform whenever Jim Jones came up in conversation. They'd get a little edgy, a little more solemn. At the mention of their pastor's name, adult choir members would go straight-faced and correct their posture. Then one night, the group's anxiety seemed to swell. They wanted to review the previous weeks' tapes, and they bickered over their quality. They seemed distressed by the

studio's regular disarray and started sweeping the floors, emptying the ashtrays. Suddenly, everything had to be perfect. The following week, Schaper realized, Jones himself was scheduled to record.

Jim Jones was nearing the height of his influence in 1973. For eighteen years, he'd worked to build Peoples Temple from an obscure Indianapolis sect to a twenty-five-hundred-member mega-church known up and down the California coast. Like the grapevines that dominated the Redwood Valley landscape, Jones's blend of evangelical Christianity and leftist politics had taken root and spread. From the pulpit, he preached a sort of New Testament communalism, heavy on brotherly love, but absent the much-derided Christian "sky god." He quoted Marx alongside scripture, stressing the former in front of younger parishioners and the latter before the more traditional, elderly black members who made up the congregation's majority. Christianity meant love, Jones told his flock, a love best expressed in the principles of socialism. And Jones claimed that he himself was the living embodiment of those principles.

He'd always been a weird kid, former neighbors would explain years later—not dangerous, but fond of spending time with freight-train hobos and known to preside over elaborate funerals for neighborhood pets. Jim Sr. was a drunk who'd been injured by mustard gas in World War I, so the Joneses got by on a disability pension, along with whatever odd jobs Lynetta Jones could pick up. If you believe his own stories, Jones showed a racial sensitivity as a teen that was rare in Indiana in the 1940s—he supposedly quit his high school basketball team when a coach used racial epithets, and he once left a barber-shop half-trimmed when he realized the place was whites-only. Disdain for segregation, he often said, was what led him to the church.

In the early, rental-hall days of the Temple, Jones worked multiple jobs to support his ministry. He'd been a hospital orderly in Indianapolis and for a time sold pet monkeys door-to-door for extra income. When Temple members first arrived in California, Jones taught high school classes during the day and adult civics courses at night. He had, after all, a pretty massive family to support—between 1953 and 1961, he and his wife, Marceline,

adopted five kids and gave birth to one, a multi-ethnic brood that the Joneses referred to as their “rainbow family.”

By the early '70s, Jones was able to devote himself full-time to the pulpit and the Temple's social enterprises. Evangelism itself was a full-time job. The pastor recorded a popular weekly radio show, and every couple of months he'd hit the road with the band and choir in the Temple buses, preaching to crowds across the country and gathering converts to bring back to Redwood Valley. Jones cut an odd profile at the lectern, a stocky thirty-something, robed and prone to wild gesticulation, his baby face framed by a slick-but-subtle pompadour, eyes hidden behind a trademark pair of tinted sunglasses. And his message was no less jarring. “I'm a nigger!” he once proclaimed to a Philadelphia audience. “I'm a nigger until everybody is free. Till everybody that's treated niggardly is free. . . . I don't care if you're an Italian nigger, or you're Jewish or an Indian, the only people that are getting anything in this country are the people that got the money, baby!”

But Jones made an effort not to scare off the straights, not entirely, by tempering his message with the trappings of traditional Protestant Christianity. It's why we end side one with “Down from His Glory,” a three-minute cockroach in the candy dish that is *He's Able*. It's the only song on the record that comes straight out of the hymnal, a cantata written in the 1920s by an evangelist whose granddad founded the Salvation Army. The melody is borrowed from “O Sole Mio,” an Italian love song recorded regularly by Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, and most any other operatic tenor worth his salt. Even Elvis sang it, sort of, adapting the tune for his post-war comeback hit “It's Now or Never.”

Jim Jones is no Pavarotti, and he's no Elvis either. The song's only accompaniment is some crushingly thick organ and piano, and if Jones can hear them, you'd never know it. He seems to want to sing at a completely different tempo. His voice is a not altogether unlistenable baritone, but he plods heavily through each syllable, laying the vibrato on so thick, you'd think he was performing from the comfort of an electric massage chair. The song utterly lacks soul. For all Jones's efforts to identify with the black community, his performance on *He's Able* makes Pat Boone look like Isaac Hayes. When he hits the hymn's octave-jumping

crescendo—*Now all God's fullness / dwelleth in Him!*—you can almost hear neighborhood dogs howling. More than anything, Jones's contribution sounds like a parody of Christian choral music, and since the preacher didn't actually believe in a biblical "sky god," that's kind of exactly what it was.

"He seemed like a complete wacko," recalls Schaper. "Came in with bodyguards, never took off the sunglasses during the entire session. I knew a lot of rock stars at the time, and they didn't act like that." Jones recorded "Down from His Glory" in just two takes.

It's tough to say when power started going to his head. You could argue that megalomania isn't something that sets in, that it's always present in one manner or another. But some former Temple members swear that, early on, Jones was everything he made himself out to be—gentle, charitable, without pretension or prejudice. By the time the Temple was laying down *He's Able*, though, Jones was revealing tendencies toward paranoia and sadism. In Redwood Valley, he'd instituted weekly "catharsis sessions" in which Temple members publicly aired grievances with one another, then doled out Jones-approved punishments. Often these would be sexual in nature—like standing naked before the group for public ridicule—but they also included beatings with garden hoses and forced bare-knuckle boxing matches. Temple members were encouraged and eventually commanded to break ties with family and friends outside the church. Jones, meanwhile, began sexual relationships with more and more members of his congregation, men and women alike, all while delivering edicts from the pulpit that alternately demanded celibacy and encouraged free love.

