books:

The Family: a journalist on Manson

By Bruce Schwartz

THE FAMILY, the story of Charles Manson's Dune Buggy Attack Battalions, by Ed Sanders. (E.P. Dutton, $9.95, 412 pp., with maps.)

As poet, protestor, Fug, and musician in his own right, Ed Sanders was in the vanguard of the counterculture from its beginning in the beatnik raves and coffeehouses of San Francisco at the start of the sixties.

By 1969, however, the hippie dream had already begun to disintegrate into a tangled skein of drugs, cults and political fanaticism. When Charles Manson and his weird family of bikers, runaways and slave girls were singled out as the perpetrators of the brutal Tate-La Bianca murders, Sanders, deeply disturbed, began an eighteen month investigation of these evil manifestations from the dark underbelly of the whole world.

In addition to covering the Manson family trial for the Los Angeles Free Press, Sanders "became a data addict," tracking down witnesses and recording hundreds of interviews. "It was like dope dealer and pornographer, patiently gathering information sometimes at the risk of his life, for Manson's not the last of the group of violance addicts left in California."

The Family is the result of his investigation. It is a detailed, cautious reconstruction of the motivations and activities of the family from its beginnings when Manson, fresh out of prison, met and was seduced by Charles Manson. Sanders, in a stenographic voice, presents his first-hand account of the Family's acts, their music, their "convictions" - which deafen him to the outside world; how the Family lived; the breakdown of respect for society. That Manson, the ex-con and hipster, was the willingness on the part of a psychopathic killer. Rather than being "true believers," the Family lived in a mental morass of confused, morally distorted concepts that integrated themselves into a vaguely coherent pattern of underground press hip rap. Through pertinacious, gripping presentation of information (The Vietnam War, for example, and the "realism" of Manson's criminal ideas), Sanders creates a frightening impression of California society. That Manson and America itself are here, all are they are all there. Behind Sanders' hazy jargon is a stern moral truth: that America is a sick, immoral society, and it is a moral truth that was also being lurking in commentaries on the My Lai massacre.

The book itself is straightforward journalism with a smattering of underground press hip rap. It is the best book I have been able to find on the Family in the last six or seven years, and it is a book that should be taken seriously by the public.

Review the selected biographical information about the victims, in respect for the innocence of their deaths. It includes enough to demonstrate that the Tate party was heavily armed. Sanders at times uses diagnostically confused slurs to rob the image of Manson. Though Manson is a brutal psychopath, Sanders creates a picture of the Family as the victims of an evil cult. Rather than being "true believers," the Family lived in a mental morass of confused, morally distorted concepts that integrated themselves into a vaguely coherent pattern of underground press hip rap. Through pertinacious, gripping presentation of information (The Vietnam War, for example, and the "realism" of Manson's criminal ideas), Sanders creates a frightening impression of California society. That Manson and America itself are here, all are they are all there. Behind Sanders' hazy jargon is a stern moral truth: that America is a sick, immoral society, and it is a moral truth that was also being lurking in commentaries on the My Lai massacre.

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