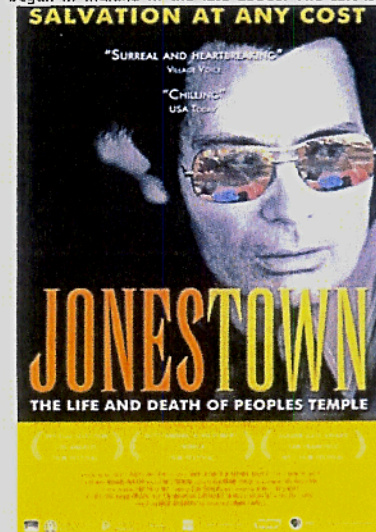




GROUNDBREAKING MUSIC + CULTURE

Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple

Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple explores the rise and fall of the People's Temple, a religious group-turned-cult that began in Indiana in the late 1950s. The cult is



eponymous with its famed "mass suicide" of more than 900 of its members on the Temple compound in Guyana, after Jones forced his following to drink cyanide-laced punch. Shown at the Afro-Punk Festival in mid-July, the documentary is unique in that in addition to focusing on the psyche and supposed insanity of the People's Temple leader, Jim Jones, the film also delves into the experience of Temple ex-members. This communication of what it was like to be a part of the cult is achieved through extensive interviews with surviving members of the Temple, as the documentary is primarily structured around conversations with said survivors and relatives of those who didn't survive. These interviews are overlaid with an outline-ish biography of Jim Jones, particularly zeroing in on Jones' declining mental health in Guyana, toward the end of the People's movement. The film also covers Congressman Leo Ryan's 1978 investigation of the People's Temple and subsequent murder while visiting the People's Temple agricultural commune in Jonestown, Guyana.

Jones originally founded the People's Temple, a socialism-based religious group, in Indianapolis, then later moved with his following to Ukiah, California (north of San Francisco) in 1965 to further the Temple's goals and gain a larger following. The Temple was ahead of its time with regard to racial integration—at a time when the United States was fraught with racism and racial tensions, the Temple welcomed all different kinds of people, and enjoyed a particularly diverse membership. At first, Jones was a respected public figure, in with several politicians of the time, but after several investigations were conducted regarding the behavior of Jones as a leader and the cultish nature of the religious group, Jones, to avoid damning publicity, migrated with almost 1000 members of the Temple to an agricultural compound in Jonestown (named for himself, of course), Guyana that the Temple had started building several years prior in the South American jungle. The religious group lived and worked there until the famed mass-suicide in November of 1978.

I found the documentary particularly significant because the surviving members emphasize that the poisoned-punch "incident" was not a mass-suicide, but rather a massacre, a mass slaughter led by Jones. Most historical documents portray the members

as brain-washed sheep, assuming that the Peoples Temple members willingly drank the punch to achieve some sort of Nirvana. Many ex-members of the Temple resent that the mass-suicide is referred to as such at all, since suicide implies death brought about by oneself. In actuality, there were armed guards surrounding Jonestown, and Jones more-or-less forced 909 women, men, children, and babies to drink from the vats of cyanide spiked Kool-Aid. Those who protested were forcibly made to acquiesce. About thirty members fled into the jungle. The final scene is the most moving: a long shot pan across the legs of the faced-down dead. For every five or so pairs of adult legs, there's a shorter pair, obviously belonging to a child.

—Erica Block