All of this took place in relative secrecy, as far as the public was concerned. Only vague rumors circulated outside the church, as former members quietly told stories of latent racism and the cruel punishments administered by the church's nearly all-white "planning commission." In 1972, a few community leaders in San Francisco started raising questions about Temple finances, about the legality of its sprawling social enterprises and the legitimacy of Jones's faith healings. That fall, a series of mildly critical articles in the *San Francisco Examiner* sent Jones's paranoia into overdrive. He started insisting that dangerous parties were plotting to bring the Temple down. Dis-

grunted former members were in cahoots with journalists and law enforcement, maybe even with the government. Enemies were everywhere, Jones said, and the Temple needed to stay one step ahead.

In October of 1973, just five months after the release of *He's Able*, the Temple planning commission gathered in a conference room in Redwood Valley to debate a series of "suggested long range plans," strategies that would help the Temple evade its perceived enemies, allow its members to flee to safety at "the first sounds of outright persecution from press or government." Unanimously, they adopted Church Resolution 73-5, authorizing the establishment of an agricultural mission in the South American country of Guyana.

SIDE TWO

7. "He's Able" (3:21)

8. "Something Got a Hold of Me" (3:25)

9. "Because of Him" (3:31)

You don't hear nearly enough cowbell in traditional gospel music. The steady clanking that introduces the album's title track is like an invocation, a wood-on-metal muezzin's call heralding the record's B-side. Accompanied by a few purposeful piano chords, it breaks through the white noise of needle-on-vinyl with bright, blunt clarity.

All the percussion instruments on *He's Able* were played by teenagers, the cowbell as well as the drum kit that comes crashing in a few seconds later. Drummers were in short supply among Temple members, and Jack Arnold figured he could train a few teens on the skins faster than he could teach a full-grown adult. Among the drummers was sixteen-year-old Lew Jones, a South Korean boy whom Jim and Marceline had adopted at age two. Another drummer was Danny Pietila, whose mother, Wanda, had recently been remarried to Melvin Johnson, the soul-man soloist on "Walk a Mile in My Shoes."

These three opening songs draw more deeply from the gospel well than anything else on the record, each one relying on the robust pipes of a strong female soloist. On "He's Able," twenty-five-year-old Shirley Smith delivers the song's staccato refrain in a husky alto—*Don't-you-know-God-is-able?*—while Jack Arnold bends guitar notes around her like a juke joint pro. It's

a hokey comparison, but she actually sounds a lot like Ja'net DuBois singing *The Jeffersons* theme. "Something Got a Hold of Me," meanwhile, is practically a vaudeville number, an old spiritual about a nonbeliever at a revival meeting, complete with jubilant horn charts and a probably pubescent drummer pounding out Gary Glitter drum beats on the toms. The singer is fifty-three-year-old Ruth Coleman, who spent her childhood in the hill-blues country of Mississippi before moving to LA. In her improvised vocalizing you can hear echoes of California's gravel-throated gospel great James Cleveland, who recorded the song in 1959.

The first time I heard "Something Got a Hold of Me" was in a touring documentary play called *The People's Temple*, and it was a perfect example of how the music on *He's Able* can seem weirdly unencumbered by the events that came after. The song came just before the close of the first act, and the audience, knowing full-well how the final scenes were going to play out, nonetheless got totally swept up in the thing. They clapped along, and in the lobby at intermission, they bobbed their heads, singing cheerfully to themselves like they'd just stepped out of a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. If they'd heard the song an hour later, I wondered, after sitting through the show's grim climax, would it still have sounded the same?

Any former member will tell you, the genuine songbird of Peoples Temple was Deanna Wilkinson, the soloist on "Because of Him." Her name comes up a lot in Peoples Temple literature, since she was, from the church's early days, one of the star musical attractions at Temple services and events. Together with Shirley Smith, she's one of the two "dueling divas" on "Walking with You Father," and she's the slinky chanteuse on "Hold On, Brother" as well. As one former member explains in *The People's Temple* play, "When Deanna sang, people were into it, man. Nobody ever got tired of hearing Deanna Wilkinson sing."

"She was so soulful," remembers Laura Johnston Kohl. Kohl was a member of the Temple choir from 1970 to 1978, and she sang alongside Wilkinson during the *He's Able* recording sessions. "She'd been through so much, that when she sang, it just broke your heart."

Wilkinson was born to a white mother and a black father in Chicago in 1950, and one of them poured a pot of boiling water onto her before she was six months old. She received skin grafts to the left side of her face and body that left her mildly disfigured for the rest of her life. Wilkinson went into social service custody before her first birthday, and she was adopted soon after by an Indianapolis couple who joined the fledgling Peoples Temple in the mid-'50s. Wilkinson's adopted family followed the Temple to California in the mid-'60s, and the teenager made the move not long after.

