



Stephen Davis. *Jim Morrison: Life, Death, Legend.* New York: Gotham, 2004. x + 481 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59240-064-5.

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When the Music's Over

When Thomas Carlyle wrote, “biography is the only true history,” he surely had not anticipated the twentieth-century shift from biography, which at its best can go beyond a life narrative to illuminate the complex relationship between an individual and his or her era, to tell-all confessionals whose only aim seems profit-through-titillation. Like reality television, today’s popular biographies seem more intent on revealing the most intimate and sometimes less savory aspects of an individual’s life than on interpreting why those aspects may be significant in the bigger picture of the past.

The latest biography of Jim Morrison, self-proclaimed “erotic politician” and lead singer of the 1960s rock band The Doors, is a case in point. In *Jim Morrison: Life, Death, Legend*, author Stephen Davis speculates on the sensational aspects of Morrison’s life that have transfixed many a youthful fan. For example, Davis considers whether Morrison’s varied sexual experiences may or may not have included trysts with both men and women and whether his volatile partnership with common-law wife Pamela Courson may or may not have led to his death. He also casts doubt on Morrison’s authenticity—questioning whether his ability to capture the very essence of longing and rebellion in his theatrical posturing might have been a calculated challenge to mainstream standards of acceptable public behavior.

All of these issues are intimately connected to Morrison’s image as a sexual icon. After all, Morrison, whose rise to fame rested as much on his good looks, libidinous charisma, and intense romantic obsession with the more primal elements of the human experience as it did on his music, seems like a perfect case study for an exploration of sexual identity during an era when the rallying cry “the personal is political” led to an assault on traditional sexual stan-

dards. Such a study might provide fertile ground for a new understanding of the cultural dynamics of the sexual revolution or the influence of celebrity on contemporary mores.

Unfortunately, the opportunity for any thorough consideration of such meaningful issues is squandered in this volume. Davis, who argues that Morrison embodied a full-blooded attempt to break down oppressive standards of social and sexual conduct, does not support his contention with anything even vaguely resembling appropriate documentation. Instead, he mainly relies on the same kind of speculation and implication that have characterized previous attempts to assess Morrison, including Danny Sugerman’s 1981 tell-all *No One Here Gets out Alive*. Though Davis is a prolific rock journalist, he draws heavily from unsubstantiated personal accounts and memories, and employs a casual, almost tabloid writing style that undercuts his case for Morrison as sexual revolutionary. For example, statements such as “[Morrison] didn’t really care who sucked his dick as long as someone was sucking it” (p. 209) merely suggest that Morrison was a user rather than sexual revolutionary fighting the strict moral codes of the era, an insatiable egomaniac rather than a Byronesque warrior on the frontlines of hypocrisy. But such statements will probably sell more books than any serious consideration of the difference between rebellion and selfishness.

So too will Davis’s fawning recreations of chaotic Doors concerts and endless accounts of Morrison’s self-destructive activities, in which he blames anyone and everyone but the singer for his fall from grace. For example, Davis attributes Morrison’s implosion at the infamous Miami concert, which led to the obscenity charges that essentially ended the Doors’ working career, to the Living Theatre’s influence on the frustrated poet’s desire to challenge his audience

intellectually, rather than as yet another example of the aggressive ambivalence of a performer already so contemptuous of his audience that he routinely insulted and flicked lit cigarettes at the worshippers in the front row. Davis also suggests that Morrison's habitual yelling of the reprehensible slur "Nigger!" on the streets and in the clubs of Los Angeles, and his frequent physical and psychological abuse of the women in his life, were more the result of Morrison's uncontrollable alcoholism than a pervasive racism or misogyny that would contradict the radical image the book strives to create. Even Morrison's own death is attributed to the corrosive relationship he shared with Pamela Courson, who may have turned Morrison to heroin rather than the cocaine and alcohol that he routinely imbibed in suicidal quantities. Such transparent attempts to absolve Morrison of personal accountability ironically rob Morrison of free will—a characteristic that would seem a necessary component for a determined revolutionary.

Finally, there was much more to Morrison as a historical figure, beyond the question of sexual identity politics in the 1960s and whatever challenge he might have presented to the behavioral codes of the

era. Morrison and the Doors produced songs that were a startling and sometimes ominous counterpoint to the prevailing optimism of the pop world in the 1960s. Songs such as "When the Music's Over" and "The End" were perhaps a more accurate expression of the sturm-und-drang of the late 1960s than the sugary bubble-gum pop that dominated the Top 40 charts—a musical harbinger of the violent shift toward rebellion and revolution, individualism and self-exploration that displaced the heady "ask-what-you-can-do" cooperative volunteerism of the early decade. This strange dichotomy might have provided an interesting avenue toward an exploration of the often contradictory impulses of a confusing decade. But Davis presents merely a limited conception of Morrison as a man driven by glamorous internal demons rather than as a possible prism through which to examine an era that was, like Morrison, full of promise but ultimately suicidal. Without footnotes, providing only a limited list of "Selected Sources," and peppered with factual errors that would have been easy to check and correct, this is one biography that does not add to our historical understanding of the individual or his era.

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