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Ask Historians dir. by Cordis_Melum, and: *Casefile True Crime* by Mike Migas, and: *Cults* by Max Cutler and Ron Cutler, and: *Last Podcast on the Left* dir. by Marcus Parks, and: *Liar City* by Brian Flanagan, and *Transmissions from Jonestown* dir. by Shannon Howard (review)

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Reviews

Ask Historians. Directed by Cordis_Melum. 2015. Single episode. https://askhistorians.libsyn.com/ahp_52_thepeoplestemplemp3

Casefile True Crime. Produced by Mike Migas. 2017. 3 episodes. <http://casefilepodcast.com/podcast-archive/>

Cults. Produced by Max Cutler and Ron Cutler. 2018. 2 episodes. <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/parcast/cults/e/52901907>

Last Podcast on the Left. Directed by Marcus Parks. 2018. 5 episodes. <https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/new-york-city-crime-report-with-pat-dixon/the-last-podcast-on-the-left/e/52868701>

Liar City. Produced by Brian Flanagan. 2015. Single episode. <http://liarcity.com/drinking-the-kool-aid-with-jim-jones/>

Transmissions from Jonestown. Directed by Shannon Howard. 2017–2018. 9 episodes. <http://radiojonestown.libsyn.com/>

Peoples Temple has been covered by many podcasts, both as episodes in an ongoing podcast series as well as single podcasts specifically created to cover this subject. I have listened to them all. A few are exceptional, most are good, and a few are excremental. The brevity of this review means that only the better ones can be mentioned, but a complete list, as of June 2018, can be found at the Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple website at https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=78248. I have also authored another review of Peoples Temple podcasts, including many not reviewed here, for the same website which can be read at https://jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=70394.

For the uninitiated, a podcast is a digital audio file made available on the internet for downloading to a computer or mobile device. It is typically an ongoing series that is available for subscription, so that new episodes are automatically downloaded by “podcatchers” such as iTunes or Stitcher. An article in *Variety* (February 2018) stated that there are currently more than 500,000 podcasts in over 100 languages, so there is a practically infinite number of subjects to choose from.

I used the following criteria in evaluating 36 episodes spread over the 19 different podcasts that have tackled this subject. First is accuracy,

although allowances were made for one or two reasonable mistakes. Citations as a whole remain a problem for podcasting and although it is becoming more common for podcasts to have a website where books, articles, videos, and so on are listed, the kind of rigorous citations that academics desire are completely lacking. So when we hear that the Eight Revolutionaries held Jim Jones at gunpoint, the only way to get a source for that is to email the creator and hope for an answer. The second criterion is respect for the people and the subject matter. Insensitive jokes and bad taste abound on the internet, especially when it comes to “cults.” A third, less important criterion, is production value in the podcast. Poor audio or monotonous tones can be difficult to slog through.

The single episode podcasts reviewed below provide a basic, highlights-reel story and are a good place for novices to start. Most of the research for them seems based on Tim Reiterman and John Jacobs’ book *Raven* (1982). There are few tangents and some of the Peoples Temple audiotapes are used. *Liar City* (2015) is a good choice for all of these reasons, as is *Ask Historians* (2015). The latter also includes a discussion of the post-Guyana historiography of Peoples Temple, thus making it a rare attempt to discuss the body of Peoples Temple literature.

For a deeper look, the two episodes of *Cults* (2018) provide a podcast with smooth, professional voices, well-placed music cues, and an overall production that would not sound out of place on National Public Radio. It does a better job placing Peoples Temple in its time period as well as trying to provide insight on how Jones manipulated his followers using the “thought reform” work of psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton.

From Australia, *Casefile: True Crime* (2017) stretches out over three hours while covering topics the previous podcasts treated superficially, if at all. These include Jones’ childhood, his early years in Indiana, and his establishment on the revival circuit in the early days of his ministry. If a person wanted a solid grasp of Peoples Temple but did not want to read a book, this would be the podcast to listen to. Even though there are longer, more in-depth podcasts discussed below, a foundation is necessary before listening to them and this does an excellent job providing one.

The two lengthiest podcasts should be listened to only by people with some prior knowledge of the material. First is *Last Podcast on the Left* (2018), which spends just under ten hours telling the story. Here, after much thought, I departed from one of my criteria. Be warned: the podcasters make a lot of jokes—some of which are off-color—and thereby constantly interrupt the narrative. They could have cut this down to seven hours if they had not joked so much. The relatively high level of research is nonetheless apparent. The creators’ use of books, FBI files, Peoples Temple tapes, and interviews makes up for their crudeness. These forays into comedy and other tangents, however, though sometimes very worthwhile, can make it difficult for novices to keep their place in the story.

Transmissions from Jonestown (2017–2018), which comes in at just under nine hours, uses more Peoples Temple tapes than all the other podcasts put together. Music, electronic effects, and the voices of multiple actors are mixed into a foundation utilizing Jones' voice, to tell the story of Peoples Temple. The finished result alone makes it worth listening to. But it is not for a beginner because it does jump around in the narrative, which can be confusing. It also airs the unanswered questions that surround Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and Jonestown that can be disconcerting without background knowledge. At times it also makes some ventures into conspiracy theories. Shannon Howard, the creator and host, never declares which, if any, of these theories she personally believes in. Her stated purpose of encouraging listeners to do their own research and keep asking questions is laudable, even if some of the theories proposed spin out beyond historical probability. To the potential listener who might be turned off by conspiracy theories, don't be. The technical achievement accomplished here not only pushes the boundaries of what Peoples Temple podcasts can do, but what podcasts in general can do.

As American society becomes less and less a reading society, podcasts are filling a void for people to learn history. But they operate without any of the fact checking that the traditional publishing industry (usually) follows. As the lives and legacy of Peoples Temple will increasingly be formed by this medium, it is important to get the story right. The podcasts reviewed here should be lauded and rewarded for their efforts.

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The Road to Jonestown: Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. By Jeff Guinn. Simon & Schuster, 2017. ix + 531 pages. \$28.00 cloth; ebook available.

Before the tragic events of November 1978, Jim Jones and Peoples Temple were well known almost exclusively to those with whom they came into direct contact. After the more than 900 deaths in the jungle of Guyana at the Peoples Temple Agricultural Mission, both Jones and the religious community that he founded were understood primarily through the prism of those events. In popular perception "Jonestown" became and has remained a terrifying symbol of the dangers of "cult" membership, as in Rabbi Maurice Davis' early assertion that "the path of the cults leads to Jonestowns." Readers of *Nova Religio* are likely to be well aware of the exaggerations and simplifications that undergird such perceptions. Guinn's lucid and well-researched history lends substantial detail to such an awareness of the complexity of Jones, the religious group he led, and its ultimate fate. It will provide helpful background