Outgoing and naturally pitch-perfect, she started wowing the congregation as soon as she was old enough to join the Temple choir. She took piano lessons from the church organist, Loretta Cordell, a longtime member who also directed the choir before Jack Arnold's return from Hollywood. Cordell was white, thirteen years Wilkinson's senior, and had been with the Temple since its inception in 1955. She had married into another Temple family, and she was raising five kids at the time the church was packing up for California. Most Sundays, she and Wilkinson performed together at Temple services, the organist accompanying her friend on songs like "Summertime" or "Hold On, Brother." Sometimes they performed duets on piano and organ. Gradually, the two women learned to communicate using the musicians' language of sidelong glances and subtle nods, and as Wilkinson grew into adulthood, that musical relationship evolved into something more. By the time they were recording together at Producer's Workshop in 1973, Wilkinson and Cordell were one of the only openly gay couples in the Temple.

It's hard to imagine another church in 1973 welcoming an interracial lesbian couple separated by thirteen years. And the awareness of this—the performers' mindfulness of their own uniquely unconditional acceptance—is the vacuum tube through which every note on *He's Able* is amplified.

"We started collecting people," says Kohl, "people who had enough of life's experiences that it just made our vocals more and more far-reaching and outstanding."

"Because of Him" is a down-tempo number, and the band plays with all the restraint of prom balladeers during the slow dance. The piano is most prominent, with Wilkinson's voice drifting lazily through the foreground. It's the voice of a singer

who has implicit trust in her accompanist, enough to take her time, to dwell a little at the end of phrases and come in at will on either the upbeat or the down. Listening to it, it's easy to envision Cordell and Wilkinson in the studio, the pianist seated at an aging upright piano, its sides scuffed from careless shuffling around the confined room. She rocks back and forth a little as she plays, glancing up every few measures at Wilkinson. The singer stands at the mic, cupping an earphone to the scarred side of her face. In my imagining, she doesn't smile, just stares straight ahead. She's wearing a sundress the color of a tequila rose, orange with swirls of lavender, and she sings so closely into the mic that it presses against her bottom lip. It's an image stolen directly from the only video I've seen of Wilkinson, one in which she's standing at the center of a pavilion, singing to a crowd of clapping, dancing people on the last night in Jonestown.

10. "Simple Song of Freedom" (4:16)

Former teen idol Bobby Darin wrote "Simple Song of Freedom" during his "conscious phase" at the end of the '60s, after he grew a mustache and started asking people to call him "Bob." It's an example of the sort of wincingly earnest protest-pop you might hear behind a *Wonder Years* montage, the kind since quarantined to Time-Life compilations sold on late-night television. Keeping with the conventions of the genre, the melody is nothing your average pot-smoker can't strum in his dorm room, and the lyrics are of the sing-song, heart-on-your-sleeve variety. *Let it fill the air / tell the people everywhere . . . I just want to be / someone known to you as me.*

The song was a minor radio hit in 1969, as recorded by the hugely underrated B-list folkie and heroin addict Tim Hardin. All the same, you don't hear "Simple Song" much on the oldies station these days. Where "The Times They Are a-Changin'" or "Turn! Turn! Turn!" have retained a few shreds of post-Flower Children gravitas, any weight that was once behind "Simple Song" has sort of up and evaporated with time. What Darin's peacenik anthem lacks is the same intangible quality that gives *He's Able* its appeal, that near-mystic property that allows a piece of music to transcend its historical circumstances. "Simple Song" isn't a bad tune; it's just grown up to become the bubble-

gum of protest folk—catchy as hell, and chock-full of delicious, empty calories.

The subject matter must have been irresistible for Peoples Temple, though, as Darin left no injustice unsung. In a sort of hit parade of social ills, “Simple Song” touches on poverty, racism, and war—even hints a little obliquely at environmental inequality. It stands out on *He’s Able* as the only track where Jack Arnold employs a wah pedal, and I picture the straight-laced pastor’s kid grinning and rocking on his heels a little while he funks out the opening chords. The soloist who comes in a few bars later is a pastor’s kid himself, a reasonably good tenor named Norman Ijames, who delivers Darin’s snappy bromides with a noticeable lack of vocal frills. Ijames flubs the lyrics here and there, sounding charmingly oblivious as he garbles a line like “Leave us be, those who want to sing” into something that sounds like “Leave us be, who he we want to swerve.” He sings with a sort of nervous directness, like a guy who’s staring straight ahead, just clutching the sheet music with both hands and trying to hang in there until it’s over. So it’s hard not to laugh a little right before the final chorus, when Ijames seems to realize that he’s made it and lets out a celebratory little “Hey!” He starts building steam, then, heading into the last refrain, and for the song’s last fifty-five seconds, he’s a whole different singer, humming intros to each line and sliding soulfully across the notes, cutting loose with all the abandon of someone who’s seen the light at the end of the tunnel.

Norman Ijames was twelve years old when his dad, Archie, agreed to become Jones’s first black associate pastor in 1956. He’d been an infant when his father had the crisis of faith that prompted him to resign the pulpit at a North Carolina church, moving his family to Indianapolis and taking a job in construction. Archie met Jim Jones a decade later, and the young Pentecostal’s charisma and opposition to segregation gave him a spiritual shot in the arm. Peoples Temple brought Norman’s dad back into the ministry, and over the next twenty years, the Ijames family became trusted members of Jones’s inner circle.

