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60¢

♦ Guns,
Drugs,
Sex &
Money

Krishna

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FINANCIAL**
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On the Trail of the Hare Krishnas

By Brian Thornton and Tim Mahoney

"The Hare Krishnas have got a whole bunch of guns at their headquarters," a friend on the police force told us. "You've got to check them out. They're really crazy." We checked with a City official. "They've got over a hundred weapons up there," he said. "Over 150 weapons," a police lieutenant said. "Shot-guns, AR-15s and .357-magnum pistols." After receiving these tips, we asked a former member of the cult about the Krishna attitude toward violence. "Devotees come to believe that whatever they do is all right as long as it's done in Krishna's service," he said. "They can even kill if it's done for Krishna."

We thought these tips, together with the daily headlines generated by the Krishnas' Airport and Waikiki panhandling, were cause for an investigation. And it wasn't long before we heard allegations that Krishna devotees engaged in orgies, used heroin and LSD and were ripping off a fortune at the Airport and Waikiki.

ISKON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) devotees live in a \$600,000 mansion in Lower Nuuanu, which they lease for a dollar a year from Alfred Ford, a Krishna devotee and great-grandson of Henry Ford. Their two-and-a-half-acre estate is planted at random with plumeria cuttings, beans, papayas and bananas. Although parts of the grounds are overgrown with weeds and dotted with decrepit shacks and tents, the mansion itself is clean and unfurnished. Devotees sleep and eat on the hardwood floors and store their meager

belongings in suitcases or duffel bags. Their two meals a day are vegetarian—no meat, fish or eggs.

Despite this austerity, the Society garners more than \$200,000 a year in donations. They pay \$10,000 a month for the literature they distribute and their monthly food bill is \$4,000. Besides feeding the nine women, 12 men and ten children who live at the Nuuanu Temple, devotees will feed anyone who stops by at mealtimes. They also hold a feast every Sunday at Queen's Surf, during which hundreds of meals are given away.

Hare Krishna, Inc., the Krishna's tax-exempt corporation, also runs the Govinda restaurant on South King Street, but devotees claim that the business barely covers its own expenses. Alfred Ford, who spends most of his time at the Detroit Temple but visits Hawaii often, contributes money regularly.

It's hard to find out exactly how much Hare Krishna, Inc., is worth. Its 25-year-old president Srutakirti (Vincent Fiyopentino), originally told us that all funds were handled simply through one bank account. After check-

ing with several banks, however, we had reason to believe that they had at least four separate bank accounts. We went back and asked Srutakirti if he wanted to stand by his earlier statement. He told us he "didn't think it was any of our concern" how many bank accounts the Krishnas have. His Temple has never had a surplus of money, Srutakirti says, and never sends any money to the International Krishna headquarters in India (a statement he contradicted later when discussing the activities of his solicitors). He adds that they never have to worry about money, which "Krishna will provide."

One way that Krishna provides, of course, is through the activities of solicitors at the Honolulu International Airport and Waikiki. Devotees call their solicitors "book distributors." Their detractors call them "plain and simple beggars." The devotees say they can't understand what the fuss is all about. They claim their sole purpose in soliciting is to distribute books about Krishna. "We're just trying to keep some degree of god-consciousness in this society," Srutakirti says. "The same people who accuse us of ripping off the tourists charge \$50 to \$75 a day for a pigeon-hole of a hotel room." He feels the sect's enemies—"demons"—are envious of the "pureness of the devotees." "We're against what the whole American society is based on," Srutakirti says. "Meat eating, intoxication and illicit sex. That's why they're upset."

He is encouraged that the courts have ruled that the Krishna sect enjoys freedom of religion under the law. The Society, however, is not especially strict in following the law; they have five times as many people living at the Temple as the zoning ordinance allows and their corporation is so far behind in filing corporate exhibits that it is in danger of losing its tax-exempt status.

Krishna devotees receive no salary, not even the solicitors, who drop a purse filled with the day's collections in a box in the president's office. Every member of the religion must, under corporation by-laws, donate at least 50 percent of their material wealth to the organization, and more is expected from those devotees who live in the Temple. The Society takes care of the needs of

Photographs by Alexis Higdon.

the devotees and anyone who wants clothes, jewelry, a watch or a plane ticket only has to "say something and they'll get whatever their needs are," according to Srutakirti. He says the Temple takes care of its own and no Temple dwellers are on welfare or food stamps. (A claim confirmed by the State Department of Social Services and Housing.)

