

Orange People

by Silvia Bombardini



Rajneeshpuram

“We are materialist spiritualists. Nothing like this has ever happened in the world” thus speaks Osho for his disciples, a mellifluous voice sizzling with sibilants from the sabulous archive clip halfway through episode one of Chapman and Maclain Way’s breakthrough documentary series, *Wild Wild Country*. Indian mystic of worldwide fame, Osho was known at the time, the 80s, as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh – or more informally to his delight, as the ‘rich man’s Guru’, for the unabashed and unambiguous championing of luxury in his teaching, as the spiritual lifestyle of a flowering being. He led by example: sometimes referred to, as well, as the ‘Rolls Royce Guru’, he’s murmured to have owned, at one point, a personal fleet of 93 sumptuous sedans. *“He was like this ... blackbird that collects shiny things”* recalls Jane Stork, a former follower and the author of *Breaking the Spell: My Life as a Rajneeshee and the Long Journey Back to Freedom*, later on in the episodes.

Then going by the sannyasin name of Ma Shanti B, Stork was one among the crimson-clad residents of Rajneeshpuram, the Bhagwan's visionary city-commune in rural Oregon, America, whose rapid rise and fall, between 1981 and 1985, *Wild Wild Country* chronicles. On 64,229 acres of desert – the Big Muddy Ranch – purchased on his behalf, on the advice of the Bhagwan's young secretary and chief lieutenant Ma Anand Sheela, Rajneeshpuram took root overnight.

Elle.com describes Sheela, for all her faults that will become clear, as a *luminous, monochrome icon*. On the tight working schedule that she imposed and no one questioned, A-frame townhouses, a mall, a meditation hall that could host 10,000 people, a dam, a discotheque, and an airstrip went up swiftly, in time to welcome the Bhagwan as he flew over a few weeks later from his ashram in Pune, India. Money was pouring into Rajneeshpuram from the sales of his books and the generous donations of Rajneeshees around the planet – or sannyasins or, 'the orange people' – of whom many, by design, were extravagantly wealthy. "*All other religions are looking after the poor*" the guru himself had said in a rare interview with *Good Morning America*, "*at least leave me alone to look after the rich*". Perhaps the very best-to-do among his disciples, were a group that Stork remembers as 'the Hollywood crowd', who would throw lush fundraising parties for the Bhagwan in LA, and gifted him once a one-million-dollars diamond watch. The Hollywood crowd were led by Francoise Ruddy, aka Ma Prem Hasya, the ex-wife of *The Godfather's* producer Al Ruddy, who would succeed as the Bhagwan's personal secretary in 1985. By then, Sheela had fled to Germany, and upon departure the Oregonian authorities would pin on her and her inner circle of devotees a number of crimes, all to do with the legal grey zone of Rajneeshpuram's municipality and the hostilities between the new scarlet commune and the neighbouring town of Antelope, as colourless as it was conservative. The investigators and police officers featured in *Wild Wild Country* denounce, among others, "*the largest immigration-fraud case in the history of the United States*" and "*one of the most greatest terrorist acts in our country, the poisoning of an entire town*", which they did by sprinkling the salad bars of local eateries with salmonella bacteria. In time, the Rajneeshees were also found guilty of wiretapping, arson, and two accounts of attempted murder for which both Sheela and Jane Stork served time in prison.

But there were a few years, however cut short by its downfall, when Rajneeshpuram was the place to be, the hippest and hippiest in the Pacific Northwest. A stone's throw away from Antelope's sleepy, largely retired township of 40 or so, here overjoyed multiracial youths gathered in their thousands in sexual freedom. Once a year in July, a 5-day 'World Celebration' would beckon to Oregon Rajneeshees from around the world to meet the guru, dance beneath the fireworks and meditate and gamble in the commune's casino. 3-day 21st-century Coachella pales in comparison, in a more than metaphorical way. If the comeback of the bucket hat may be the only style cue worth taking note of from the go-to festival of 2018, in 1982, '83 and '84, what the sannyasins wore at the Big Muddy Ranch was on everyone's lips, for better or worse. They cut a striking figure all-year-round when coming down to Antelope or The Dalles, in tonal shades of mauve, maroon, cerise, oxblood. Mystic red, as it happens, is the proper name of the colour with hexadecimal code #ff5500. But for their yearly festivities in the depth of summer, vermilion trails of Rajneeshees on their way to Rajneeshpuram were setting

the whole desert aflame. In their multitude, they still look as radiant as the morning sun in the sepia old tapes that *Wild Wild Country's* directors have pieced together. This was the intention, precisely: the sannyasins wore the colours of the sunrise as a token of the 'new man' that the Bhagwan's preaching sought to awake, whilst the guru himself, awoken already, donned sequined robes and shimmering turbans in anything but red.



