Review BY CHRIS ROTH

Revisiting a Communal Crucible: *Surviving Zendik Farm*



Surviving Zendik Farm is a compelling new documentary about Zendik Farm Arts Cooperative, a relatively long-lived (1969-2013) radical communal experiment previously described in Lawrence Siskind's "Relationships in the Crucible" (Communities #118), in our review of Helen Zuman's book *Mating in Captivity* (Communities #179), and in that author's "A Tangled Web: Sex at Zendik Farm" (Communities #183). All three articles are well worth revisiting for further background in light of this new video. (Current subscribers can find those issues in their online SimpleCirc accounts.)[1]

Dedicated to creating a new culture based on ecological reconnection and sustainability, interpersonal intimacy, truth-telling, complete sharing, and freedom from the illusions and destructive practices of what they called the "Deathculture," the group relocated multiple times over its four-and-a-half decades, occupying a series of sites in California, Florida, Texas, North Carolina, and West Virginia. At its peak the population hovered around 60 people, though during some transitional phases it declined to as few as five or six. All told, many hundreds of people joined Zendik Farm between its founding and its dissolution, staying with it from less than a year to many decades. Cofounders Wulf and Arol Zendik died in 1999 and 2012, respectively, leaving their daughter Fawn to preside over the group's ending.

Surviving Zendik Farm states its own limited scope from the outset: "This film follows several former members who ultimately returned to the [more mainstream] world they left behind. These are personal accounts, unique to the individuals telling them, and are not intended to represent the experiences of all those who lived at Zendik Farm."

That disclaimer is important, because this is far from a comprehensive historical depiction of the group. The complete Zendik Farm archives, donated by Fawn to the Hamilton College Library, comprise nearly two dozen large banana boxes full of news reports and Zendik's own unique, abundant print, video, and audio creations. The filmmakers chose to focus mostly on historical material directly related to their present-day interviewees' own stories; the interspersed archival video clips are wide-ranging and fascinating, yet, inevitably, much is left out in these 82 minutes.

Six ex-member interviewees (Helen, Fawn, Jeanne ["Shey" at Zendik], Verd, Mazz, and Lisa ["Kaila"]) appear most frequently and provide the bulk of the in-person story, supplemented most prominently by Jeanne's daughter Thea, scholar Christian Goodwillie, and additional ex-members Cary, Obbie, and Kord. Archival footage includes extensive appearances by Wulf, Arol, Fawn, and also Thea's biological father, Chen.

"Biological" is a key qualifier here, because Zendik was committed to an alternative version of parenting that included deliberate separation between parents and their children, to break what were seen as destructive bonds and replace them with bonds to the "tribe." Likewise couple bonds were frequently broken up (usually by decree of Arol) when they seemed to threaten each individual's primary allegiance to the group. The only members immune to forced, frequent separation from their own children, and allowed to conduct intimate relationships not subject to denial or sabotage by the group's leaders, were those making and enforcing the rules: primarily Wulf, Arol, and eventually Fawn.

Wulf comes off in this film as emotionally abusive toward Arol; Arol as alternately kind and cruel towards others; and both of them as controlling "bullies" who present a black-and-white, Us vs. Them reality to their followers. At the same time, and just as emphatically, they are presented as charismatic, passionate, articulate, intuitive leaders, well-loved by many in the group, and insightful about much of what ails society and about ways of perhaps righting the ship. Wulf is the Beat-poet ideologue, a performance artist sometimes spouting extreme statements, while Arol (also skilled at rhetoric) was by all accounts the "implementer," steering daily life and relationships at Zendik in collaboration with a core group of favored members. Wulf and Arol cast Fawn, from her birth onwards, as the promised Savior of humanity—an unchosen path that led their daughter often to act callously herself until calling it quits and selling the Farm a year after

her mother's death. (In an astonishing fall from grace per Zendik standards, she pulled herself together financially, post-Zendik, by working in Walmart, the belly of the Deathculture beast.)

