

May 24



“The Doors: Part One”

At The Packing House as we’ve been completing our spring run of rock-music-oriented movies, the preliminary plans for the autumn film series have been developing. One group which has been requested by previous audience members and those who responded to our Hendrix movie night questionnaire is The Doors, a natural fit for inclusion in such a sequence. If anyone has had a preconceived, locked-in notion about how 1960’s west coast rock bands were/are supposed to act, look like, write songs and sound like, The Doors (in many respects) upset or undermined those assumptions. Never the epitome of the psychedelic “peace and love” – spouting combo, The Doors took some conventional rock ingredients of their era and used them to surprise, provoke, exasperate, incite, even enrage their listeners. They attempted to transform audiences whenever possible, not simply and placidly entertain them. The “strange days” and “weird scenes inside the goldmine” which vocalist Jim Morrison wrote about were commonalities with this ensemble. The ride they provided listeners with was never smooth or too easy, too comfortable.

Formed by two graduates of the UCLA Film School, Ray Manzarek and James Morrison, and two fantastic musicians who were taking nearby meditation courses, Robby Krieger and John Densmore (both highly adept at jazz and blues playing), the band centrally featured the popularly squealy, surging vox continental electric organ sound that thousands of other groups relied on. However, The Doors were not conventional in what they did with those basics. Having no bass guitarist, adding raga-meets-Wes Montgomery guitar lines, John Coltrane - esque modal, scalar improvisations, a strongly blues-influenced repertoire and drumming that was not typical rock “bash and crash” was a large part of their scheme. So too was a vocalist and lyricist who had been an extremely intellectual college student (who had regularly shocked his teachers) and was now let loose as a hell-raising instigator of trouble, demanding that listeners question the American status quo at every opportunity. This was a band capable of hits and pop niceness which had so

much more ammunition in its view arsenal and so much personal volatility that an explosion could occur at any moment.

The Doors started out with about twenty-two “songs-poems” that Morrison had created while living a rootless life after UCLA. The group members equally contributed to hammering these early proto-tunes into fully evolved songs. Yet the first Doors hit was the one-off piece written by guitarist Krieger, “Light My Fire”. Many other radio and chart successes followed rapidly, but consistent with the band’s very contrary nature and tendency to often dash people’s expectations, they rarely ever played any of the subsequent hits when performing concerts! These shows would be free-form plundering’s of The Doors back catalog, turning the nights into one long and harrowing medley, repeatedly punctuated by Morrison’s speeches, rants, accusations directed towards sectors of the audience and diversions into poetry recitation. Folks started to go to Doors concerts to see what chaos would ensue rather than what favorite songs would be played. Given Morrison’s penchant for generating controversy and dramatic exposition, people sometimes got more than they bargained for.

One of the great ironies in American music is that a band of film students (who were still involved in trying to make a movie) never were frequently filmed playing their songs, at least on home turf. Early on The Doors were given a couple of spots performing on TV shows, although they were taken a bit more seriously (and were filmed) on their first tour abroad. A British television network even crafted a full documentary on the group around one of their convert appearances. Strangely, given his moody, mercurial nature, Jim Morrison was on nearly his best behavior and had his enthusiasm running high for the foreign cameras.

Next time around we will discuss the final Doors filmed performance and then delve into the world of another requested rock-movie subject, vocalist Janis Joplin.

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