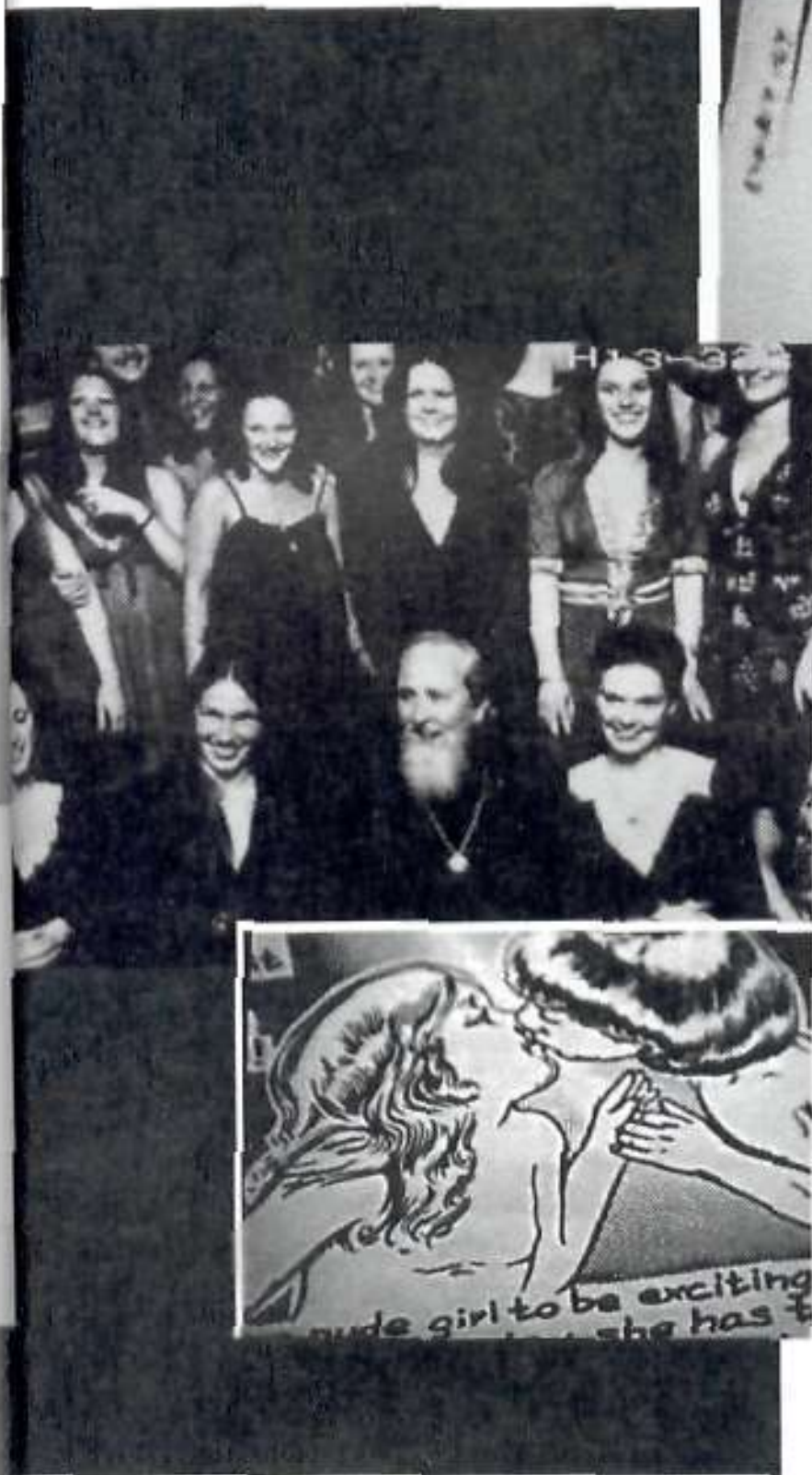


ORGIES AND

Three young women managed to escape from one of the world's most notorious and fringe religions are still going strong

"Everything revolved around homeschooling, big orgies, hours of late-night lectures, prophecies and fucking Grandpa," says Davida, 31. She has platinum blond hair, plumped-up lips and a look in her eyes that says "I've seen stuff you can't even imagine." I first met her a few years ago, when I was hired to work on a documentary called *Children of God* (airing in September on Cinemax) that was directed by a guy named Noah Thomson. Like Davida, Noah is a former member of one of the world's most notorious cults, the Children of God, presently known as *The Family International*.