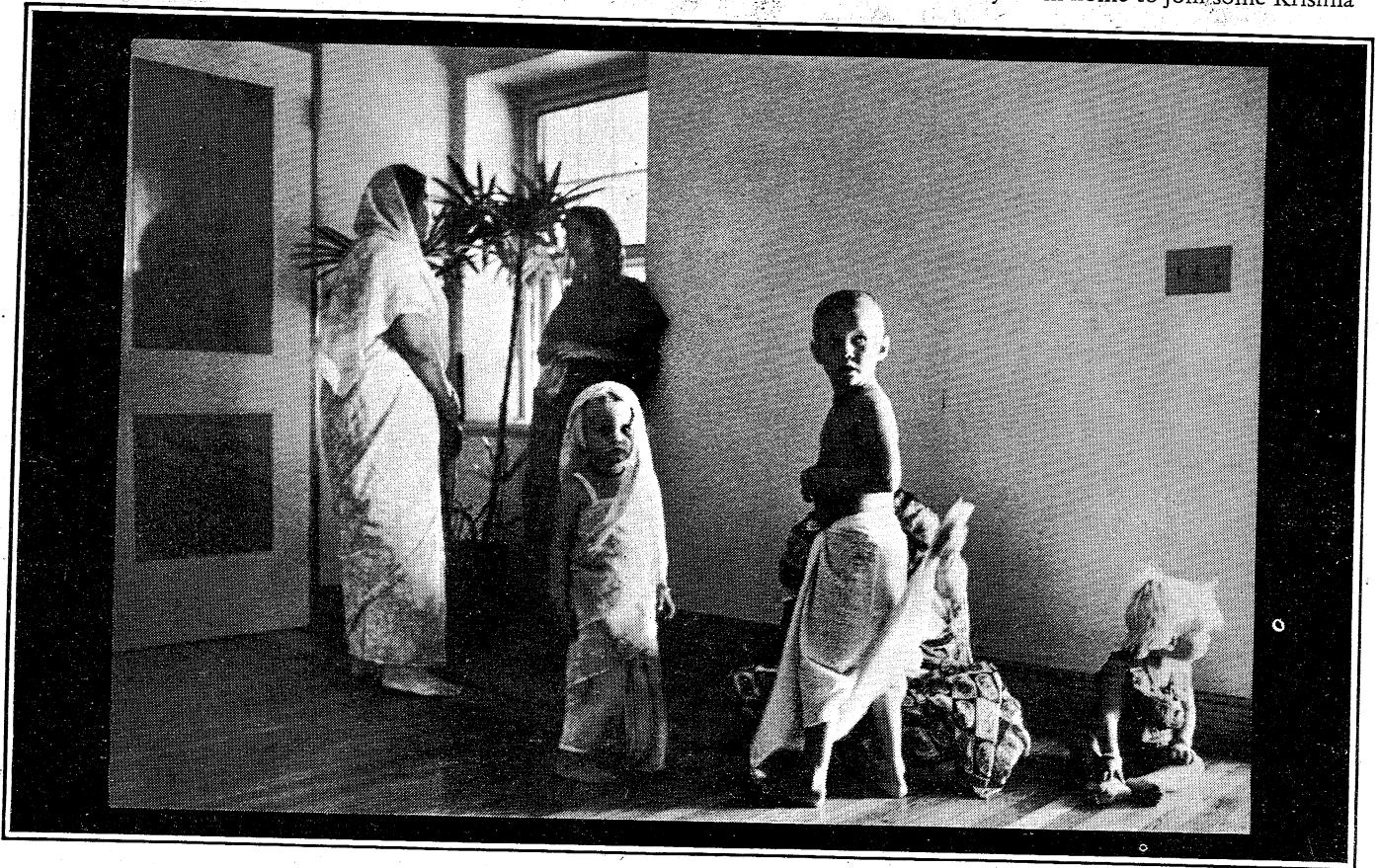
Instead, the Society's daily bread is acquired by the three solicitors who

robes and shaved heads for plain street clothes, wigs and straw hats. We asked Srutakirti if this wasn't intentional misrepresentation. "It is obvious, isn't it?" he conceded, and explained that devotees distribute more books, make more money and get fewer hassles now than when they worked in their robes.