Prominent in this documentary are the skewed power relationships that shaped life at Zendik, and the damage to interpersonal, couple, and parent-child bonds they caused, in service to the philosophy that the Zendik Tribe should be preeminent in members' lives, protected from any competing individual connections. Less prominent here are all the factors that made this a compelling experiment for so many—and the agency that many members did experience, even amidst the restrictions imposed by the situation. Not everyone stayed simply because they'd been scared or brainwashed into thinking that Zendik was "the only thing going," in Wulf's words, and that the outside world was entirely hostile. *Surviving Zendik Farm* does describe some of the close ties that members developed, the levels of intimacy and actual honesty that kept the group so vital, but not to the extent that it might have if some others had been interviewed.

While "cult," a loaded term often applied to Zendik (sometimes even by these interviewees), is of debatable usefulness in describing it, there's no question that Zendik Farm was a "high-demand" group, expecting and requiring a lot of its members, and not tolerating those who didn't meet its expectations. Many came to it for that reason; they'd felt lost in their lives, whether as drug-addicted street kids, alienated Ivy League graduates, or anyone else who felt the conscious or unconscious ache of disconnection from the earth, from others, from themselves, from creative expression. In Zendik Farm Arts Cooperative they found a tribe to belong to and healthier ways of living and relating, albeit much of it created not by the wide-scale social pressure and limitations of the "Deathculture" but by very focused social pressure and restrictions coming from Zendik's founders and inner circle.

A sign at the gate reminded members, "All Ye Who Leave Here Abandon All Hope."

My impression has always been that Zendik was something of a "boot camp": a fitness boot camp (physical exercise and healthy living habits were high priorities), a "do-it-ourselves" and self-reliance boot camp (involving both back-to-the-land skills and creation of their own music, art, literature, cultural practices), a clean-living boot camp (no alcohol, drugs, even coffee), an intimacy boot camp (accommodating people at every level of previous relationship experience, and immersing members in practices designed to break down dishonesty and self-isolation), a personal resilience and self-assertion boot camp (not only in dealing with all the "feedback" coming one's way, but in learning how to become a successful recruiter and marketer of the group's publications, music, and other merchandise on frequent "selling trips"), and a personal growth boot camp (it was impossible to hide, and one either continued to participate in the dynamic weave, and learned how to navigate the complexities of relationships and daily life there, or one was shown the door, if not already bolting for it on one's own).

Individuals' relationships with Zendik Farm as a whole tended to be deeply involving and/or entangled. Casual, take-it-or-leave-it relationships to the group were not on the menu, and departure from the intensity of Zendik meant, in many cases, a complete cessation of contact as well; rejoining the "Deathculture" was the ultimate failure. To emphasize the point, a sign at the gate reminded members, "All Ye Who Leave Here Abandon All Hope."

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The greatest strength of *Surviving Zendik Farm* is its probing exploration of the personal experiences of those it interviews, combined with archival footage illustrating some of the past they are describing. It is worth watching simply for those elements.

The weaknesses are its omissions and, especially in relation to one event, its imbalanced perspective. Omitted is an examination of how Zendik changed over time. The first ex-Zendik I met had lived there during its earlier, more urban-adjacent West Coast phase; at that point, members supported themselves partly through shoplifting. According to past article author Lawrence, once they moved to more rural areas, they adopted the opposite approach, prioritizing good relations with their neighbors and trying to be of service to them rather than steal from them. Likewise, they also rapidly transformed from a group composed partly of "stoners" into a substance-free group of "health nuts." Power and influence shifted over the years from Wulf to Arol to Fawn, and every relocation brought changes as well. A much longer video series might have had time to deal with this broader picture; this single video does not.

I believe the greatest weakness, and the most unfortunate editing choice, is the amount of time spent on one individual with mental health issues who, more than 20 years after spending 11 months at Zendik, ended up shooting five people dead (and was killed himself) in Denver. Nearly seven minutes—more than one-twelfth of the video's runtime—is devoted to this person and to the reactions of interviewees who knew him. For context, somewhere between 1000 and 2000 person-years were spent in total by the many hundreds of people who called Zendik Farm home over the course of its four-plus decades. Yet one individual whose residency constituted well less than one-tenth of one percent of that time comes to cast a shadow over the entire film.