Archie was fiercely loyal to his friend and head pastor, but he occasionally condemned the harsh punishments doled out as “catharsis” by Jones and his planning commission, and that

criticism probably helped Archie earn his appointment as the Temple's first man-on-the-ground in Guyana. In December of 1973, Jones sent him to South America to clear the bureaucratic hurdles that stood between the Temple and their agricultural commune. On Jones's orders, Archie leased a plot of land from the Guyanese government deep in the country's jungle interior, some two hundred miles from the capital of Georgetown. A few months later, he was joined there by a handful of his younger parishioners, and together they began clearing land for the village that would become known as Jonestown.

Twenty-nine-year-old Norman didn't make it to Guyana until a year after his dad's deployment. He'd earned his pilot's license at an age when most people are still learning to drive stick, making some of his earliest long-distance flights between Indianapolis and California to scout out sites for the then-growing church. With the establishment of Jonestown, Norman became the Temple's pilot-in-residence, flying supplies and settlers in chartered planes to a remote airstrip in the nearby Guyanese town of Port Kaituma. When he landed there in December of 1974, he was carrying his first load of Jonestown pioneers.

Personal accounts from Jonestown's original pilgrims suggest that many considered the earliest days of the village to be among the best of their lives. The settlers spent long days building cabins and clearing roads. They raised a few crops and some livestock, working toward self-sufficiency and supplementing their harvest with bulk staples of grains and rice. It wasn't *Gilligan's Island* exactly—comforts were few and the work was demanding—but the settlers' reliance on one another seemed to cultivate just that spirit of brotherhood that Temple members had long preached. They were free from racism and classism in the US, free also from the Temple's constant evangelical demands, from the ominous threat of "catharsis." At night, they looked up at a billion-star sky.

As in the recording studio, it wasn't until Jones himself showed up that things began to sour. As envoy between Jonestown and the US, Norman Ijames was able to witness firsthand both the steady evolution of the jungle community and the Temple's sudden decline back in California. Peoples Temple in the mid-'70s had continued to grow in both size and visibility, and as it did, Jones's political influence soared. Rosalynn

Carter staged a conference and photo-op with Jones during her husband's 1976 presidential campaign. San Francisco mayor George Moscone appointed him to the city's powerful Housing Authority the same year. The Temple was a sizable voting bloc, and more than one Bay Area politician owed his position to their active campaigning.

What touched off the Peoples Temple's exodus from California was a magazine article about Jones's political clout. In the spring of 1977, reporters from *New West* magazine landed on-record interviews with several Temple defectors, interviews that definitively exposed the beatings, corruption, and sexual exploits that had been taking place behind closed Temple doors. When Jones got wind of the story, months before its August publication date, he realized that the potential damage of the allegations outweighed even what shelter his political connections could provide. He announced to his congregation that the time had come—this was exactly the “outright persecution” he had prophesied.

So began the mass migration. At Jones's bidding, most Temple members had long since acquired passports and filed the necessary paperwork to leave the country—departure was just a matter of packing a few bags. The Temple paid for hundreds of plane tickets, and just like that, members picked up and left, departing in great waves aboard commercial airlines. About a hundred people made up the fledgling community of Jonestown in May of 1977. By the time the August issue of *New West* hit the newsstands, Jim Jones and nearly nine hundred members of Peoples Temple had already resettled in Guyana. The simple song of freedom was growing complex.

II. “Black Baby” (3:18)

Marceline Jones haunts the story of Peoples Temple like a ghost in a film reel—out of focus, barely there, and yet eerily present in every frame. She was a nineteen-year-old nursing student when she met Jim Jones in 1946. He was an orderly, a handsome and eloquent high school junior with plans to graduate early and enter Indiana University the following year. They married in 1949, and when Jim entered the ministry three years later, Marceline became her husband's most ardent follower. Over the years, she worked for the Temple in most every capac-

ity, and when she wasn't administering the nursing homes or helping stage elaborate healings, she was raising the Joneses' six children.

All but one of the kids were adopted, and the group was multiracial in a manner that seems uncomfortably deliberate, as if their parents were assembling a collection. By 1959, Jim and Marceline had already taken in two Korean children and an orphaned American Indian girl. The older Korean adoptee was killed in a car wreck just months after her adoption. Marceline gave birth to Stephen that summer, and before the year was out, the family also added Suzanne, another Korean adoptee, and James Jr., the first black child adopted by a white family in the state of Indiana.

Like Deanna Wilkinson, Marceline was a regular performer at Temple services, and "Black Baby" became a staple of her repertoire following James Jr.'s adoption. It's another cover tune, written in 1950 by jazz songwriter and Chicago civil rights activist Oscar Brown Jr. The original title is actually "Brown Baby," and why Jim or Marceline felt the need to darken it is unclear. A handful of high-profile soul singers recorded the song in the '60s and '70s, including Nina Simone and Diana Ross, but Marceline's version is slower and sparer than the others, just an organ and a subdued soloist, a hushed lullaby for a sleeping child. *I want you to stand up tall and proud*, Marceline whispers. *I want you to speak up clear and loud*.

Marceline's singing voice is a crystal clear alto, and it would be pretty if she didn't sound mechanical and sort of bleak, like a dry-drunk karaoke patron serenading an empty bar. The song's overt racial message is a bit awkward, and the horror-show drone of the Wurlitzer is nothing if not ominous. Frankly, "Black Baby" is creepy from beginning to end. If the best songs on *He's Able* succeed by banishing nagging "cult" associations, then Marceline's track is the one that drives them home. The lyrics try hard to convey the same idealism as the rest of the record, but in Marceline's vacant moan, they sound twisted, somehow perverse. She sounds brainwashed—there's no other word for it. And when she chants to her hypothetical infant, *When out of men's hearts all hate is hurled / you're going to live in a better world*, it's hard not to think about just how wrong she is.