If a person makes a donation, the solicitors will offer them the "Back to Godhead" magazine or the hard-bound *Bhagavad-Gita*, depending on the size of

read them off to Krishna," Srutakirti says. And, though the devotees say they abhor competition, the Society's U.S. headquarters in Los Angeles runs a book-selling contest among American temples.

Krishna devotees are widely suspected of drug use. Pamala Stephenson, 18, told us that when she was a 13-year-old Niu Valley Intermediate student she ran away from home to join some Krishna



work the Airport and the five who operate in front of the International Market Place in Waikiki. The solicitors offer visitors a plumeria and, when they stop to accept it, ask them to "contribute to a drug-abuse program" or to "feed hungry people." Each solicitor wears a green identification card with the words "ISKON-HAWAII" in bold, black type. Underneath are the words "A non-profit organization." Even though devotees normally go by Sanskrit names, the cards also display their English names and individual photographs. Nowhere on the cards do the words "Hare" or "Krishna" appear. Also, the devotees dress more or less normally—abandoning their saffron

the donation. The solicitors work an eight-to-ten-hour day, with an hour off for a vegetarian lunch brought from the Temple. They distribute well over a hundred books and magazines per day, and describe their job as "rough." "People yell at you, and hit you," said Nance Dodson, 22, a devotee for the past two years. "They even spit at me once. They think we're hippies. They tell us to get a job." The solicitors in general are aggressive, but they unanimously feel that they must spread the word about Krishna by distributing books. No special incentives are offered to the solicitors, Srutakirti says. But their book sales are totaled up at the end of each day and put on a blackboard. "Then we

chanters who were living in an abandoned church at Sunset Beach. "I saw a lot of weird things up there. There were heroin addicts and 'people who shot coke—actually shot it.' There was also heavy pot-smoking and Pamala says that the Krishnas cajoled her into using drugs by telling her she would be 'holding back God' if she didn't.

We expected to find this kind of behavior at the Nuuanu Temple. We did not—even though we were allowed to roam around as we pleased. We went there at every hour of the day or night over a one-month period and saw no evidence of drugs or drug-induced behavior. By their own admission, however, "90 per cent" of the devotees are

what an average family of four pays in conventional electricity costs, making it suitable only for rich eccentrics.

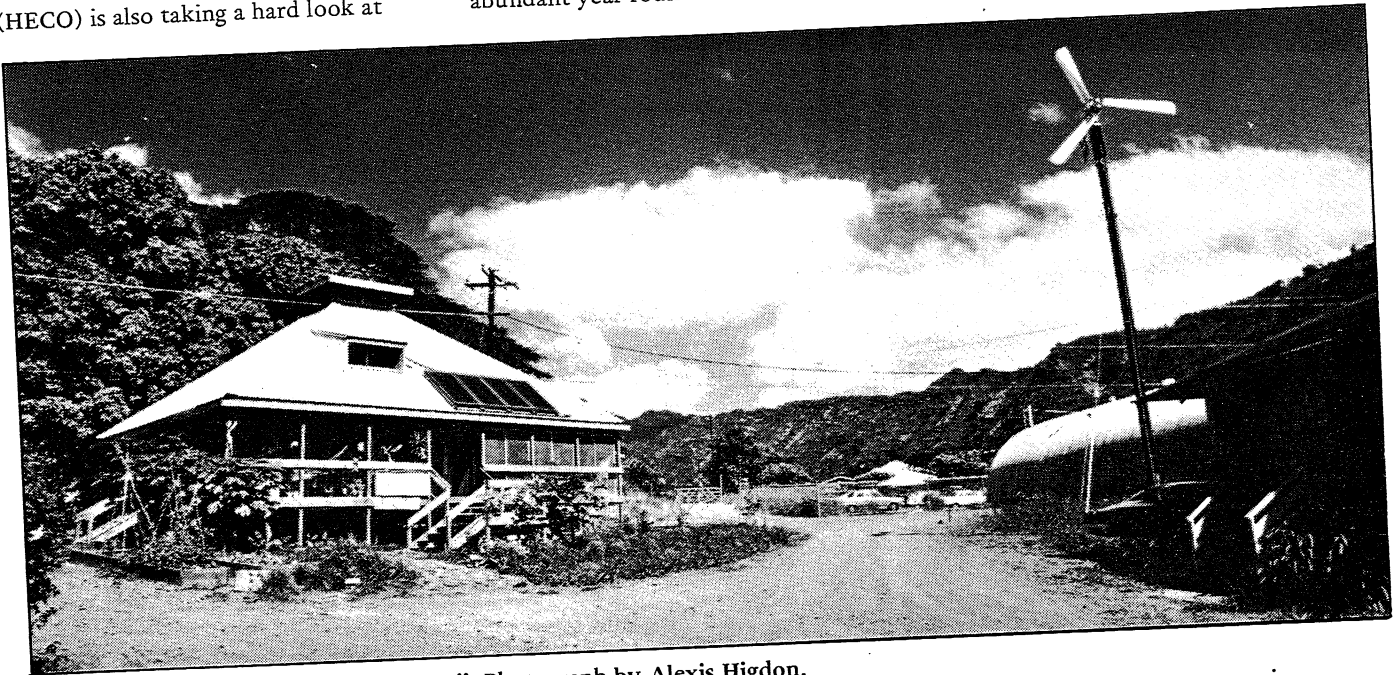
Despite the fact that the trade winds blow over the Islands about 70 per cent of the time, feasible energy extraction requires a minimum of 15-mile-per-hour winds—a condition present at only a few sites. Oahu is perhaps the most studied wind area in the world, and the consensus seems to be that promising sites are Kahuku on the North Shore and Kaena Point. Hawaiian Electric Company (HECO) is also taking a hard look at