The filmmakers find one clip of Wulf saying that he would be willing to "kill" for the revolution, and he expects his followers would be willing to "kill" too; another clip shows a follower using similar language as part of a joke. These statements seem much more theatrical than real—simply a way of indicating intense

devotion to the "cause," an exercise in "more radical than thou" rhetoric that found no mirror in group members' actual actions. In practice, Zendik's form of revolution focused on creation, not destruction, at least in relation to the physical world; their motto, "Stop Bitching, Start a Revolution" was about finding peace by cultivating something new, not murdering those who were enmeshed in the old. They were too busy trying to convert others to their cause, on their seemingly nonstop selling trips, to turn around and kill these potential converts instead.

Zero examples are known of any active Zendiks engaging in acts of physical violence towards others, and among ex-Zendiks, just this one, greatly overplayed example. One reason this person is included is that one of the ex-Zendik interviewees became emotionally involved with him in the years since their respective stays there. The most dramatic interview clip reveals that he told her that he intended to "kill" just a few years before he did, and she stayed in touch with him nonetheless, hoping she could make a difference—and yet she couldn't prevent the eventual killing. The story struck me as extremely tangential, at best, to the larger Zendik story, and yet its gravity had a larger impact on the film than even its out-of-proportion seven-minute runtime would suggest.[2]

Lawrence and others I've spoken to have speculated that the underlying reason for its inclusion is the unfortunate current state of affairs in finding "eyeballs" to watch videos. No longer are traditional reviews or in-person recommendations the main ways that people discover media. Online algorithms, search terms, and viral posts direct far more people to what they watch than actual reviews or friends' recommendations do. Getting a video classified as (among other things) "True Crime," as this editing choice allows, will get it into significantly more video feeds than classifying it as merely an "Intentional Community" story.

Ironically, a likely much more telling act of (self-)violence from an ex-Zendik is absent from the film. As I learned in the course of my research, a leader



prominent in the community's history and also shown in the archival footage committed suicide two years ago. Yet the video does not mention this at all, despite its undoubtedly huge impact on many other ex-Zendiks and despite what it might reveal, if probed, about the heartbreak of leaving a collapsed utopian experiment after several decades of extremely close involvement.

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Given all its cautionary tales, I expect that many people watching this documentary (including me) will reach the conclusion, "I sure am glad I never joined that group." And yet, if something like this documentary had existed before their involvement, those who joined the group, and ended up becoming forever grateful for the experience and how it transformed their lives, might well have reached the same conclusion and avoided Zendik altogether. I myself am glad I entered with fresh eyes into the two "high-demand" groups I joined in my 20s, which also had what ultimately proved to be unhealthy power dynamics and "cultlike" behavior and/or demands.[3] I learned things through those experiences that I don't believe I could have learned any other way; and in fact, each person who joined also became part of significant evolutions and changes in each group. That was possible partly because I went in ready to have my own experience rather than already having been told what to expect, and so did others.

Reality and identity, whether of individuals or of groups, turn out not to be as fixed as some stories would have us believe. It's too easy to watch Wulf Zendik raving at the viewer in archival footage, or witness Arol wailing with less-than-Yoko-Onoesque skill in another improvised musical performance, or hear a tale of arbitrary cruelty, or watch footage of an ex-Zendik mass shooter, and be tempted to write off the whole enterprise. But as most of these interviewees also attest, it was a transformative experience that they (most of them, anyway) wouldn't have traded for anything.

Surviving Zendik Farm, a film by Dan Greenstone and Travis Chandler, 82 minutes, 2026, is available for free viewing via youtube.com/@TheFringe-j9q.

Chris Roth edits Communities.

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1. See also gen-us.net/mating and gen-us.net/tangled.
2. For an alternative viewpoint, see helenzuman.substack.com/p/zendik-farm-the-movie.
3. See "Charismatic Leaders, Known and Outgrown," Communities #210, gen-us.net/charisma.