

Ray Manzarek, a founding member of The Doors, dead at 74

Hiram Lee
25 May 2013

Musician Ray Manzarek, a founding member of renowned rock band The Doors, died May 20 in Rosenheim, Germany, where he had travelled for treatment of bile duct cancer. Manzarek's inspired and versatile keyboard playing was central to The Doors' music and in later years the always-spirited musician would serve as a kind of keeper of the band's legacy.

Born to parents of Polish ancestry on the South Side of Chicago on February 12, 1939, Manzarek took to music very early and was encouraged to begin his study of the piano at age 7. While he would be classically trained on the instrument, he would also develop a love for early rock 'n' roll and R&B music and develop an excellent sense of rhythm and groove under its influence.

Although Manzarek graduated with a degree in economics from DePaul University in Chicago, a life in the arts was never far from his mind. In 1962, he moved to California and began attending UCLA's film school. It was there that he met fellow film student Jim Morrison. The latter had been writing poetry and song lyrics and was eager to start a rock band. After hearing Morrison sing a few of his earliest lyrics during a chance meeting on Venice Beach in 1965, Manzarek leapt at the chance to partner with him.

Morrison and Manzarek named their band The Doors in reference to Aldous Huxley's 1954 book *The Doors of Perception*, which detailed the author's experiments with hallucinogenic drugs. Huxley had taken his title, in turn, from English poet William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" ("If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.")

Guitarist Robby Krieger and drummer John Densmore, who Manzarek had met at classes in transcendental meditation, filled out the remainder of

the lineup.

The Doors tested themselves playing in Los Angeles clubs, most famously as the house band of the Whisky a Go Go. They worked and reworked songs in front of audiences. Their eponymous debut album, featuring the hit single "Light My Fire," would appear in 1967 and demonstrated the extent to which they had grown as performers.

Manzarek was a gifted musician and his organ and piano playing was, as much as the brooding voice of Morrison, the defining sound of The Doors' music. Krieger and Densmore were both talented improvisers and the band functioned well as a unit. Morrison certainly had a presence. His abilities as a poet and lyricist, however, have been exaggerated.

Morrison's self-conscious efforts at portraying himself as some sort of visionary poet quickly wore thin. His lyrics could be aloof and obscure, so "ethereal" at times that they seemed to float off in a fog. Little of this holds up very well today (or appeared especially serious to many at the time).

The band's most enjoyable music tends to be that which sees them leaving behind their more "artistic" pretensions and letting their love of rhythm and blues shine through. It is pop and R&B performances like "Love Me Two Times," "Hello, I Love You," "Soul Kitchen," "Twentieth Century Fox," and "Back Door Man" rather than the silly and pretentious Morrison performance piece "The Celebration of the Lizard" or the Oedipal conclusion of "The End" that still make an impression today.

A good rendition of "Alabama Song," composed by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, also deserves to be heard.

While their sound may not have been typical of the genre, the Doors belonged at least sympathetically to

the psychedelic rock movement, of which Manzarek would remain a lifelong advocate. The Doors, he would say, “were about idealism and the 60s’ quest for freedom and brotherhood.”

One felt in The Doors’ music a yearning to change the prevailing state of things, to break through postwar conformity and conventional thinking. Considerable anger over the Vietnam War also found expression in songs like “Five to One” or “The Unknown Soldier.” In performance, The Doors staged the execution of a soldier (Morrison, of course) in a moving manner.

But the change The Doors and their psychedelic co-thinkers had in mind was first and foremost a change in individual consciousness, a widening of the “doors of perception,” whether through drugs, music or meditation. More penetrating social questions were just not on their radar. A great deal of self-indulgence and intellectual laziness passed itself off as the “counterculture” in those days. And the musical results were all too often careless, unstructured and narcissistic.

Tragically, Morrison would die from an apparent drug overdose in Paris in 1971 at the age of 27. After attempting for a few years to carry on without him, The Doors officially disbanded in 1973.

In 1991, Oliver Stone’s film about the band (*The Doors*) introduced their music for a new generation. The tawdry and bombastic work was heavily criticized by Manzarek. “I’d like to deck that guy,” he said of the director during an interview with *Inside Entertainment*. The keyboardist felt Stone had completely misrepresented the band and performed a character assassination on Morrison. It was “ *Natural Born Killers* as rock-n-rollers,” Manzarek said in another interview. None of the “idealism” or the “quest for freedom and brotherhood” could be found in the work. He also suggested that Stone’s film had “omitted calmer, more humorous times” in the band’s early days (Associated Press).

Manzarek continued to be active in music in the ensuing decades, going on to perform with the band Nite City and to collaborate with many people from Philip Glass to Echo & The Bunnymen. Notably, he would serve as producer for the first four albums of the Los Angeles-based punk band X.

One of Manzarek’s longest-running collaborations was with Beat Generation poet Michael McClure,

whom he accompanied on many recordings and in live performances. Most recently, the duo released the album *The Piano Poems: Live From San Francisco* in August 2012.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact