

On the Dangerous Road to Heaven with Abbey Neidik's The Love Prophet and the Children of God

Maurie Alioff
Cine Festival

During the sixties, a Christian preacher called David Berg was unable to build a following around his message of imminent apocalypse and the hope for salvation. Discouraged, and intimidated by his mother's star status on the evangelical circuit, Berg went on to find his true believers amidst the swirling carnival of the sixties youth rebellion.

First known as The Children of God, and later The Family, Berg's followers lived communally and hit the streets in search of more converts to their leader's vision of God. It was a vision that developed some unusual wrinkles.

Picking up on the free love vibe of hippie culture, the Family's leader began encouraging its attractive young members to "flirty- fish," or lure potential disciples by taking them to bed. Meanwhile, Berg, known to The Family as "Moses David" or "Dad," delighted in sexual experiments that included sharing his various wives with the men nearest and dearest to him. Eventually, the rapidly growing international movement (River Phoenix's parents became missionaries for it) was suspected of child abuse, and the Children of God got targeted by police investigations.

"It's hard to know what was going on in Berg's mind," says Abbey Neidik, whose TV movie about the man, *The Love Prophet and the Children of God*, world premieres at the WFF. "He's a mystery character. But when you look at the history, it becomes apparent he started getting weirder and weirder, just seeing how much he could get away with."

At the same time, Neidik is sure that The Family grew out of a genuine thirst for spiritual meaning that was typical of the sixties counter-culture. "In a sense, *The Love Prophet* is about the birth of a religion, the very early days of it," explains the director of this unusually intimate documentary view of a secretive group. "It's quite possible that The Family will evolve and change. It's already got rid of some of its more scandalous doctrines. It could develop into something like the Amish and be around for thousands of years. You never know."

In Neidik's non-judgmental portrait of The Family, today's members seem to be warm, clear-eyed idealists coming to terms with the past. After all, what religious movement doesn't have a guilty history? Christianity spilt an ocean of blood. Biblical Jews seemed to be capable of sacrificing their own sons to their God. Belief systems enhance people's lives, but at the same time, they can be dangerous. "The spiritual journey is a precarious route," Neidik points out. "Buddha said that to get to Nirvana, you must have no doubt. But to get to this

truth of doubtlessness, you must use doubt. You never know where the road leads. There are so many forks along the way."