

Singer Jim Morrison's *Collected Works* published prior to the 50th anniversary of his death

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29 June 2021

The Collected Works of Jim Morrison: Poetry, Journals, Transcripts, and Lyrics, a 600-page coffee-table book published by HarperCollins on June 8, gathers together most of the previously published writings of the songwriter, poet and vocalist for the 1960s' band The Doors, along with poems, lyrics and other writings culled from 28 recently discovered notebooks.

The new volume—published in advance of the 50th anniversary of Morrison's death on July 3—presents for the most part the artist in his own words. Along with rare family photos from his youth and later years, the book contains scans of original pages from Morrison's legal pads, stenographic notebooks and journals in which he wrote down poems, notes and other fragments.

The material previously published includes The Doors' song lyrics from 1967–71, several self-published collections of poems entitled *The New Creatures* and *The Lords/Notes on Vision* and the posthumously published poem *An American Prayer*.

Among the newly published items are a poem Morrison wrote at age 10, numerous never before seen song lyrics, notes from his September 1970 obscenity trial in Miami, a movie script for his unreleased film, *HWY*, a full reproduction of his "Paris Journal"—believed to have been written during the final months of his life—and an outline for a new book.

The new anthology was supported by Morrison's estate and contains a prologue by his sister, Ann Morrison Chewning. This element provides a glimpse into the artist as seen by those who were close to him before and during the years of his rise to popularity.

One of the aims of both publisher and family is to detach Morrison from his rock-star persona, present him as a serious poet and introduce a wider audience to his poetry and other works outside of his music.

For example, Morrison's sister Ann Chewning writes in the prologue, "After The Doors' first album came out, I

followed Jim's career, loved the music, and, when I returned to California [from London], visited Jim and Pam Courson in LA. Seldom without a notebook and pen, he self-published his poems and published others with Simon & Schuster and in literary magazines. He wrote a movie script and filmed it with friends. Some of his poetry and his film were personal works, exclusive to him, and some of his writings became an integral part of The Doors' lyrics."

Chewning explains that after the death of Morrison's parents, she became the executor, along with the Courson family, of half of the estate of Jim and Pamela. When it came to projects related to the band, family members always followed the lead of the remaining members of The Doors, keyboardist Ray Manzarek, guitarist Robbie Krieger and drummer John Densmore. She writes, "But when considering what to do with Jim's work, we tried to follow his intent."

The result is something of a large scrapbook of Morrison's poems, notes, musings and writings, much of it incomplete and fragmentary. The various sections contain pages of quotes from Morrison's interviews and comments that help explain the context in which the material that precedes them was produced.

The largest chunk, more than 300 pages, is "Poems and Writings." Generally, Morrison's poetry reveals the influence of the Beat poets and writers (Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac and others) and through them, the Surrealists and other modernist trends. He also apparently read William Blake (from whose work indirectly the band derived its name), Hart Crane, Antonin Artaud, Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche and more. Morrison's poems also include various profane, sexual, Zen and Native American "spiritual" references, fairly typical for his time and generation. Most of this, unfortunately, is done at a relatively low level, much of it deliberately obtuse and forced.

An example from the opening of the poem entitled "The

Universe”:

*The Universe, one line, is a
long snake, & we each are
facets on its jeweled skin.
It moves inexorably, slowly
winding peristaltic intestinal
phallic orgasmic ass-wriggling
slow. Fuck shit piss kill.
The skin of the dead beast
shivers in hair raising waves
of love. Die brute. Claim
your world. Join the snake
on its slow journey.*

Some of the more interesting material comes from the previously published *The Lords/Notes on Vision*, which Morrison explains in the supplemental quote, was written, “when I was at film school in LA.” It consists of notes about the evolution of visual entertainment leading up to cinema. In one passage, he writes:

*Phantasmagoria, magic lantern shows, spectacles
without substance. They achieved complete
sensory experiences through noise, incense,
lightning, water. There may be a time when
we’ll attend Weather Theatres to recall the
sensation of rain*

Much of Morrison’s poetry comes off as undeveloped, rambling stream of consciousness. In part, this is because it was never intended to be published in book form. More generally, however, it has to be said that by and large Morrison’s poems are sophomoric and the kind of thing that many middle-class adolescents attracted to the “counter culture” wrote in the late 1960s and early ’70s. Elements of social or youth protest, references to previous anti-establishment literature and a great quantity of self-indulgence and intellectual sloth abound.

This not to say that Morrison did not possess talent. The merger of his lyrics, singing voice and charismatic stage presence with the music of The Doors did, in multiple instances over the four years of the band’s popularity, produce some memorable popular songs. However, it would be a mistake (and unnecessary) to extrapolate from this and conclude that everything else that Morrison wrote or recorded was somehow the work of a great American writer. There has been an attempt ever since his tragic death at 27 to turn Morrison into a “visionary poet.” Various factors have been at work, including financial considerations, but it is misguided. Of course, he was very young when he died and might have developed as an artist, but one is obliged to judge him on what he accomplished during his lifetime.

In certain writings, Morrison himself seemed to be aware of his limitations and took a fairly sharp look at himself. In

one of the newly discovered items, “As I look back,” contained in a Paris journal and written in the final days of his life in 1971, he reflects on his experiences from childhood up to that point and includes this self-evaluation:

*Elvis had sex– wise
mature voice at 19.
Mine still retains the
nasal whine of a
repressed adolescent
minor squeaks & furies
An interesting singer
at best – a scream
or a sick croon. Nothing
in between*

Morrison identified with the youth movement of the late 1960s and recognized the connection between it and the popularity of The Doors’ music. While he may have wanted to be a poet rather than a rock ‘n’ roll star, the fact is that writing significant poetry, on the one hand, and good song lyrics, on the other, are not the same thing. There is also the fact that the other members of The Doors were exceptionally talented musicians able to create the instrumental environment within which Morrison’s gifts as a singer and lyricist could find expression.

Morrison’s death at the height of The Doors’ success—along with persistent rumors that he faked his own demise—has created fertile ground for all manner of charlatanry, idol worship and money-making over the past five decades. Many people who came into contact with Morrison during his short life have sought to tell their story and cash in on the mythology of the man.

At least three dozen books have been published about Morrison during the intervening years by music critics and former managers, friends, girlfriends and band members. Many of these focus on one or another aspect of the rock star’s life and celebrity, typically concentrating on his self-destruction, libidinous lifestyle and on-stage antics. It is rather sad. Others paint Morrison as a rebel-poet and the American equivalent of 19th-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, who withdrew from public life at age 20 and died young in 1891. This is simply inappropriate and foolish.



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