water heating, and fast-approaching a do-it-yourself system. With hot water comprising 40 per cent of the average consumer's fuel bill, roof-top solar heaters—according to manufacturers—can pay for themselves in ten years. And with no moving parts, they need little maintenance.

Ocean Thermal Energy Conversion (OTEC): Still in the research-and-development stage, this system creates energy from temperature variations between deep and surface waters. With Hawaii's abundant year-round warm surface

Which brings us to the biggest stumbling block for Hawaii's energy independence: cost. All experts agree that we are on the threshold of a new era in energy. The question is whether we should confine our innovative energies solely to technological problems of energy extraction or whether we should also look at what many believe is an outmoded energy-distribution structure as well.

The electric utility and oil companies evolved as brokers and distributors of cheap, abundant oil. Should we now



Energy House at the University of Hawaii. Photograph by Alexis Higdon.

wind energy, and has already petitioned the Federal Energy Research and Development Agency for use of one of its four huge windmill prototypes. Although the windmill is a pilot project, it is no toy, having the capability of servicing 100 homes.

Wind has two serious drawbacks: its inconstancy and the difficulty of storing the extracted energy. These two factors require that wind-extraction systems have more consistent energy back-ups. This means of course, that energy independence here in Hawaii will have to be achieved by means of several complementary energy sources. Volcanically-cold Oahu cannot rely on steam, and becalmed areas have no hope of energy extraction from the wind. Other sources of local energy that could plug the gaps are:

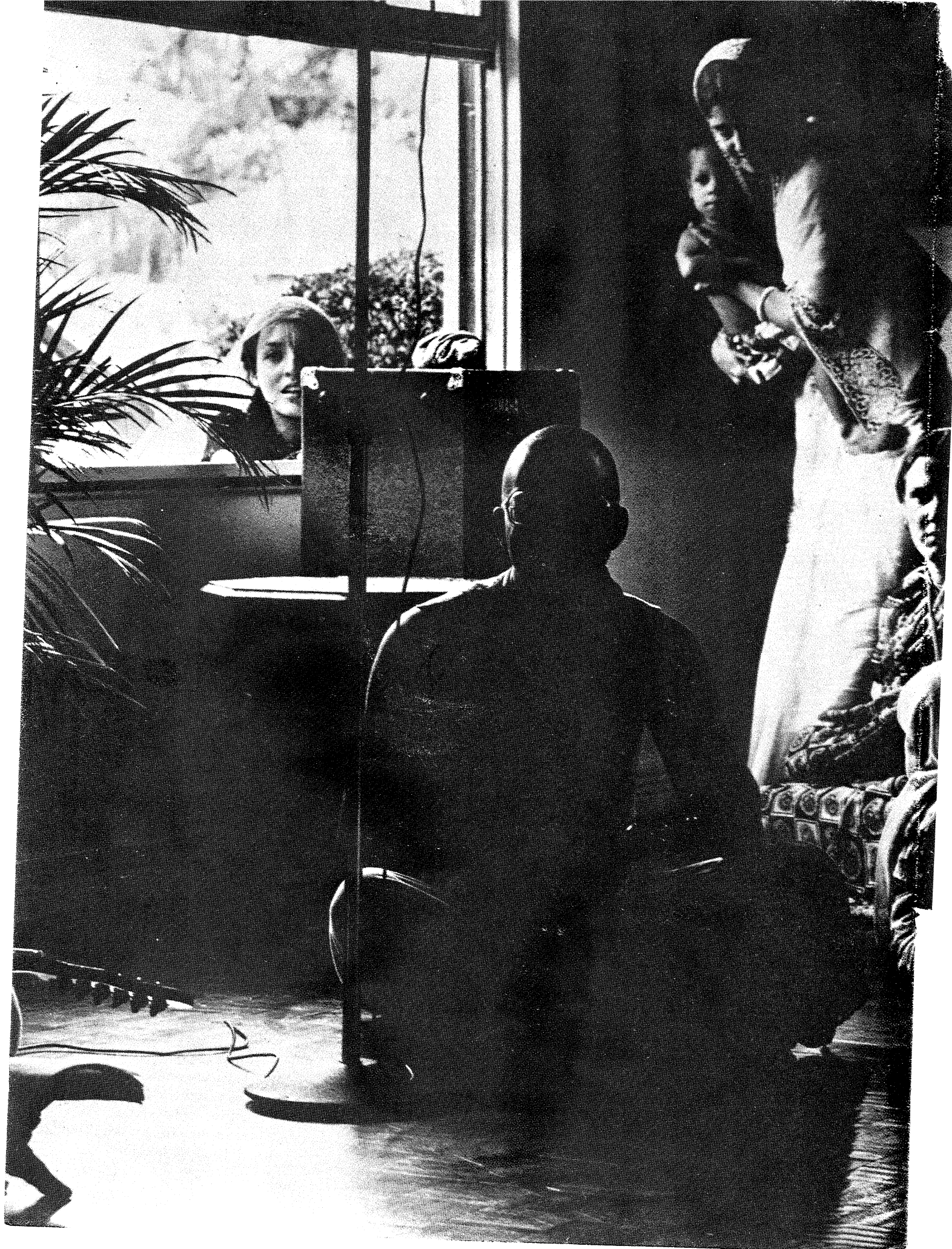
Solar: Most promising for direct hot-

waters, this scheme looks promising.

Biomass Conversion: A reality on the Big Island with cane, and on a State-wide basis in the sugar industry which generates more than 13 per cent of its energy from this source. One long-range proposal was for replacement of the faltering sugar industry with fast-growing eucalyptus forests for fuel. Already, local eucalyptus chips are marketed to Japan for paper. While biomass conversion is still at the by-product stage, future energy could be extracted from algae, which has four-to-five times the photosynthetic capacity of cane, and will produce lipids—oils that could be used as fuel—under certain conditions. Even the old rum formula could be dusted off to extract ethanol and methanol from cane as a local transportation fuel. However, this particular technology is still prohibitively expensive.

graft our new technologies onto this distribution structure? That seems to be the trend. Federal efforts here are "primarily directed at the potential application of wind-energy systems as integrated into the Hawaiian Electric system on Oahu." Likewise, one of the positive factors listed by the UH wind-power assessment is the "strong interest" of HECO.

While both the State and University recognize the tremendous social necessity of creating an alternate-energy capability, neither has lived up to its mandate. The State is busy with tax inducements—necessary, but hardly enough—and the UH has acted in effect as a research-and-development arm of HECO. Time is running out, and the basic question remains: In Hawaii's precarious energy fix, can we afford the luxury of band-aid solutions?