In a photo on the back of the record jacket, Marceline stands in front of a dangling microphone at Producer's Workshop. She's pretty at thirty-six, though not fetching. Her blonde hair is up in a chaste bun. She wears a sleeveless dress with a low neckline and the sort of ruffled-collar blouse that calls to mind Shirley Jones of the Partridge Family. There's a slight facial resemblance to Audrey Hepburn, and if it weren't for a certain dullness behind her eyes, she might even stand out in a crowd. Her expression in the photo matches the sound of her voice on the record: dispassionate, monochrome.

The picture was taken the same evening that Jones recorded "Down from His Glory," but no one involved seems to remember Marceline's session. As was often the case in her married life, her presence was overshadowed by her husband's theatrics. In the studio, as in the marriage, she performed her part, then stepped silently out of the way.

Marceline broke her silence only sporadically over the years, to confront her husband about his philandering or drug use. Once, early in the Temple's California years, she threatened to leave with the children after Jones revealed an ongoing affair. He talked the kids into staying by telling them that their mother had severe psychiatric issues. Marceline grudgingly accepted her husband's infidelities, and publicly, she stayed loyal to him throughout numerous affairs, even defending at meetings his right to have sex with other Temple members. In private, she confessed her anger and disillusionment to her sole birth-son Stephen, but she stood by Jones even as his sexual proclamations grew increasingly bizarre. It's hard to imagine, for example, another wife in the history of marital faithlessness having to rationalize her husband's claim to be the world's "only true heterosexual."

The Marceline Jones who arrived in Jonestown with the rest of the California émigrés was no longer the pretty young woman who sang in Sunday services. Temple life had aged her considerably. In addition to a full-time job running the Temple's care homes, she was required to sit beside Jones at the various planning and "catharsis" meetings, many of which stretched on until dawn. She was a revered mother figure in the congregation, regularly approached to make leadership decisions when her

husband couldn't be bothered. From the early '70s onward, she had the added responsibility of hiding Jones's increasingly drug-addled condition from Temple members and the media. Jones was popping pills and shooting Valium with rock-star regularity by the time he left for Guyana, and even though Marceline's cabin was separated from the compound he shared with his aides and mistresses, she presided over meetings in Jonestown when her husband was too incoherent to lead them himself.

Marceline's responsibilities in Guyana included balancing the books, and she made regular trips back to California in order to check on the Temple's financial affairs. When she returned to Jonestown, she almost always found the village expanded. The new arrivals worked with a single-minded fervor to build a livable community out of the jungle village, constructing dozens of multi-family cabins around a large pavilion that served as the town square. By 1978, Jonestown had a school, a medical clinic, new care homes for the elderly, a library, a mill, and a communal kitchen. It also had guard towers and gun turrets, ostensibly built as protection against potential attackers. Among those armed and pressed into security detail were Stephen and James Jr., Marceline's birth son and her adopted "black baby."

Jonestown residents still worked exhaustingly long days, but they retired at night to food and entertainment in the pavilion. The village had its own dance team, and several of the *He's Able* musicians had coalesced into a sort of house band, the Jonestown Express. Fronted by Deanna Wilkinson, the Express gigged occasionally in Georgetown, even toured the neighboring jungle communities, playing to modest crowds of bemused Guyanese villagers. They tweaked the lyrics to Billy Preston's "You Are So Beautiful" so that it praised their host country, and they encored with "Abraham, Martin, and John," swapping in the names of Guyanese national heroes. Bringing American pop music into the jungles of South America is one of the weirder cultural legacies of *He's Able*.

Marceline had quit singing by the time the Jonestown Express was rocking the Amazon, so "Black Baby" never made the set list. It's probably just as well, since even outside the context of Jonestown, the song is kind of a downer. It's certainly the album's most lethargic track, crawling along at a tempo that

would have sent Guyanese day laborers wandering sluggishly back to the sugar fields. Jack Arnold deserves points, though, for positioning the track where he did, adhering to the mix-tape maxim that one's slowest song should always occupy the penultimate slot—a sort of lull before the finale. With its well-ordered highs and lows and its thematic groupings, *He's Able* demonstrates an appreciation for this sort of track-list artistry. But art is vulnerable to history like wood is vulnerable to rot, and Jack Arnold couldn't have known that *He's Able* would pick up an additional track in the years to come.

12. “Will You?” (3:35)

After the band and choir wrapped up their late-night recording sessions, they filed out of Producer's Workshop and into the LA pre-dawn, where an idling Temple bus awaited their return trip to Redwood Valley. Duct-taped between brake lights on the back of the bus, a handmade banner declared, “Brotherhood Is Our Religion.” It was an unofficial motto that acknowledged the Temple's communal tendencies without being overtly socialist. The line made up the refrain to a popular number in the Peoples Temple songbook, and it appeared as a large, bold headline in the first edition of the church newsletter. When Jack Arnold wanted to give the completed *He's Able* a professional-sounding gloss, he invented “Brotherhood Records,” a fictional record label complete with a logo and address stamped onto the album. The logo is a lower-case “b” with a white dove superimposed over the bowl. The address leads to the small walk-up apartment that Jack Arnold shared with a roommate on the outskirts of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood.

