

When You're Strange: A Film about the Doors—what was it about the 1960s?

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24 June 2010

Written and directed by Tom DiCillo; narrated by Johnny Depp

“Wait until the war is over,
and we're both a little bit older.”

—Jim Morrison, “The Unknown Soldier”

Almost four decades have passed since the death of Jim Morrison, lead singer of the American rock band the Doors. Morrison was not the only famous musician of the 1960s to meet an untimely end. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones, and others also died under tragic circumstances, usually drug-related. Why the early deaths? And what was it about the era that produced such unique artistic individuals? And why are such artists so few in 2010?

Director Tom DiCillo's latest film, *When You're Strange*, is an unsuccessful attempt to answer some of these questions. There are no surprises in this film for fans of the music, and yet it does manage to humanize the members of the Doors and offer some partial insights for those unfamiliar with the so-called “counterculture” of the 1960s.

At times, the narration, written by DiCillo and narrated by actor Johnny Depp, is too much of an uncritical tribute to Jim Morrison—for example, describing him as a “shaman” when he is onstage.

Nonetheless, a considerable effort has been made. DiCillo was able to obtain rare footage of the band, and he has incorporated Morrison's own experimental film “HWY: An American Pastoral,” begun in 1969, but never completed.

Thankfully, *When You're Strange* does not go down the obvious route of interviewing various “talking heads” to tell its story. From a technical side of things, it is so well edited that it almost defies the “music documentary” category and seems more interested in presenting a gripping narrative.

The documentary begins with Morrison driving along a stretch of California desert. The car radio announces the death of the same Morrison in Paris, at the age of 27. It is an eerie scene, because Morrison now seems to be a ghost wandering the earth. In reality, these shots are from his aforementioned film, but they are integrated so ingeniously into *When You're Strange* that one could easily be forgiven for thinking that this is an actor portraying the singer.

Then the obligatory 1960s montage: the John F. Kennedy

assassination, images of the civil rights movement, antiwar students clashing with police, American flags burning, and naked hippies frolicking in parks. Depp narrates approvingly (and complacently), “The days of Ricky Nelson and ‘Leave it to Beaver’ are over.” While this no doubt sets the mood for the Doors and their music, the film never gets much deeper than that. DiCillo presents the MTV version of history, and the viewer is left to ponder about the more disturbing questions.

Ultimately, from the sociological point of view, rock ‘n’ roll was the product of the growing confidence of American working class youth after Second World War, and also the breakdown of racial barriers in the face of the mass struggles of the 1950s. The desire to push the musical boundaries and abandon the old social conventions went along with those processes. Popular music then caught on to and helped nourish the anti-establishment sentiment of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Jim Morrison, we learn, was born in 1943. His father was future admiral George Stephen Morrison, who was serving as commander of US Naval forces in the Gulf of Tonkin during the famous incidents in August 1964 (including an alleged attack August 4 by North Vietnamese vessels on US Navy ships that never took place) that were used as a pretext for a sharp escalation of the Vietnam War.

Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, the admiral's son would himself become the wild front man in one of the most notorious rock bands of the 1960s. An element of strong protest and outrage—perhaps even guilt—was present in Morrison's best work.

The elder Morrison, for his part, felt his son to be an embarrassment and disapproved of his lifestyle and creative efforts. When he first listened to the Doors' self-titled debut album (recorded in August 1966 and released in January 1967), the Navy man wrote a letter to Jim requesting him to “to give up any idea of singing or any connection with a music group because of what I considered to be a complete lack of talent in this direction.” Jim would sometimes falsely claim in interviews that his family was dead. What would make someone lie about his past? Perhaps it's not so much of a mystery. In any event, the film does not explore this adequately.

The young Morrison attends UCLA film school, where he produces one film and then drops out. He befriends Ray Manzarek, a keyboardist who likes jazz and Chicago blues. They eventually recruit Robby Krieger, an avid student of flamenco guitar, and drummer John Densmore, heavily influenced by the bossa nova

sound. Morrison gets the name of the band from a line in William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790): "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite."