"I always felt so dirty," Davida says about her childhood, when she and many other kids raised in the group were forced to have sex with one another, their guardians and their leader, David Berg (aka Grandpa). "If you hadn't started your period yet, you were required to do everything but actual penetration," she says.



Images from Noah Thomson's documentary, *Children of God*, which airs on Cinemax in September. Clockwise from top left: A Children of God newsletter; David Berg's followers; Ricky as a young boy with one of his caretakers; David and his followers; more COG newsletters; David in shades; another COG newsletter; David with spooky eyes; Amy as a young girl doing a striptease for David.

PROPHECIES

cults. Don't let things reach that point—many cults today, and you might be more susceptible than you think. By Joshua Lyon

"But if a girl developed physically, that meant she was ready to do the real thing." When Davida was 20, she finally escaped with a 21-year-old guy named Ricky Rodriguez, aka Davidito, who, as a kid, was prophesied by David to be the next leader of the cult. The two were like brother and sister, because they both lived in David's household. Then in January 2005, while Noah was working on the documentary, Ricky kidnapped one of his former nannies (after failing to track down his mother, who was his main target) and stabbed her five times before slitting her throat and killing himself. He left behind a heart-wrenching video that blasted the cult and its abuse tactics. The incident caused a media frenzy. It was the perfect scandal: a cult, a declared prophet turned avenger, sexual abuse, murder and suicide. But the abuse that occurred within the Children of God runs much deeper than that →

→ one horrifying public incident, and it's still affecting an entire generation of people in their 20s and early 30s who are now trying to carve out a normal life.

"GRANDPA HAD HIS PICK"

David Berg founded the Children of God in 1968 in Huntington Beach, Calif., after he was fired from his post as minister at a Christian and Missionary Alliance church for alleged sexual misconduct with an employee. His group attracted free-love hippies who were into communal living—Rose McGowan and River and Joaquin Phoenix all grew up in the Children of God—and the organization quickly grew. (Cult expert Rick Ross says the latest reported membership number is "about 10,000," but adds that an exact count is hard to determine because the group is spread out around the globe.) David and his wife, Karen Zerby, aka Mama Maria, maintained a secretive, insular household made up of his inner circle—devoted followers who went by made-up names.

"I found a stash of my mom's books, and one was all about child abuse. ... So I took it to my mom and ended up getting beaten for finding it." —*David*

"I would live with people and never know their legal names," says Amy, 34, another former member. It was a tactic that conveniently made it difficult to find and prosecute members of The Family when the children grew up and started coming forward with stories of abuse.

As its disciples grew, the rest of the organization lived within communal groups, called units, throughout the world. The adults raised their children as one big family. They were homeschooled and had to sing for money and do missionary work, spreading the word of God on the streets. All of the cash they raised was tithed and sent to David.

"We relocated every six months," says Davida, who lived with David in relative luxury compared with his followers' meager surroundings. "In Europe, there were always beautiful houses." she remembers. "In the Far East [we had] huge mansions with acres and acres of land."

Davida's mother was an extremely close member of David's inner posse. "I always felt like [the sexual stuff] was weird, but when I was 11, I finally realized that what was going on was wrong," Davida says. "I found a stash of my mom's books, and one was all about child abuse. It said, 'If an adult touches you here, it's wrong.' So I took it to my mom and ended up getting beaten for finding it. But I was like, 'I knew there was something fucked up about this!'"

But life continued as normal. David's near-destitute disciples would wait for his doctrines and newsletters telling them how they should be living their lives. Among the messages: that Jesus would return in 1993, signaling Armageddon (this was later amended to 2000). He also promoted "flirty fishing," a recruitment method that encouraged some female cult members to "go out and witness the love of Jesus with the serious intent to use sex or sex appeal as bait." And then there were the teachings that encouraged sexual relationships

between children and adults. As David justified it in one newsletter, "God made 'em able to enjoy it practically from the time they're born!"

"On orgy nights, everybody was encouraged to have sex," Davida says.

"Sometimes there'd be a toga night. It was us and all the adults interacting sexually, doing sexy dances. Grandpa had his pick of whoever and however many women he wanted."

"GOD APPROVES OF THIS VERY MUCH"

"I've had people tell me I'm a miracle because I'm actually able to function," Amy tells me. With her long brown hair and kind eyes, she looks like the girl next door, grown up. "I was one of the first kids born into the cult. My dad was only 13 when he met David, right when the Children of God was first starting. My father had lost his dad, so he latched onto David, because he was offering him a family."