As Jones grew bolder in the '70s, brotherhood gave way to out-and-out comradeship. “Apostolic socialism” became the Temple's credo, and services regularly took time out to extol comrades Brezhnev, Castro, and Mao. Jonestown even hosted a Soviet diplomat in October of 1978, and Jones periodically claimed to be in secret negotiations with the USSR, acquiring clearance for Temple members to emigrate to the Motherland. Among the names regularly dropped into Jonestown Express renditions of “Abraham, Martin, and John” were Vladimir Lenin and Che Guevara.

“Will You?” is a sort of lukewarm anthem to the nascent

spirit of socialism rolling around the Temple in 1973. Fittingly, there is no soloist. The women of the choir carry the verses; the men join in on the chorus. The song actually follows a somewhat peculiar structure, something like verse-bridge-verse-chorus-verse-chorus. The intro verse lays out the premise, a kind of rhyme, pre-school summation of the *Communist Manifesto*:

*We've found joy in sharing,
sharing what we have with one another.
And we've started caring,
caring what becomes of our brother.*

From there, the song launches into a curious little interlude, a mildly psychedelic tangle of keys, guitar, and brass that builds vertically and sounds like something off *The White Album*. Jack Arnold and Loretta Cordell lay the groundwork by repeating the same two notes at different octaves, a sort of electric variant on a snake charmer's melody. Then a layer of bass trombone comes plodding in, descending the scales like a fat man marching down a staircase. A bright, repetitive trumpet melody tops it all off, and the whole thing builds for a few measures, growing louder and more intense, before suddenly and perplexingly giving way to a bongo solo. All in all, it's a weirdly groovy thirty seconds, like a tie-dye stain on a vestal robe, and I think of it as Jack Arnold's way of saying that Marxist doctrine doesn't have to be a drag.

The genius of the "Will You?" chorus, on the other hand, is in its single-line simplicity. Coming out of the verses, the drums fall into cut-time with a tambourine on the accents, the sort of driving, rapid-heartbeat rhythm that feels like it's pushing you somewhere. Then the horns pour on top, and the choir delivers the title refrain, holding onto the last note so they sound like a roomful of train whistles: *Yes, the world is changing—will you-ou-ou?*

Jones's megalomania, paranoia, and drug use gradually came to dominate the socialist experiment at Jonestown. His increasingly incomprehensible ravings—about Temple defectors in San Francisco and enemies in the US government, about Christianity and socialism, about sex and reincarnation and an ever-ex-

panding list of Jonestown rules—were broadcast continuously over the town's PA system, often with only a couple hours of break for days at a time. Nightly meetings in the pavilion stretched into the next morning, taking the grisly components of the catharsis sessions to new heights. Temple members were asked to describe how they would torture and kill their non-Temple relatives. With increasing frequency, Jones instituted "White Nights," where members confirmed their willingness to die for the Temple rather than see the movement destroyed, then walked through the procedures of an orderly mass suicide. Between the White Nights, workdays that frequently lasted sixteen to twenty hours, and Jones's near-constant screeching over the PA, life in Jonestown degenerated into a nightmare.

The final days of Jonestown came about abruptly, like the impetuous bongo solo in the "Will You?" bridge, a bizarre development in an already bizarre context. Back in California, a group calling itself Concerned Relatives had been making the public case that Jonestown was an armed prison whose residents were being held against their will. California Congressman Leo Ryan announced a fact-finding trip to Guyana in November of 1978, accompanied by several members of the media and a handful of Concerned Relatives. Jonestown warily agreed to open its doors.

The Ryan delegation touched down at Port Kaituma on November 17, the same airstrip where Norman Ijames landed when he came to deliver supplies. They traveled to Jonestown by truck, and they were greeted there by what seemed to be a community of happy, healthy people. Congressman Ryan was impressed. There was a feast in his honor. Deanna Wilkinson sang an Earth, Wind & Fire song in her tequila-rose dress, a moment captured by one of the visiting cameramen. Everything seemed to go well, until a Temple member was caught passing a note to a reporter asking for help leaving Jonestown.

The next morning, November 18, 1978, Ryan announced that any Temple members wishing to leave the village could accompany him and his delegation back to the States. Jones insisted that anyone could leave at will, and he watched as sixteen Temple members boarded a truck to leave with Ryan's group. It was raining. Ryan's party arrived at Port Kaituma an hour later. As they prepared to board two idling planes, a Peoples

Temple truck emerged from the jungle and skidded onto the airstrip. Five men stepped out, armed with automatic rifles. Before Ryan's people on the tarmac could react, the men opened fire. The shooting lasted several minutes, and when the truck finally tore away into the jungle, sixteen people had been shot. The congressman and four others were dead.

13. "Mass Suicide" (41:02)

Four months after the Jonestown Massacre, in March of 1979, the city of San Francisco held a public auction for a number of items seized from the Temple's San Francisco headquarters. Among them were an unspecified number of unsold *He's Able* record albums, maybe as many as a couple thousand copies. No auction records exist from that day, nothing to show who may have bid on the albums or how much they sold for. The remaining copies of *He's Able* simply dissolved into the culture stream, dispersing to become dusty second-hand relics and anonymous garage-sale curios.