Morrison begins as a shy poet, but later breaks out of his shell (to say the least) as the band members become more and more confident in their musical abilities. DiCillo's narrative depicts Morrison as someone who relishes the spotlight, but we are never provided enough insight into what he really might be thinking and feeling.

At a certain point, the touring and the constant commotion begin to take their toll on the band. While working on an album, Densmore gets up and leaves the studio, declaring he can't take it anymore. He returns the next day, and the band soldiers on as if nothing happened.

But the live shows are becoming too much for the lead singer, who threatens to quit the band to concentrate on his poetry. Instead of coming to listen to the Doors play music, fans are increasingly drawn to the spectacle of Morrison's performances and expecting (and often getting) a circus. Some shows end in riots or are cancelled by the authorities, who view Morrison as a corruptor of the youth.

The Doors are able to record several studio albums, but Morrison descends into alcoholism. Increasingly alienated by the music industry, he retreats to Paris, where he dies of a heart attack in 1971.

In an interview, Manzarek explains that he wanted *When You're Strange* to be "anti-Oliver Stone," referring to Stone's 1991 film, *The Doors*. That version is overblown and far more into mythologizing the band than telling any significant portion of the truth.

Unhappily, DiCillo's version is not terribly more profound in the end. The theme of the film is that "you can't burn out if you're not on fire." In fact, creativity and self-destruction are not mutually exclusive, as Densmore pointed out in another documentary, "Picasso lived to be 90." Concrete historical and social factors, the conditions in which a given artist works and the possibilities open to him or her, play their part.

Many leading rock band members who played in that era specialized in self-destructive behavior, finding themselves in many cases torn between the immense pressure exerted by a predatory industry and the demands, musical and social, inevitably posed by the widespread popular radicalization. From Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys to Syd Barrett of Pink Floyd, it seems very few musicians from the 60s and 70s survived unscathed. This issue has rarely been seriously explored. The easy path is merely to paint a picture of a "shooting star" whose trajectory is inevitably short and tragic.

If the Doors were *just* about ingesting drugs and "having a good time", why would anyone still listen to them? That ethos defined plenty of bands from the 1960s and, needless to say, defines many more now, most of whom are entirely forgettable.

The answer—and DiCillo does suggest this here and there—is that Morrison, Krieger, Manzarek, and Densmore possessed some degree of artistic integrity. The effort on the part of the music industry, whose sole aim is to sell records on the principle of the

lowest common denominator, to turn these talented figures into harmless pop stars was no doubt a contributing factor to the band's demise.

In an interview with popmatters.com, Krieger was asked what made his band's music so enduring. He replied (somewhat self-servingly), "Besides the fact that the music is great, I think if you look at those albums and you check each one out there's really no bad songs in there.... We wouldn't put something out unless we really believed in it.... We sort of knew that Jim might not be around too long, so we had the feeling, 'Hey, let's keep recording. Let's get as much as we can down before something happens.' And it was true."

What else made the Doors stand out from many of their contemporaries? For one, Morrison's extremely aggressive and bold, if sometimes misguided, approach to delivering a song. For another, the band introduced dark and gloomy subject matter into pop songs, yet performed them with considerable verve and enthusiasm. Songs like "The End" ("This is the end, beautiful friend") were at odds with the artificial cheeriness of many mainstream bands of the time.

This "dark" element pointed to the violence in American life (and Morrison's own family connection with that violence), both at home—in the student unrest and ghetto rebellions, and political assassinations—and abroad—the saturation bombing and other atrocities in Vietnam. A memorable feature of Doors concerts in the late 1960s was Morrison's mock execution by a firing squad, made up of the other band members, during performances of "The Unknown Soldier."

DiCillo hints at some of this at key points in the film, juxtaposing songs like "The End" with the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy. In another sequence, "Riders on the Storm" plays over images of American children playing in suburbia followed by Vietnamese children fleeing the destruction that surrounds them. How surreal to think that such haunting music was made at a time when another part of the world was in flames!

At the very least, DiCillo's film reminds us—if only inadvertently—that in 2010, the killing is far from over, be it in Afghanistan or America. Where are the Doors, or better, of the twenty-first century?



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