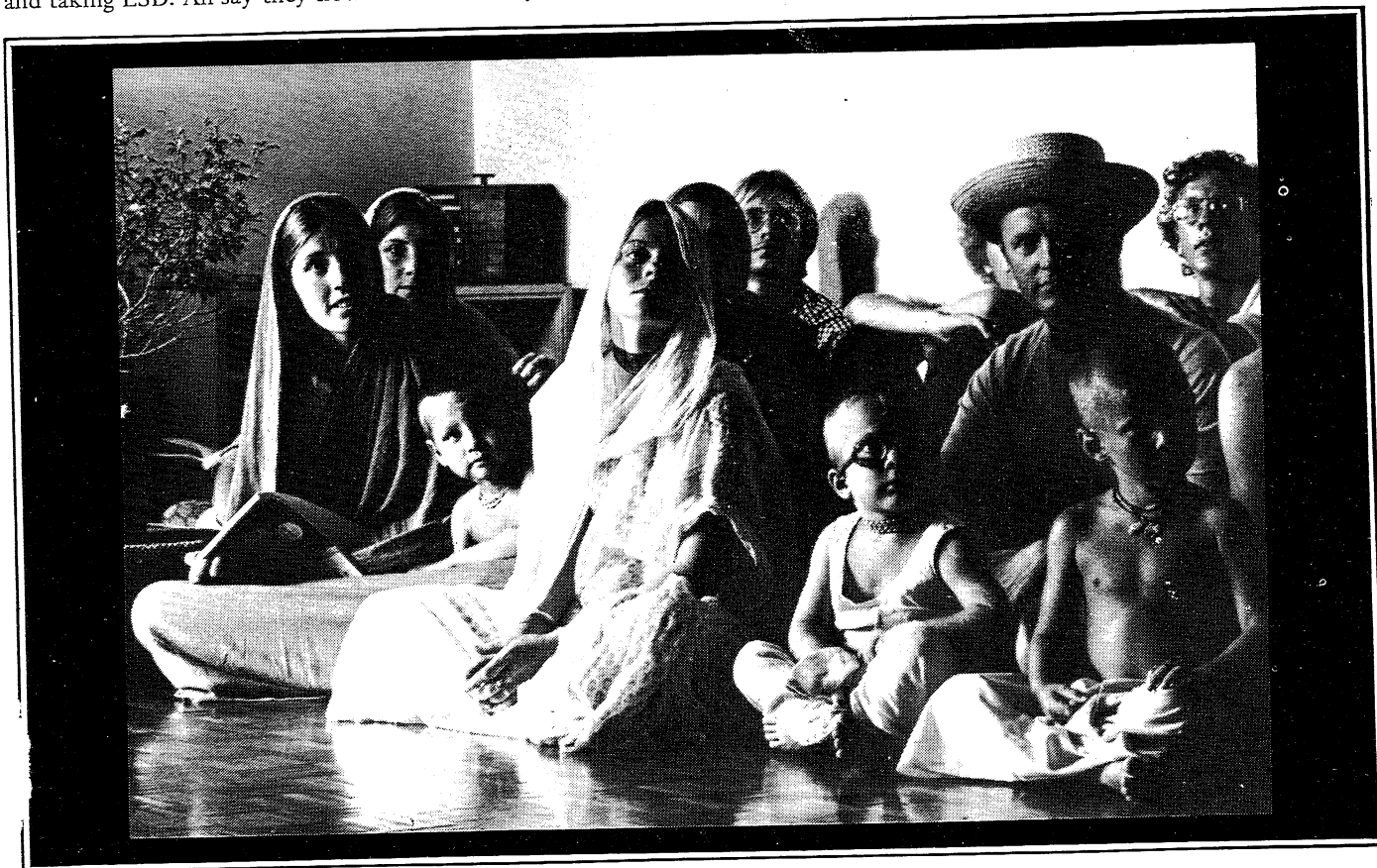


ex-drug users. Street solicitor Debra Higgins joined the movement at 16 "to break her drug habit." Groundskeeper Kanva Das, once a "reporter" for the New York Stock Exchange, was into "glue, barbituates, codeine, anything I could get my hands on." Later he was a "regular wino" who slept in Ala Moana Park. Ronald McClellen, who lost his right arm as a lieutenant in Vietnam, spent six years on Maui smoking grass and taking LSD. All say they now find

Some feel that Krishna discipline is closer to mind control. "They want to rule every single aspect of your life," says an ex-devotee. "What you eat, what you wear, your sex life and how you worship God. They take away all your power of thinking so that you become a walking zombie."