Today, the vinyl album occasionally resurfaces in the tidal pool of the internet. Copies in the original cellophane can auction on eBay for as much as five hundred dollars. They're often filed under "Cult"—a sad irony, since resilience against the "cult" mystique is exactly what gives the album its appeal. To put the needle to the record is to create a space that's insulated against the morbid persistence of the Temple's legacy. Ultimately, this is the defining characteristic of *He's Able*. It's a transportive quality, one that effectively allows you to *be there* with these people during the Temple's heyday, oblivious to the impending tragedy. And it's as forceful and as fragile as a high note held beyond a breath.

The postscript to the *He's Able* story comes in 1993, when an anonymous British bootleg cartel called Grey Matter "re-released" the record on CD. Grey Matter releases were geared toward devotees of the early industrial scene, the sort of post-punk avant-garde in which stygian spoken-word recordings, sound collage, and macabre disaster memorabilia have a lot of cachet. Their catalog included musical offerings from Charles Manson and recordings of pagan rituals by British "witch king" Alex Sanders. Just who operated the underground label remains a

mystery. British author and subculture guru Stewart Home contributed liner notes to an early Grey Matter release and had further contact with the outfit while researching a book on the UK bootlegging industry in the early '90s. He's not naming names, but he says that the Grey Matter bootleggers were just a couple of shrewd and anonymous amateur businessmen. "It was a furtive scene with meetings in motorway service stops where dealers would exchange box loads of records," Home explains. "The distribution was very effective, since it would quickly become difficult to discern who was responsible for what material." Grey Matter was active for two or three years, by Home's estimation, and it pressed between five hundred and a thousand copies of any given title.

The Grey Matter edition of *He's Able* has a maroon cover with a black-and-white photograph of corpses piled up outside the Jonestown pavilion. On the reverse is a picture of a large metal vat, a few dead bodies strewn nearby. The images are obviously disturbing, but in the context, they don't immediately seem more graphic than your average, skull-laden, death-metal album art. The track list is identical to the vinyl except for the addition of a thirteenth track. As a block of accompanying text explains, "Tracks 1-12 are taken from the long out-of-print LP on Brotherhood Records of San Francisco. Track 13 was recorded on a TEAC tape recorder beneath Jones's 'throne' on November 17, 1978."

Grey Matter is off a day on the date, but the rest of the description is accurate. Meetings, events, and even individual conversations were recorded in Jonestown with the exquisite fervor of the paranoid. When the FBI flew in to investigate the massacre, agents seized 971 cassette tapes from the site. One of these, the so-called "Death Tape," was recorded just before and during the massacre itself. It leaked almost immediately. By March of 1979, the *New York Times* was running an abbreviated transcript of a forty-minute tape the paper had acquired from a New York porn distributor. In the article, the porn mogul claims to have received the tape from "someone who was in Guyana," and he discusses his plans to start selling the cassettes later that week.

Grey Matter evidently saw the same commercial appeal. With the addition of the "Death Tape" as a thirteenth track,

the bootlegged CD takes everything worth admiring about *He's Able* and turns it on its head, smashing through the insulating barrier to let in time, irony, and grief.

It begins with an excerpt from a speech Jones gave during a previous White Night. The speech has since been sampled by various musicians, including Alabama 3, the acid-house group best known for playing behind the opening credits of *The Sopranos*. The snippet catches Jones at a sort of oratorical climax, a Mussolini-on-the-balcony moment that captures the brutal power of his revolutionary rhetoric.

“Love is the only weapon?” Jones asks quietly, before exploding: “Shit! Bullshit! Martin Luther King died with love! Kennedy died talking about something that he couldn’t even understand, some kind of generalized love, and he never even backed it up! Bullshit! ‘Love is the only weapon with which I’ve got to fight?’ I got a hell of a lot of weapons to fight! I got my claws, I got compasses, I got guns, I got dynamite! I got a hell of a lot to fight!” The audience howls, and Jones howls along with them.

Then the “Death Tape” begins. It picks up at roughly the same moment that shooting is breaking out at the airstrip at Port Kaituma. That afternoon, a few hours after the Ryan party left the village, Jones declared a White Night, calling everyone into the pavilion for what would be the last time. Speaking through an analog hiss as thick as fog, he begins making his case for “revolutionary suicide.” “How much have I loved you?” he asks. “How much have I tried to give you a good life?” He predicts Ryan’s plane going down over Guyana, the pilot shot by an unnamed assassin, “. . . and we better not have any of our children left when it’s over because they’ll parachute in here on us . . . My opinion is that you be kind to the children and kind to the seniors and take the potion like they used to take in ancient Greece.” His voice is a slow waltz of patient exhaustion, his tone that of a parent explaining the death of a pet.

The “potion” is grape Flavor-Aid mixed with a sedative and potassium cyanide. Jones had been importing the drug by the case since even before his own arrival in Guyana. It was mixed in vats of galvanized steel, the same vats that Temple members had practiced lining up in front of during previous White

Nights. On the tape, Jones and an assistant explain that the “medication” is painless, that it just tastes a little bitter. His justifications for “stepping over into another plane” are rambling and repetitive, and the track is full of jumps and cuts where Jones or an aide stopped and restarted the tape machine. Applause follows each of his more self-aggrandizing statements, and a growing chorus of assent begins echoing the calls to “die with a degree of dignity.”

