In 1967, police arrested a 33-year-old man who was traveling with a teenage girl just north of San Francisco in a beat-up Volkswagen mini-bus.

Charged with obstructing the interrogation of a suspected juvenile runaway, he gave his occupation as minister and his name as Charles Willis Manson.

He had substituted Willis for his given middle name (Milles), he explained, because it spelled out his real identity: Charles' Will Is Man's Son: the Son of Man, he was carrying out the Lord's Will.

Two years later, Manson and several members of his commune were charged with the murder of pregnant actress Sharon Tate and several others.

To millions of Americans, he became the epitome of evil, the emblem of a society, one critic put it, in which "insubordination became life itself. Go further, we said. Shock, offend, outrage, overstep, disturb. Know no limits. Lose control."

In "Manson," Jeff Guinn, the author of "The Last Gunfight: The Real Story of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral," draws on scores of interviews to recreate Manson's early life and sets him and his cult "Family" in the context of their chaotic times. An "opportunistic psychopath," Manson, Guinn demonstrates, was not the product of the '60s, "but they made it possible for him to bloom in full, malignant flower."

Guinn does a fine job describing life in the Haight Ashbury district of San Francisco and the celebrity culture of Los Angeles, where Manson, an aspiring songwriter, managed to get fairly close to Dennis Wilson, one of the Beach Boys, and record producer Terry Melcher, the son of actress Doris Day.

He reminds us that Manson interpreted the Book of Revelation and the Beatles' "White Album" as foretelling an apocalyptic race war Manson called "Helter Skelter," during which Manson and his Family would hide in a "bottomless pit," preparing for the day in which they would emerge, 144,000 strong, to rule the world.

Guinn's attempt to convey the motivations of his subjects, however, yields mixed results. "It's always worrisome," he acknowledges in the footnotes, "when writers of nonfiction claim to know what long-deceased people were thinking." And in Manson's case, he writes, "the reader's educated guess is as valid as mine."

Nonetheless, he speculates, writing, for example, that Manson's mother, who died in 1973, thought her teenage son
deserved to be in prison but "her heart still ached for him." And he seems to intuit that although Manson acted "cooler than hell" in the isolation room with his jailers, "at some level the guy had to know that these jurors weren't buying his act."

As Guinn suggests, Manson may well have been "a skilled con artist." But he was straightforward about one thing. Informed that members of his "Family" had found the Lord and now thought their former leader was possessed by demons, Manson, who counseled women to avoid temptations of the flesh, including meat, cigarettes, makeup, and violent movies, shot back: "If they're following God the way they followed me... then God can't be too proud." Original Print Headline: Manson's life, in all its dark details

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MANSON: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CHARLES MANSON By Jeff Guinn, Simon & Schuster, $27.50