

Wild Wild Country: how a hippie cult inspired a must-watch TV phenomenon

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Arson, mass poisonings and a utopian Eighties cult - Alice Vincent discovers the story behind the latest must-see true-crime show

"We knew from the beginning that we weren't out to make a traditional true-crime story," says Chapman Way, co-director of **Wild Wild Country**. And he's right: there's no whodunnit, and no dusty case files, while all of the criminals involved have pleaded guilty and done their time. And yet since its release last month, this gripping six-part Netflix documentary about the Rajneeshpuram commune in Oregon has been fuelling conversations at dinner parties and water coolers, just like other word-of-mouth true-crime hits *Making a Murderer* and the *Serial* podcast did before it.

The biggest mystery about **Wild Wild Country** is why the events it recounts have been so forgotten over the past 30 years. It centres on a cult formed of 7,500 people who took over of a tiny town in rural Oregon in the early Eighties, rapidly creating their own "city".

But that is just the beginning of a mind-boggling series of events that involves a silent guru with a magpie-like love of glittering Rolls Royces, his megalomaniac, smiling secretary, immigration fraud, wiretapping, and the largest bioterrorist attack in the history of America.

At its heart is a clash of values: between the traditional rural lives of Mid-American citizens and the utopian ideals of those seeking a new way of being.

Established in 1981 by the followers of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, an Indian spiritual leader who had inspired devotion since the Sixties, Rajneeshpuram was a community that was built on rugged ranchland at a cost of \$110 million and which comprised thousands of architects, lawyers and other professionals who had abandoned the rat-race to indulge in free love.

The problem? The nearby town of Antelope, in Oregon's Wasco County, population: 40. When the Rajneeshes started to buy up vacant properties in Antelope, the locals were surrounded. A turf war began that saw the cult bus in 5,000 homeless people to help them gain seats in a Wasco County Court election and gather more semi-automatic weapons than the entire Oregon police force combined.

In response, Oregonian gun clubs declared "open season" on the "Red Vermin", in reference to the cult's red clothing. In 1984, after the homeless votes scam failed, the cult deliberately infected 751 locals by spreading salmonella in salad bars, to incapacitate them and thus prevent them from voting.

It's to the credit of Chapman Way and his brother Maclain, who co-directed the series, that **Wild Wild Country** never simply demonises anyone. The actions of the cult are indefensible, but its allure is shown in archive footage of thousands of joyfully dancing Rajneeshes and the present-day interviews with former members, who discuss how the commune offered them a freedom and opportunity for self-expression they had previously lacked.

“The story starts off belonging to a commune and progresses to show how devotion can be manipulated into having people do things that they shouldn’t be doing,” Chapman says. “It’s not a black and white journey.”

At the heart of the story is Ma Anand Sheela, Bhagwan’s personal secretary. After the guru took a vow of silence in 1981 Sheela became his spokesperson, inspiring reverence from the Rajneeshees while fuelling antagonism with the press and locals. The series could be said to serve as a portrait of a woman drunk on power.

However, her reign came to an end in 1984 when she fell out with Bhagwan and abruptly left the commune. Bhagwan broke his silence to assassinate her character, calling Sheela “a perfect bitch”, and saying her crimes, including the mass poisoning and an arson attack on Wasco County Office, were of her own doing, rather than at his instruction, as she maintains.

Sheela was eventually arrested and pleaded guilty to arson and first degree assault: she was sentenced to 20 years, but was released after just 29 months.

It’s difficult to square Sheela’s criminality with the sweet old lady we see being interviewed on screen. These days, the 68-year-old runs sheltered accommodation for the elderly in Switzerland. In spite of her plea, Sheela maintains her innocence; in the documentary, she suggests she took imprisonment as the easiest option, and feels no remorse or regret for her actions.

The overriding question the documentary prompts is: why did Sheela agree to dredge up this ugly part of her history? “It is part of my life, and I stand by it. I was happy with my life then, and I’m happy with my life now, and I’m happy with my past even today,” she tells me, when I reach her over the phone. “Whether you like it or not makes no difference.”

Back then, Sheela’s power, and with it, that of Rajneeshpuram, derived from her ability to captivate a camera. She swore openly on talk shows and was shown walking around the ranch with the stately air of a dignitary. One wonders whether she still perversely enjoys the celebrity, three decades on: **Wild Wild Country** has given her a platform she hasn’t had in years.

It was Sheela who made the Way brothers want to retell the story. “We were immediately drawn to [her],” Chapman says. “This provocative, foul-mouthed woman who didn’t take crap from anyone.”

Sheela has proved a divisive character among **Wild Wild Country**’s growing audience. Some see her as a fascist, others a freedom fighter, and the Way brothers have been criticised for focusing on the sinful actions of a woman while the silent man who inspired them remains blameless.

“It’s been fascinating hearing women’s different perspectives on the story,” points out Maclain. “They said it was really rewarding to see a complex, feminist, female character.”

Meanwhile, **Wild Wild Country** concludes by looking at the surprising legacy of Bhagwan today. After the events in Antelope, the Rajneeshees rebranded. Bhagwan became “**Osho**” and, although he died in 1990, his teachings continue to resonate with believers worldwide.

The original Rajneesh commune, in Pune, India, is now home to The **Osho** International Meditation Resort and Guesthouse - it has a four-star rating on Trip Advisor. The release of **Wild Wild Country** comes at a time when cults are having a cultural moment.

They provide a backdrop to the Netflix sitcom *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, about a cult survivor, and the theme for the latest series of US anthology show *American Horror Story*. Meanwhile, there are three films about the Manson family commune in the works, including one by Quentin Tarantino.

All portray the potentially horrific consequences of the cult mentality. But there's no doubt that alternative communities still hold an appeal.

"Bhagwan's following originally sprang from a disillusionment and resentment towards politics," Maclain says. "And now I have friends who I would consider reasonable, level-headed people and they're so resentful towards the current politics in America that there's a hint of seriousness when they joke, 'Hey man, putting on one colour and moving to the middle of the desert and building a utopian city doesn't seem that crazy right now'."

It is intriguing that Sheela still wears red, the colour of the Rajneesh uniform, while being interviewed in **Wild Wild Country**. She maintains that her feelings for Bhagwan haven't changed: "I love him, very much." But she also speaks in the terms of a survivor.

"Look at me now," she says. "After 30 years I'm still here. Living my life, not dependent on anybody, not naming anybody, not accusing anybody, I'm being myself."