Ma Anand Sheela

Yet for all of its auspicious symbolism, red was not the dye to blend in with the ranchers, nor to settle in Wasco County unnoticed. In Jasmin Malik Chua's article for *Racked* about the Rajneeshees' clothes, Leatrice Eiseman, executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, is quoted to describe red as overwhelming, demanding, and antagonising by degrees. In the West, it means danger: to the point that some speculate whether the feud between the sannyasins and their neighbours could not have been avoided if only they had opted for a more pacifying hue. In fact, before the end of the series, after Sheela's escape, the Bhagwan is seen giving his followers permission to wear any colour they please. But it was too late by then – already by episode two, the Antelopians are printing bumper stickers with the old motto 'better dead than red'. Rancher Jon Bowerman, who still lives nearby the Big Muddy, recounts proudly in his *Wild Wild Country's* interview of his father's role in the fight against the Bhagwan: Bill Bowerman, as a fellow Antelope's townsman puts it, "*in Eugene [Oregon] was ... kind of like Queen Elizabeth in England*". He was the only local with the resources and political clout to alert higher-up government officials of the serious threat the Rajneeshees were posing to the peaceful existence of a small town and the greater region. Indeed, Bowerman senior was the co-founder of footwear giant Nike.

Still the residents of Rajneeshpuram didn't dress as unlike those Nike-wearing cowboys on closer inspection, on any ground other than their colour spectrum. As Chua points out in her piece, the sannyasins had left behind in

Pune their willowy Indian robes, to adapt to and adopt in their place the getups of western culture as they moved to the States. They wore berets and baseball caps, blouses and blazers, flannels and puffers in ruby and rose, raspberry and rust. As all of the Bhagwan's Rolexes and Rolls Royces could have given away, Nike aside, labels did not elude them either. In a Q&A with *i-D*, the Way brothers mention, for instance, of how Levi's had secured an exclusive deal to sell orange dyed jeans in Rajneeshpuram's boutique: so that the Rajneeshees, whose press coverage equalled that of any celebrity at the time, could purchase only Levi's jeans at the ranch. The uncompromising convergence of eastern symbolism and western consumer culture, holiness and status symbols, makes the Wasco County's sannyasins a unique case study in cultural dress: they wore the red cloak of materialist spiritualists, just what the Bhagwan had intended them to be. This harmony, found in indulgence as opposed to austerity, may be the reason why their style resonates so much with contemporary viewers, over 30 years since Rajneeshpuram dismembered – with a “*final liquidation*” sale which, according to a Seattle Times' reporter who covered it at the time, cleared out “*everything from rose-hued thermal underwear to one of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's airplanes*”. Today, our faith in neoliberal capitalism has weakened, so that many are seeking out once more alternative systems of belief – and yet, capitalism's perpetual expansion in the face of its crisis unites East and West in the pursuit of products. The Rajneeshees' guiltless expenditure, their luxurious devoutness would therefore appeal, visually at least, to a generation who had not yet been born when the commune collapsed. Fortunately, the free market also makes sure that *Wild Wild Country's* numerous fans will have plenty to choose from in the latest collections, when it comes to restyle their wardrobe in sun-kissed tones. That's beside the fan-made gems one can find online, such as a t-shirt with one of Sheela's most popular quotes from the show: “*What can I say? Tough Titties*”, was her answer to a male reporter making plain that “*we don't want the orange people in our town*”. Or another, printed with a photo of her giving the finger, and the ‘I FEEL LIKE SHEELA’ slogan in gothic lettering – a play, of course, on Kanye West's *The Life of Pablo's* official tour merch.