Pamala Stephenson claimed that homosexual behavior was rampant at the Krishna house in which she stayed. "They were trying to get me to do it,"

vehicles, performing completely separate duties. Men and women seldom exchange so much as a sentence with one another during the day and pass each other in the halls without so much as a greeting. The women dress in Indian garb which covers every part of them except their faces. "I don't think about sex," says Kanva Das, who is single, "especially with the women covered up like they are." Ronald McClellen, who has just become engaged, says, "I



inner peace by chanting Hare Krishna. "Every day gets better and better," McClellen says.

Devotees rise at 3 o'clock every morning—"when Krishna is closest to earth"—chant and dance for approximately two hours, then attend two hours of devotional services and religious classes. It is nearly 7 a.m. before they have breakfast.

"There is no real drug program here," Srutakirti says. "There's just the chanting of Hare Krishna. That's all that's needed." He claims that people who are addicted to drugs of any kind will not be able to stand the rigid discipline of Temple life and will leave without having to be kicked out.

she says. "It's the way God wants it," they'd say. That's when I split." She says that homosexual relations in the house were "right out in the open where everyone could see."

Mel Bennett, a 28-year-old born-again Christian who once spent a few weeks at a Krishna farm on Kauai, claims that single males there could have sex with "any woman they wanted to" once a month. "The female had no say. It was pure physical desire on the man's part."

When we asked Srutakirti about these allegations, he laughed and said, "That's against all our principles." At the Nuuanu Temple, we observed men and women living almost separate lives; eating in separate rooms, traveling in separate

haven't even kissed my fiancée yet." Krishna devotees say they marry only to help their spouses become more devoted to Krishna. All Temple dwellers are expected to maintain strict celibacy, but married devotees living outside the Temple may have sex once a month at the time when the woman is most fertile. Srutakirti says, "There is no pleasure in sex," and adds that the only purpose for sexual activity is to conceive children. Some other devotees display even less enthusiasm for sex. We were repeatedly told that sex drains life energy out of a person because, according to the devotees, it takes 40 drops of blood to make one drop of sperm. Devotees compare people who have sex for pleasure

to "cats and dogs." One street solicitor told us, "If Krishna wanted you to have sex, he would have given you the body of a pigeon. They do it, what, 40 times a day?"

For people who don't particularly like sex, the devotees have a lot of children. Krishna parents do not believe in disciplining their children until they're five years old and, as a result, children are constantly running in and out of the Temple. Their appearance reflects the lifestyle of their parents—their heads are shaved, they wear saffron robes and have clay markings on their foreheads. But they seem to behave just like other kids—laughing, yelling and teasing. One morning we observed a chubby Krishna boy, who appeared to be about five years old, arguing with another, skinnier boy about the use of the community bicycle. As the skinny youngster pedaled around in circles, the chubby one was telling him that Krishna expected them to love one another and share. The philosophy lesson fell on deaf ears as the skinny boy refused to get off the bike. Finally, the chubby youngster saw that his patient philosophical approach had not succeeded, so he attacked the bicycle rider from behind and knocked him to the ground. With a beatific smile, he pedaled away from the now-crying youngster.

Srutakirti told us that Krishna children are separated from their parents and sent to a school in India when they are six years old for religious instruction. They stay there until they reach adolescence—regardless of where their parents might be—and devote themselves exclusively to the Krishna way of life.

But until the age of five, the children are cared for in communal style by the women, who do most of the other work at the Temple.

The women get up as early as an hour and a half before the men to begin their cleaning and household chores. The most difficult jobs—scrubbing, soliciting and washing clothes—seem to fall to the women, while the men seem to do most of the chauffeuring, cooking and administrative work. Almost all the Krishna women at the Temple originally came because their husbands had de-

serted them, leaving them with one or more children. At the Temple, at least, there is food and a place to sleep.

The women are quiet and demure, and most won't talk to a man either inside or outside of the Society. None of the spiritual leaders of the group are women. "They just aren't equal to a man," says a male devotee. "They're too dependent, too emotional." He con-

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cludes that feminists are "witches."
"Just look at them sometime and see how uptight they are."

Srutakirti says that women need "the protection" of the male leaders. "Otherwise they become like women in your society—prostitutes—or they end up with divorces."

