

The Doors

1991-USA-Musical Drama/Biography [feature]/Showbiz Drama

N.Y. Times Review by Caryn James

PLOT DESCRIPTION

Val Kilmer delivers what was considered one of 1991's best performances as Jim Morrison in Oliver Stone's hallucinatory bio-pic of the seminal 1960s rock group The Doors. Stone cuts a jagged swath through Morrison's life, starting with a childhood memory where Morrison sees an elderly Indian dying by the roadside. It picks up with Morrison's arrival in California and his assimilation into the Venice Beach culture, followed by his film school days at UCLA; his introduction to his girlfriend Pamela Courson (Meg Ryan); his first encounters with Ray Manzarek (Kyle MacLachlan); and the origin of The Doors -- made up of Manzarek, Robby Kreiger (Frank Whaley), and John Densmore (Kevin Dillon). As the fame of The Doors grows, Morrison's obsession with death increases. The band grows weary of Morrison's missed recording sessions and no-shows at concerts. Morrison, meanwhile, sinks deeper into a drug-induced haze, having mystical sexual encounters with Patricia Kennealy (Kathleen Quinlan), an older rock journalist involved with sadomasochism and witchcraft. ~ Paul Brenner, All Movie Guide

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FILM VIEW; For Groupies Only . . .

By CARYN JAMES

The novelist Eve Babitz slept with Jim Morrison when he was still lean and beautiful, she says in this month's cover article in *Esquire*. Richard Goldstein, in *The Village Voice*, recently revisited an interview he did with Morrison more than 20 years ago. And Lisa Robinson began a column in *The New York Post* a few weeks ago, "I knew Jim Morrison toward the end of his life," when he was bloated and constantly drunk. So here is my own journalistic confession: I never slept with Jim Morrison, I never drank with Jim Morrison, I never saw the Doors in concert and I never even, as Oliver Stone has admitted he did, worshiped Jim Morrison from afar.

Such neutrality shouldn't be an obstacle to watching a movie, but the greatest problem among many in "The Doors," Mr. Stone's latest 60's extravaganza, is that it demands an audience already as enamored of Morrison as the director is. "You're a poet, not a rock star," Morrison's girlfriend tells him in the film. And every pseudo-poetic scene in "The Doors" -- from the Indian shaman who enters little Jimmy Morrison's soul, to a hallucinatory peyote

trip in the desert, to the final shot of Morrison's grave in Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris, alongside Oscar Wilde, Balzac and Sarah Bernhardt -- declares that Mr. Stone uncritically bought into the myth of Morrison as a self-destructive genius.

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That's fine; a lot of people did. But at the very least, "The Doors" needs to convey some of that idolatry to viewers for whom Morrison is nothing more than a vague memory from Top 40 radio or just another rock star who died before they were born.

Instead, the film charts Morrison's quick ascent to the rock stratosphere and his steady self-destruction from drugs and alcohol without giving a clue about whatever possessed him or his fans. Was he done in by fame or artistic frustration or some demonic gene that would have got him even if he'd turned out to be a plumber? Was it simply Morrison's sex appeal that made young women scream and tear off their clothes? Or was he, on stage, the momentary embodiment of a social and sexual freedom that owed very little to the Doors? Why is he hotter dead than alive?

These are questions that Mr. Stone is too bedazzled by Morrison to ask. No wonder so many film-goers are measuring "The Doors" against their own memories or fantasies of Morrison and the 60's. Mr. Stone creates a movie virtually inaccessible to anyone who doesn't share his assumptions. He distances viewers from his film, throwing them out on their own.

That approach, the bullying narrative surface and the hollow interior, is typical of Mr. Stone's work. He turns characters inside out, splashing their psyches across the screen with montages and quick cuts and circling cameras and extreme close-ups that are meant to mirror some internal energy but are often just dizzying. Pouring all that action onto the surface leaves nothing within the characters.

The most extreme example of Mr. Stone's hyperactivity was "Talk Radio," a nearly unwatchable 1988 film that disastrously busied up Eric Bogosian's one-set play. "Platoon," made two years earlier, was filled with blatant symbolism, including the now-famous Christlike image of Willem Dafoe dying with his arms outstretched as if on a cross.

And even in Mr. Stone's most moving work, his 1989 "Born on the Fourth of July," a parade marches into the audience's face as a substitute for social context.

Leaping off the screen with relentless energy and ants-in-the-pants camerawork, "The Doors" is just Oliver Stone at his Oliver Stoniest. When Val Kilmer, as Morrison, sings the Doors' most notorious lyrics -- about his desire to kill his father and sleep with his mother, the sophomoric poetry of someone who has just discovered Oedipus and Freud -- Mr. Stone's camera predictably goes crazy, swirling and jumping and acting like a giant exclamation point. At its best, the film's haunted Doors music and visceral look creates the sense of being in some hypnotic trance. But by the end, audiences may feel they have been beaten over the head with a stick for two hours.

In "Born on the Fourth of July," Tom Cruise's wonderfully deep performance created the most fully developed character in any Oliver Stone film. In "The Doors," Mr. Stone also gets a first-rate performance from his star. But despite Mr. Kilmer's miraculous impersonation of Morrison, despite his shifts from a sensitive seducer to a vulgar monomaniac, he can't invent a man from a character written as a myth, with no inner life.

How, for example, did Morrison transform himself, inside and out, from a chubby college kid to a drooled-over sex symbol in the space of a year? Now *that* story would have shown myth-making in action. But Mr. Stone ignores it; he seems uninterested in any un-glamorous vision of Morrison. Even the singer's selfish, pot-bellied last days are idealized as the fall of a tragic hero.

So, what does Oliver Stone see in Jim Morrison? On the evidence of "The Doors," it must have been Morrison's way of playing an audience. He could apparently manipulate a crowd, using flash and noise and a poetic facade that masked the emptiness behind the act. Mr. Stone's film does very much the same. It is made by a Morrison groupie for other groupies, a film that leaves the rest of us locked outside wondering what the fuss is about.