Brands nurture a following, logos inspire loyalty, and consumers turn into converts in their continuous search for that elusive sense of belonging. “*It's always been our prerogative to bring together the varying tribes*” is how Kenzo introduce in the show notes their spring 2019 collection, “*we invite you to celebrate summer ceremonies, gatherings of all sorts, and the jubilation of rituals*”: three decades ago, it could have been the slogan to advertise Rajneeshpuram's midsummer festival. In the present day, Supreme fans around the world, all dressed the same in their box logos, line up for hours outside the stores, single file, as if waiting for the Bhagwan to drive by – as he did daily at two o'clock up the Big Muddy, at a walking pace to salute from his Rolls the sannyasins who stood by the roadside in a long red row. Indeed, Comparisons between the fashion industry and cult behaviours are easily drawn, without the need for Kanye West himself to buy, as he did earlier this year, 300 acres of hilly land in Calabasas, California, where he now plans to build his “*first community*”, 4.6 times larger than Rajneeshpuram. ‘Is Kanye Trying to Be the Next Bhagwan?’ wondered a headline on *The Cut* website, back in May. If he is, here's a *Wild Wild Country* season two in the making.

Just as we began to think we'd buried them for good, cowboys have made a comeback too, stomping their Cuban heels all over the fall 2018 runways. Many of them stomped in in shades that the Rajneeshees would

approve of, too. At Each X Other, zebra boots were worn with a zip-up jumpsuit, a turtleneck, and slick leather gloves all of them red. At Isabel Marant, a marigold western style long-sleeve shirt, with snap-down pointed flaps on twin chest pockets, was seen as both mens- and womenswear, paired for her with a tonal miniskirt and metal cap-toed riding boots. At Salvatore Ferragamo, silhouetted against a deep scarlet background, new creative director Paul Andrew sent out a round of ponchos, pants tucked into knee-highs and suede total looks in quick succession, in various nuances of persimmon, magenta and burgundy. Sure enough, a recent article on *Highsnobiety* christens cowboys as “the ultimate style gods”: “herding cattle and performing physical labor on a ranch ... is a kind of nostalgic daydream in 2018” it reads, “that’s part of the reason workwear has become so popular of late. People want to feel physically useful”. But if workwear has been popular of late, workwear in the tones of the morning light may well be its most recent update. In Dries Van Noten’s spring 2019 menswear collection, a peach boilersuit and some eggplant overalls rolled down at the waist call to mind the footage of early sannyasin settlers building a whole city in record time, on inhospitable land – the unswerving optimism with which they did it mirrored in rose-tinted sunglasses and some slouchy tailoring in sunburnt swirls and whirls.



via wildwildtshirts.com, TeePublic

Soft suits had also come up at Paul Smith for fall, with three subtly chequered, double-breasted red-on-red ensembles with overcoats for his final looks. At Haider Ackermann’s fall 2018 womenswear, and again Acne Studios’ spring 2019 menswear, orange suits were worn shirtless: silky and luminescent the former, a pale pumpkin paired with socks and Velcro-strap sandals the latter. A boxier, creaseless, ankle-length wine-coloured coat at Roksanda’s fall 2018 show looks instead like something Sheela would have favoured for one of her frequent appearances on American talk shows, her small figure further emboldened, unnecessarily, with 80s’

power-dressing shoulder pads. Whereas Hasya and the Hollywood crowd, perhaps, would rather have gone for Jacquemus' classy but physical tangerine wrap-dress with a tight-high slit, or a coral see-through top over a maroon balloon skirt and strappy heels. After all, another of the Bhagwan's aliases, to the horror of the Antelopians, was 'sex guru' – after a series of post-68 lectures he gave in India, later published in the collection *Sex Matters: From Sex to Superconsciousness*. But if one were to choose a single look to wear, to re-enact the saga of Rajneeshpuram – not just in its glory, but throughout its fall from grace, too – it would probably have to be one of the two safety orange coveralls with reflective stripes, balaclava and squeaky hazmat boots combos that opened and closed Calvin Klein's fall 2018 show. Through a set that Vogue summed up as “*a hallucinatory farm scene, complete with barn simulacra*” Raf Simons' collection had all the nods to Americana that he's been building upon ever since taking the reins of the label. Western shirting, cowboy boots, but also this time outings somewhat less polished, slightly wilder: a too-simple oversize buffalo-check plaid dress, sketchy, unravelling knits with the likenesses of Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner, speeding through an unnamed desert. The firefighter's jackets and shock blankets that were seen at the end of *Wild Wild Country's* episode two, in the footage of the bombing of the Bhagwan's Hotel Rajneesh in Portland, were found here too. The protective rubber, crisp tinfoil gloves and drawstring hoods evoked something dangerous, deceitful and possibly poisonous. As he's wont to, the Belgian designer scrapes the two poles of the American Dream, its mythology and its side effects. As did the Rajneeshees, over their brief but intense stay, in the 80s, at a ranch in Wasco County, Oregon.



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