We began tracking down the rumor that the Krishnas were acquiring an arsenal by talking to Srutakirti. What, we asked, would the Krishnas do if attacked by people wielding guns?

"We'd fight back with guns," Srutakirti replied. "We're not fools."

A police lieutenant confirmed that the Krishnas were buying guns. So did another policeman who told us the name of the gunshop where the devotees were supposed to be regular customers. One clerk at the shop played coy, but another told us that shaven-headed Krishnas had been purchasing weapons and that at least one devotee had made multiple purchases over a long period of time. Mel Bennett told us he found that the Krishnas on Kauai had bought and were practicing with firearms.

We now felt sure the devotees had guns. They had admitted they were not pacifists, at least three people had told us devotees would do anything for Krishna and four different sources said they possessed firearms.

At the Temple, we spent much of our time trying to figure out where the Krishnas had their arsenal stashed. We went so far as to poke into a huge pile of leaves that we suspected was being used as a hiding place for the guns. We talked to Kanva Das, and he said he thought his fellow devotees had a shotgun stored somewhere in the Temple. We looked everywhere for the guns—except in a huge locked closet in the Temple foyer. We found nothing; the foyer closet was the only place left.

Meanwhile, we continued to spend half of every day examining the public records on the Krishnas. We took down the license numbers of all the cars in the Temple lot, traced their owners and then checked the firearms-registration file under those names. It was a slow and laborious process. We compiled a list of every devotee in the Temple and, finally, a break came. One person we had identified as a devotee, 28-year-old Thomas Dadant, owned a 16-gauge Remington shotgun. Then we found that Gary McElroy, 29, a devotee and partner in Govinda's restaurant, had recently purchased three .44-magnum pistols and a large-bore rifle.

As it happened, we walked into the police station one day and saw Dadant talking with a lieutenant. Dadant left and ran down Keeaumoku Street and we chased after him. He admitted owning a gun. "We have to protect ourselves. We have women and children to



protect. There are demons out there who are violently opposed to us."

Once we had this evidence, we questioned the devotees more closely about violence. Over and over again we heard how a Krishna farm in West Virginia had been raided and desecrated by a motorcycle gang. Devotees told us repeatedly that they would strike out at anyone who blasphemed Krishna.

The only thing left for us to do was to get a look inside the foyer closet. At about three o'clock one morning, while most of the devotees were chanting and dancing, we saw one of the kitchen workers unlock and open the closet: It was stocked with cleansers and mops.

But all we knew for sure was that the weapons weren't on the Temple grounds. We carefully prepared a series of questions designed to elicit more information from Srutakirti.

"Do you know Thomas Dadant and Gary McElroy?" we asked.

"Yes," Srutakirti nodded. He was sitting, as always, on a cushion on his office floor.

"Are they members of your organiza-

tion?"

"They haven't been for a long time," Srutakirti replied.

He said one of the recurring problems of the Society was that people identified everyone who shaved their heads or wore saffron robes as members of ISKON. The Temple-dwellers were "like priests," but he could control only these most devout followers of the sect. "There isn't so much as a pistol in the Temple," Srutakirti said. "What kind of consciousness would you develop shooting a gun eight hours a day? It wouldn't be god consciousness, it would be gun consciousness."

We still don't know what to make of the Krishnas. Their method of panhandling is misleading and outrageously aggressive. Three out of four devotees seem to have had their individuality and ability to reason completely taken away—they answer every question with a parable from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The way male devotees think of and treat their women seems like a throwback to another century. And it's very hard to

be tolerant when you see their kids and realize that at six years of age they will be permanently taken away from their mothers, whisked off to India and forced a dogma they can't begin to understand.

But you begin to feel a little sympathy for the devotees when you hear them complain about the bias of the media, and then see for yourself how TV news distorts its reports of events you attended in order to make the Krishnas look more ominous. If you go out at 2 a.m., and watch them perform their morning devotions, you feel no group of people could be less threatening. You watch them as they share their food and lodging with any and all. And, after talking to the devotees, you realize that, for many of them, Krishna is what stands between them and jail or sleeping in the park.

Brian Thornton and Tim Maboney were last seen in front of the International Market Place chanting Hare Krishna and distributing copies of the Bhagavad-Gita.