Amy, it turned out, had a gift for singing. When she was 9 and living in France, David told her father to give her to a music unit in Athens, Greece, and he complied. That's right, he gave away his 9-year-old daughter. "There were about

how cults suck you in

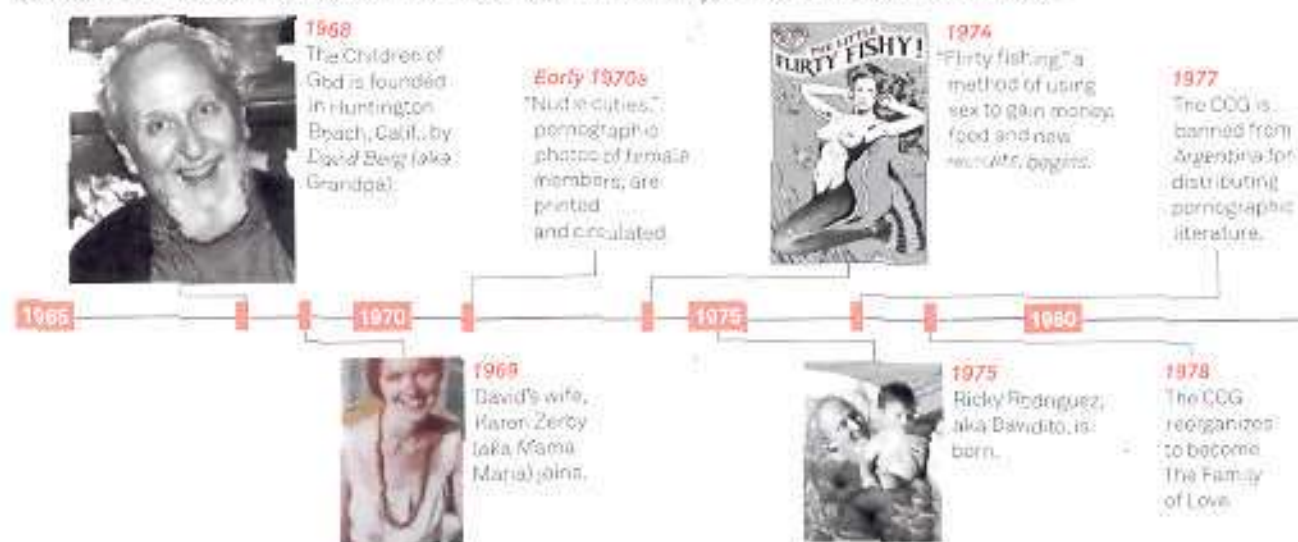
Turns out that getting people to "drink the Kool-Aid" isn't so difficult.

"The stereotype is that only weak or stupid people would join a cult," says Steven Hassan, a counselor who spent some time in one during his early 20s, and now runs the Freedom of Mind Center. "But human beings are a lot more susceptible than anyone wants to admit."

It can start by simply forming a friendship with someone who seems to really like you. This person's enthusiasm is so flattering, it's hard to say no when they invite you to a meeting of their group. The meetings, they often promise, are wonderful, transformational, etc., and may even last an entire weekend. What the group may not tell you is that you might be deprived of food, sleep or bathroom access, all of which makes you weaker and more easily brainwashed. You also might be encouraged to confess your sins, which could then be used against you to break down your self-esteem.

After the initial contact, many cults pressure you into spending more and more time with the group, while trying to undermine the credibility of your family, friends and inner voice. You may be told that your doubts are the work of Satan, or that they're due to your weak, flawed nature. "After a while, a person has no way to judge what's going on," says cult expert Carol Giambalvo. Before you know it, you might be signing away your bank account, your freedom—or worse.

CHILDREN OF GOD TIMELINE The whole unholy mess, made simple





DAVIDA

"If the government ever wants to take down a COG unit, I will absolutely back them up, 100 percent."

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ELINOR CARUCCI

25 or 30 of us in a campground," she recalls. "We were called Music With Meaning." The lead musician was Jeremy Spencer, Fleetwood Mac's original guitar player, who in 1971 abruptly left the band to join the Children of God. He helped train these kids to be celebrities within the cult—almost like their own little Mickey Mouse Club—and they recorded videos that were sent to envious kids in units all over the world.

But there was a high price for that stardom. "There was a lot of sexual abuse," Amy remembers. "It started right away. At the time I didn't think it was wrong, because the adults would say, 'God approves of this very much.' As I got older, they'd set up 'sharing schedules,' where you'd be assigned to people." And Amy wasn't just having inappropriate sexual contact with the adults. "We were encouraged to have sex with girls our age," she says. "I wasn't comfortable, and it felt like a chore." (In 1995, a court in England stated that "Music With

Meaning was a particularly corrupt and corrupting organization. [Jeremy] played a central part in it.")

