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UNSEEN, UNHEARD, UNKNOWN: The Children Left Behind In Melbourne's Most Notorious Cult

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([HTTP://THEVINE.COM.AU/ENTERTAINMENT/UNSEEN-UNHEARD-UNKNOWN-CHILDREN-LEFT-BEHIND-MELBOURNES-NOTORIOUS-CULT/#COMMENTS](http://thevine.com.au/entertainment/unseen-unheard-unknown-children-left-behind-melbournes-notorious-cult/#comments))

Premiering at the 2016 Melbourne International Film Festival, 'The Family' carries disturbing revelations of stolen children, child abuse, and LSD use in Melbourne's most notorious cult – writes [Tara Watson \(http://thevine.com.au/author/tarawatson/\)](http://thevine.com.au/author/tarawatson/).

Anne Hamilton-Byrne was beautiful, charming and charismatic, but she was also delusional and dangerous. Convinced she was a living God, Anne along with her husband **Bill Hamilton-Byrne**, headed up an apocalyptic sect dubbed **The Family**, which rose to prominence in Melbourne through the 1960s and 70s.

Through the sect, Anne acquired numerous children, through adoption scams, and babies born to cult members- and she raised them as her own. The children of The Family were always dressed eerily in matching outfits and had their hair identically dyed blonde.

They grew up in secluded sect homes just outside Melbourne in the Dandenongs and Lake Eildon, isolated from the outside world, and were allegedly beaten, starved and injected with LSD.

The children were eventually rescued during a police raid in the mid 80s, while in 1994 Anne and her then-husband were extradited from the United States to Australia and plead guilty to perjury.



But what happened to these kids, and the sect that still exists today, along with cult's leader 'Aunty Anne'? Australian documentary *The Family* will have its world premiere at Melbourne International Film Festival (MIFF) and attempt to shine a light on the how the cult was born and what came next. Through the film, survivors and cult members tell their stories on camera, many for the first time.

Melbourne director **Rosie Jones**, from MIFF 2011 film *'The Triangle Wars'*, has spent years researching the disturbing mysteries of The Family. She worked alongside Former Victoria Police Detective **Senior Sergeant Lex De Man**, Former Detective **Senior Sergeant Peter Spence** and journalist **Marie Mohr** who worked the case in the 1980's.

Jones investigated the still-operating sect but also the conservative Melbourne community that allowed The Family to flourish. She spoke to us about the process and why she was drawn to the cult.

Jone's said,

“THIS WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN IN THE 1960’S AND SOME PEOPLE WOULD THINK THAT IT WAS SORT OF CLOSED DOWN IN 1987, BUT IN FACT THE LONG TERM EFFECTS OF THAT BACKGROUND STAY WITH PEOPLE FOR GENERATIONS.”

The film features in-depth interviews with the children that have now grown up, and the impact of their childhood trauma, caused by the physical and psychological abuse they endured. Interviews with survivors include Adam Lancaster, Ben Shenton, Leeanne Creese, Fran Parker, Barbara Kibby, David Whitaker, and daughter of the son of Bill Hamilton-Byrne, Anouree Treena-Byrne.



Jones said it was important to build the trust for the people she interviewed.

“I was very aware that you’re dealing with real people that have been through a difficult childhood, I didn’t want to cause extra trauma,” she said.

“I sort of circled around the edges of the group and started talking to other investigators, the journalist that had worked on the case. So I sort of worked my way towards the children, trying to get adults to talk to me. Some of them were quite ready to talk to me, but some of them took a bit longer. A lot of time was spent building relationships with people.”

Growing up, The Family’s matriarch ‘Aunty Anne’ told cult member that she was Jesus Christ incarnate, and connected to Jesus’s bloodline. In reality she was a railway yard workers daughter and her mum was a mental patient.

Survivors have said that she fantasized about living a privileged life with an idyllic family. Jones spent years studying Anne and found her an enigmatic character.

“Clearly she was charismatic, highly intelligent I think. I’m not a psychologist so I don’t want to start to bandied around terms, but she was ruthless.

I think she was ruthless. While she may have started out with good intentions, she was a control-freak clearly, and I think the power and the ability to boss people around and do her will, got out of control.



‘Aunty Anne’ – MIFF

“Her family has a history of mental problems. I think she was mentally unwell but obviously she had her positive and charming side as well or she wouldn’t have been able to attract so many people and get them into the group.”

The ability to entice so many followers was aided by the use of LSD, which was growing in popularity in 1960’s in Australia. It was under LSD that Anne would exploit people into believing that she was some kind of holy being, and to submit to her teachings.

“Under LSD people become quite malleable, and she was able to convince them that she was Jesus Christ reincarnated, which is pretty amazing. Without the LSD, they would have been more rational, so I think it[the use of LSD within the sect] was incredibly important,” she said.

One of the more intriguing characters in the film was Roland, the son of one of the cult’s aunts. He had only left The Family in recent years, after long defending the cult. But he recently spoke out against the treatment of some of the children and how the extensively-connected sect was forcing adoption on mothers and literally stealing children from public hospitals.

“He was a fantastic character in the film, because he was up at Lake Eildon, then he was thrown out of there and passed around to cult families. Then he had to make all these decisions as an adult and learn to live in the world.

It was almost like an alien world for him, because he didn’t know how to navigate it; he didn’t know any other values then what he’d been taught in The Family,” she said.



The treatment of the children of The Family has left scars of PTSD, depression and even suicide. Detectives counted around 14-15 children at the time the house was raided, but Anne has said as many as 28 children had lived within The Family at any one time.

Living within the sect, children were subjected to years of abuse and social isolation. Jones said one of the worse cases she had heard, was in the case of Roland.

“Something that stayed with me was actually something to do with Roland,” she said.

“He had his fingers held over a flame after doing something naughty. He had his fingers held over for several minutes by Anne and Elizabeth Whitaker, who was his own mother. The other children were made to watch. That’s not within the normal bounds of punishment, that is sadism in anybody’s book.”

While The Family may have started in the 1960s, it is still in operation today. The leader Anne Hamilton Byrne is still alive, living with dementia. The documentary invokes issues on why it took so long for revelations of child abuse on such a massive scale to finally surface, and what went on in regards to the community responsibility for reporting abuse.

“I mean the sect motto was ‘Unseen, Unheard, Unknown’ and that’s how they operated. That’s how they continue to operate because it’s very convenient to just not talk.”