Exactly one Temple member raises an objection, a sixty-year-old black woman named Christine Miller. She steps to the mic and asks, “Is it too late for Russia?” Jones replies that it is, then fumbles to provide a good reason why the group can no longer emigrate. She argues that the children deserve to live and is booed by others in the pavilion. “I agree,” says Jones, “but what’s more, they deserve peace.” The crowd cheers, but Miller doesn’t back down. “When we destroy ourselves, we are defeated,” she says. And they continue like this, going back and forth, Jones’s supporters growing louder and more agitated. Their cries of derision bleed together on the low-quality tape, shrill and indistinct, like a chorus of mechanical alarms. Eventually, a deep-voiced man intercedes, and he eerily echoes the song title when he tells Miller, “Your life has been extended to the day that you’re standing there *because of him*.” Miller is shouted down, then escorted from the microphone. Her brief performance is as virtuosic as anything on *He’s Able*.

A total of 918 people died in Guyana that day, including those attacked at Port Kaituma and a Temple member in Georgetown who killed herself and her three children when alerted by radio to the White Night decree.

Among the dead in Jonestown were songbird Deanna Wilkinson and her lover Loretta Cordell. Also dead from poison were Shirley Smith and Ruth Coleman, the album’s two other gifted female soloists. Marceline Jones was dead, as were three of her grown children and their families. Stephen and Jim Jones Jr. survived by being away in Georgetown with the Temple basketball team. Their mother had interceded with Jones to allow them to go. Though Norman Ijames wasn’t in Jonestown during the massacre, he lost his wife and nine-year-old daughter there. He died two years later when his plane crashed over Venezuela.

Children's choir director Don Beck came to Jonestown with the very first work crews, but he was living back in Redwood Valley in November of '78. A third of the bodies found in Jonestown were of children, many of whom had been among Beck's former pupils. Laura Johnston Kohl, who sang on *He's Able* as well as in the Jonestown Express, happened to be in Georgetown on the day of the massacre. Melvin Johnson and his wife, Wanda, had left the Temple in 1976, but Melvin's seventeen-year-old daughter and Wanda's twelve-year-old son were among the Jonestown dead. Kohl remembers seeing Wanda in San Francisco not long after returning from Guyana. "She was at some setting that I was," Kohl says, "and she just yelled at me, 'How come you didn't save my son?'" Last she heard, the golden-throated singer of "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" eventually returned to a career as a San Francisco street pimp and died there in the 1990s.

Jack Arnold Beam and his wife, Cyndie, left the Peoples Temple in a rented U-Haul in the middle of the night in October of 1975. They'd grown tired of the abuse and intimidation. Against their will, they left behind Jack Arnold's parents and a sister, all of whom would die by cyanide in Jonestown.

For a year after he left the Temple, the maestro behind *He's Able* couldn't touch a guitar at all. Today, Jack Arnold lives in Florida, where he sells cars and keeps a small recording studio for demo work with local musicians and small record labels. He's justifiably somber when he talks about his Peoples Temple experiences, but when he gets on the subject of music, Jack Arnold speaks a little faster, starts saying "man" at the ends of his sentences. The Temple sold some ninety thousand copies of *He's Able* on their cross-country road trips, he says, a number I suspect is swollen by the convex lens of memory. The master tapes were stored in the Beams' basement for years, but they were lost along with many other memories during the No-Name Storm of 1993. For Jack Arnold, the long nights in the dinge of Producer's Workshop were the fulfillment of his youthful dreams, but they were also the high-water mark of his life with Peoples Temple.

"It was such an emotional setup," he explains, "because you're taking something that never existed before, and you're bringing it forever into being."

When you're dealing with a movement that took twenty-five years to build and only a few dark hours to destroy, you really can't overestimate the value of that kind of permanence. Jack Arnold is right: Like sin or synthetic polymer, good music is immune to environmental degradation. Once you've brought it into the world, you can't really take it out again. But while a piece of music may be immutable, the significance of any one song has a half-life. It is endlessly on guard against decay, and when you set the needle on a record after thirty-five years, you can only hope that you're able to hear it like you did before.

Halfway through the thirteenth track, Jones is informed of the congressman's murder, and he calls for the vats to be brought out. Dissent has been silenced, and the track's remaining nineteen minutes are the most genuinely disturbing. We hear Jones and the other Temple members trying to maintain order as cyanide punch is poured or injected into the mouths of the children. Over and over again, we hear the screams. Diffused in lo-fidelity, they sound like screeching tires or boiling teapots. Members proclaim their eagerness to cross over while the adults begin to line up at the vats. There is sobbing, followed by others' recriminations that the sobbing is scaring the children. Behind it all floats the barely audible strains of slow-mo choral music, along with spectral, half-heard snippets of what sounds like phone conversation. Because the Temple recorded over and over using the same cassettes, these remnants of a tape's previous contents are heard drifting through the backgrounds of many of their recordings. Audio engineers sometimes refer to these phenomena as "ghosts," and their effect is to set the carnage of the thirteenth track to an acid-trip soundtrack of disembodied voices and warped chanting.

Days later, Jim Jones will be found dead of a gunshot wound to the head. His is the last voice we hear on *He's Able*, commanding the adults to begin, then delivering his final recorded words. "We got tired," he says. "We didn't commit suicide. We committed an act of revolutionary suicide, protesting the conditions of an inhumane world." Then the tape cuts off, and for the track's last thirty seconds, all we can hear are the ghosts.