Once a year, on David's birthday, followers would send homemade striptease videos to him. "From age 9 until 15, I would have to make these tapes," Amy says. "Like all the women, I stripped off my clothes and danced. I remember being very embarrassed, but I would get highly praised, like 'Oh, Grandpa Berg is going to love that,'" she says. "He was always writing us letters and commenting on our videos."

"IT WAS LIKE A HAREM"

When Amy turned 13, she was called up for the ultimate starring role: living in David's household. "I didn't leave the house, and I had regular sexual contact with David the whole time," Amy says. "It was kind of like a harem, I'd been trained to revere and respect him my whole life, so it was like ... what can you do? I kept getting told I was privileged to be there." →

how can you tell if it's a cult?

Psychiatrist and prominent cult scholar Robert Jay Lifton says cults have three defining characteristics:

- 1 A charismatic leader who becomes an object of worship
- 2 The use of techniques of "coercive persuasion" or "thought reform"
- 3 Economic, sexual and other types of exploitation of group members

And expert Rick Ross says hate groups, anti-government extremists and multilevel marketing schemes may all have cult leanings, but by some definitions of the word *cult*, so could Trekkies. Rick says that an unsafe or destructive group is not defined by what it believes, but by any "behavior that causes harm and injury to the members of the group and/or others in society."

1987

Flirty fishing is discontinued in the wake of AIDS fears, and The Family of Love becomes The Family.

1995

The Family International publicly renounces former policies that encouraged sex between minors and adults.



2005

Ricky murders his former nanny and commits suicide.

1990



1994

David Berg dies, and Karen Zerby takes control. The Family becomes The Family International.

1995

2000

2004

Madison's brother commits suicide.

2005

2007

Noah Thomson releases his documentary, *Children of God*, about his experiences growing up inside the cult.

cult classics

We all know about that *South Park* episode. Here are some more spoofs for your viewing pleasure.



The Simpsons
"The Joy of Sect"

Homer et al. are brainwashed by the Movementarians, a group that takes their possessions and feeds them lima beans.



Holy Smoke

Kate Winslet moves to India, falls under the spell of a misogynistic guru, and changes her name to Nazni. Harvey Keitel is the de-programmer to the rescue.



Family Guy
"Chitty Chitty Death Bang"

Lonely Meg is wooed by suicide-cult baldies.



King of the Hill
"Fun With Jane and Jane"

Lonely Luanne is enticed by a food-withholding cult that masquerades as a sorority.



Dude, Where's My Car?

Ashton Kutcher and that other guy meet geeky cult members in matching sneakers.



AMY

"A lot of the men who leave [The Family] struggle more, because they're not as open to getting help. Women tend to be more willing to talk about things."

PHOTOGRAPH BY
BRIGITTE SIRE

→ Davida, who was 10 at the time, says, "At 13, Amy was considered an adult. I was molested, but she got fucked real bad."

Amy says it lasted six months. "Then Davida's mom and Mama Maria gave me a speech telling me it was time to leave, that I would be a leader of my generation, but I couldn't tell anyone where I'd been," she says. "I was sent back to the music unit, and I was so happy to be leaving."

In 1994 David died, and his wife became the new leader, a position she still holds today, although she remains out of the public eye (requests for an interview went unanswered). She renamed the group The Family International and renounced all policies condoning sex between minors and adults, though she kept coming out with comparatively safe but still wack doctrines, like "If you want to love Jesus while masturbating, that's up to you."

When Amy was 17, she married a member her own age and they had three children. But she became increasingly disillusioned with The Family and its endorsement of polyamory. Then she got the news that her father, whom she'd had little contact with since he gave her away, had committed suicide after leaving the cult. "The little that my

dad found out about what happened to me [after they sent me to the music unit] was really hard for him to deal with," Amy says.

Sadly, Amy's father and the "prophet" Ricky aren't the only suicides. Twenty-nine-year-old former member "Madison," who left The Family in 1999, lost her brother a few years later when he leaped to his death off a building after mumbling something about David and being brainwashed. "We all have stuff that triggers us," Madison says now.

At Amy's father's funeral, a couple that had left The Family offered to help her if she wanted to leave. It took her two more years to get the courage, but she finally packed up her two young daughters. "It broke my heart to leave my son behind," she says. "But I had no work skills. It was hard to support us."

