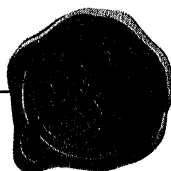




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Good Hustle, Bad Karma

MONKEY ON A STICK

by John Hubner & Lindsey Gruson
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
414 pages; \$19.95

"Dial Om for Murder" was the catchy title in *Rolling Stone*. The 1987 article told of drugs, sexual abuse and bodies buried helter-skelter at New Vrindaban the 3,000-acre community built in West Virginia by members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, better known as Hare Krishnas. The journalist-authors, John Hubner of the San Jose *Mercury News* and Lindsey Gruson of the New York *Times*, who teamed up for the piece, have apparently found the association rewarding. *Monkey on a Stick* is their expanded, though not necessarily deepened, account of the Hindu religious movement that started in 1965 as a storefront attraction in Manhattan's East Village.

The time and the place were right. The Lost (not to mention loud) Generation of the '60s took up the sect's chant ("Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare; Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare, Hare"). Within ten years, and with a little help from the Beatles, the Hare Krishnas became a worldwide cult, flaunting millions of dollars and commanding thousands of devotees whose shaved heads, saffron robes and mantra became familiar on street corners from Times Square to the Ginza.

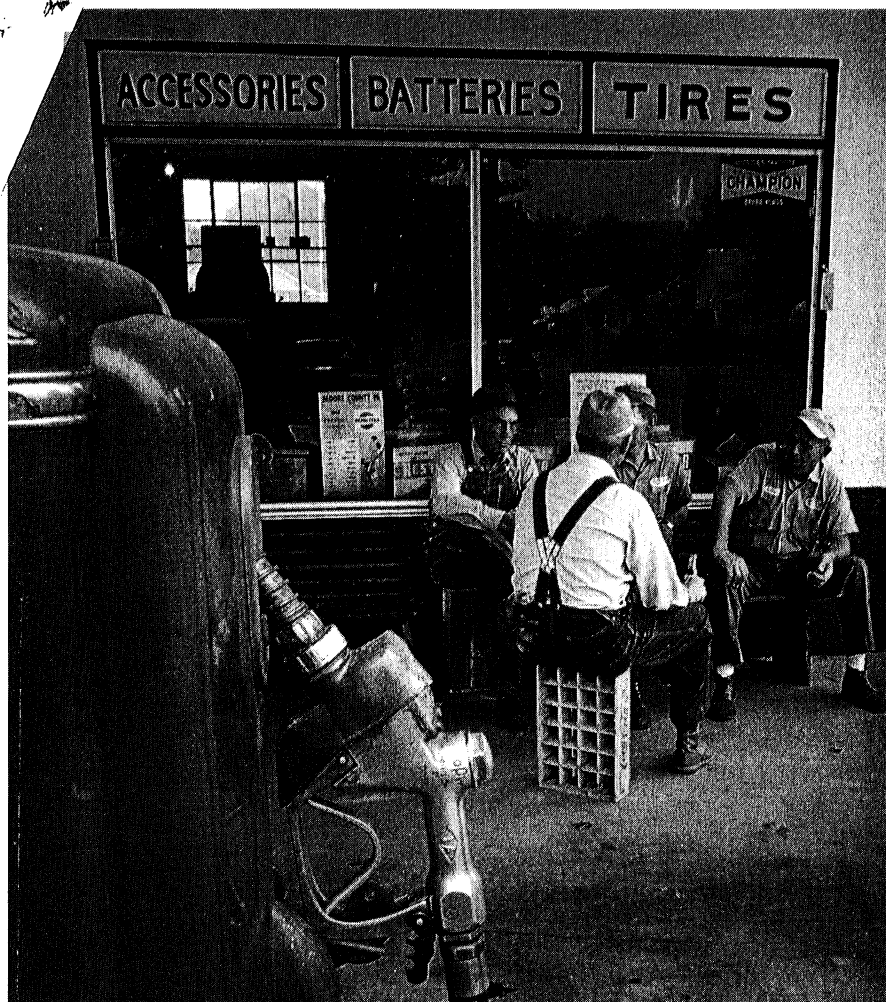
To tell their story of trouble in Nirvana, Hubner and Gruson adopt the usual techniques of the true-crime genre. Hearsay information is accepted as more or less reliable, and eyewitness accounts are energetically dramatized. Some characters are protected by pseudonyms. Others are fictional or, as the journalists prefer, "composites." In addition, dialogue that could not have been recorded firsthand is approximated for maximum effect. Here, for example, is a murder scene in which the victim, repeatedly shot, stabbed and bludgeoned, is as hard to kill as Rasputin.

Drescher and Reid dragged St. Denis down the logging road to the dammed-up stream. They dumped the body on the swampy ground . . . Reid . . . picked up one end of the plastic. They were about to wrap St. Denis's head when he opened his eyes.

'Don't do that, you'll smother me,' he said.

Reid screamed, a long, piercing scream of pure terror."

The authors are frank about their methodology. They are also quick to insert disclaimers that their exposé of New Vrindaban is meant to discredit the whole Hare Krishna movement. But it does, mainly because their approach focuses almost exclu-



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sively on bizarre and scandalous events. Following the 1977 death of founder A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, each of his closest disciples split off to establish his own turf. For example, Hans Kary of Hoboken, N.J., headed for Berkeley, where, as Hansadutta, he became a Krishna guru who financed rock-'n'-roll albums and amassed an arsenal of firearms.

The dark star of the book is Keith Ham, a former doctoral student of religious history at Columbia University, known as Kirtanananda. He established New Vrindaban, whose temple dome and walls were sheathed in gold leaf. From there he controlled the lives of his 300 subjects, stripping them of personal assets and arranging their marriages.

Money poured in from the Hare Krishnas who worked the crowds in airports and at rock concerts. Hubner and



Going for the gold: Hare Krishnas soliciting

Drugs, deaths and other trouble in Nirvana.

Gruson are convinced that drug smuggling was another major source of income. One of the dealers was Charles St. Denis, who, the authors say, was killed for, among other things, withholding money from Kirtanananda. The guru has repeatedly denied involvement in either the dope business or the homicides. A New Vrindaban fringe member named Dan Reid (Daruka) and a commune enforcer, Thomas Drescher (Tirtha), are currently serving prison sentences in West Virginia for the St. Denis murder. Drescher is also awaiting a California trial for the execution of a devotee who was trying to get Kirtanananda thrown out of the movement. Kirtanananda was eventually expelled, although he remains at the head of his private cult in New Vrindaban.

Excommunication has been bad for business. Hubner and Gruson report that Swami Ham now wants to build a new community in Pennsylvania or New Jersey where one could ride out nuclear war, the AIDS epidemic and economic depression. He has learned a fundamental truth about the great river of being: one can never step into the same cash flow twice.

—By R.Z. Sheppard