It was so hard that, after a year, Amy returned her daughters to their father. All three children are now being raised in the cult, but Amy is confident that the group has stopped its abusive ways. "I see them every weekend and on holidays," she says. "Their dad is a good dad, sensitive and nurturing. He and I are of the second generation [of The Family], so we know the mistakes of our parents' generation. My son, who's 13, told me, 'Mom, I'm third-generation,

free at last These former cult members broke through the mind control.

"When I was a preteen, I began to realize that things everywhere else weren't like they were for me at home. My parents were in the cult, and I was subjected to their dogma and oppressive control. I ran away seven times, the last time for good at age 14. I went from being an isolated person who hadn't learned social norms to living on the streets of Seattle." —Anna, 30, Chico, Calif.

"I joined [a cult] when I was a sophomore in college. It became very controlling, down to what we ate and what we wore. We had no access to money. We would have to physically abuse one another and we were abused by the leader: He ordered me to puncture my skin with a coat hanger, and

think before you join

These organizations absolutely do not resemble the Children of God, but they're mentioned by Rick Ross as being "of concern." Consider this *your heads-up*.



CHURCH OF SCIENTOLOGY

Red flags: Intimidation of critics; The *St. Petersburg Times* ran a story in 2006 in which a former member said the church made it difficult for her to leave. Top officials wore funny uniforms until recently, and the group believes in aliens. **Where to find 'em:** Los Angeles



KABBALAH CENTRE

Red flags: At \$415, the holy book, *Zohar*, is perhaps unreasonably priced. A *Village Voice* story

in 2004 quoted a man who said he was pressured to spend money, and a woman who said she felt her husband was unduly influenced. The group has a charismatic leader and a silly dress code for men, and it's popular with celebs. **Where to find 'em:** Hollywood



TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

Red flags: The group has a charismatic leader and offers enlightenment. In the past it has offered benefits such as yogic flying, which didn't always materialize.

Where to find 'em: Peace Palaces in Fairfield, Iowa; Lexington, Ky.; Bethesda, M.D.; and Houston



FALUN GONG

Red flags: The grand poo-h-bah claims powers of invisibility. A San Francisco activist says that Falun Gong discouraged his parents from seeking medical treatment (accusations also made by the Chinese government). **Where to find 'em:** Disrupting meetings between President Bush and the Chinese

DAHN YOGA

Red flags: A woman died of dehydration during leadership training, and

there have been allegations that members are subjected to mind-control techniques.

Where to find 'em: Sedona, Ariz.

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS

Red flags: The fallout from child-abuse allegations in the '70s and '80s is mostly over, with the church taking an active role in making amends. Followers still shave their heads and sing on streets in peach robes. **Where to find 'em:** Los Angeles



UNIFICATION CHURCH

Red flags: The mass weddings and

supreme leader Sun Myung Moon's prison sentence for tax evasion are now ancient history. Most accusations of brainwashing are also in the past.

Where to find 'em: Supplying fish to sushi restaurants in Chicago; running the *Washington Times* paper in Washington, D.C.



UNIVERSAL CHURCH KINGDOM OF GOD

Red flags: Offers followers financial success and freedom from debt while asking them to "sacrifice" by giving large donations. **Where to find 'em:** Hispanic communities

we know what's up.' He's not as gullible as I was."

Indeed, many current and former members now say the abuse has stopped. And Amy is trying to become financially stable enough to take care of her kids by working for a large tax firm and running a children's entertainment business (face-painting, balloon animals) on the side.

Davida is having a more difficult time. "I drink way too much and I should probably be on medication, but I don't have insurance," she says. She works as a dancer and nude model. "I loathe having to take my clothes off for money. When guys grope

me, I start crying. People say, 'You're crazy,' and I'm like, 'I have a good excuse.' But I'm happy as a nude model. That's a profession."

Still, Davida, Amy and Madison have hope and encouragement for people who are thinking about leaving The Family, and they regularly check in with other former members. "The one good thing about what we experienced is that we all have a brotherhood, or sisterhood," Amy says. "We're throwing a party soon for people in the movement that have come out. People are coming from all over. Everyone is really close because of what we've been through." ■

that's what ultimately compelled me to run away. Leaving was torturous, because I felt like I was abandoning the mission and leaving the will of God. I felt like everything in my life would be a failure." —Carrie, 25, Boston

"We were told we were the brides of Christ and that no one else in the world mattered, because the world was going to end by the year 2000. Women weren't supposed to play sports or get a higher education, but my parents didn't fit the cult mold, and I ended up getting a full scholarship for track. By my junior or senior year, thanks to a couple of incredible teachers and classes, I realized I didn't want to go back." —Heidi, 26, Los Angeles