

JIM MORRISON: A FAILED SHAMAN?

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Abstract: Jim Morrison, the rock musician, was influenced by shamanism, and performances of his group, The Doors, contained ritualistic elements. One of their songs was titled “Shaman Blues,” and another contained references to “the Lizard King,” an appellation for Morrison himself. The case can be made that Morrison served shamanic functions for his “community” of fans. However, he lacked the commitment to this community and the disciplined use of altered states of consciousness that characterize traditional shamans. When he died in 1971, shamanic references abounded. However, at best, Morrison can be considered a failed shaman; nevertheless, The Doors recorded five gold record albums in a row, and the surviving members of the group still perform.

Where can shamans be found in industrial societies? If shamanic capacities, at least in part, have a genetic basis, one would expect them to manifest in the population at large. Some people with shamanic propensities find their way into the health care professions; these individuals can develop and express their healing capacities as physicians, psychotherapists, or nurses. But I suspect that far more of these proto-shamans become performing artists – among them, actors, poets, jazz and rock musicians. Like traditional shamans, these artists enter altered states of consciousness to access their creativity. For example, John Coltrane claimed to have had a “religious conversion” while playing with the jazz icon Thelonius Monk, who would sometimes leave his piano, dance, and “go into ecstasy” during a performance. After this “conversion,” Coltrane dropped his years-long heroin habit, mastered his musical craft, and became a jazz icon himself.

Like traditional shamans, these artists have communities that look to them for guidance. These communities may be comprised of their fans, their audiences, or the members of virtual communities that log on to their Web sites, buy their albums, read their books, or wait in lines for tickets that will give them access to the same venue in which their icon makes a personal appearance.

James Douglass Morrison’s father and mother were separated during the Second World War, due to Captain Morrison’s assignment to the Pacific theater where he flew Hellcats from an aircraft carrier. After the war, the family was travelling on a highway near Albuquerque, where Captain Morrison was an instructor in one of the military’s atomic weapons programs. Suddenly, they came upon an overturned truck and saw the bodies of several Pueblo Indians lying on the asphalt. Captain Morrison saw to it that an ambulance was called, while his son screamed, “I want to help, I want to help! They’re dying, they’re dying!” While his mother held Jim in her arms, his father told him that it was a dream—it really didn’t happen. But Jim later described the event as “the most important moment of my life.” He believed that as his father’s car pulled away, an Indian died and his soul passed into his body.

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As a student at UCLA, Jim would sit for hours discussing philosophy and art with other students. One day, Jim and his friend Dennis Jakob reflected upon William Blake's line, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it really is, infinite." They resolved to form a band with Jim as vocalist, and call it "The Doors: Open and Closed." Another student, John DeBella, joined the discussion group; he later reminisced, "We were into the shaman: the poet inspired."

Shortly before classes ended, Jim dropped out of UCLA. Soon after, he started his rock group, and began to write poems and songs, producing more material in less time than he ever would write again. The other members of "The Doors" were drummer John Densmore, guitarist Robby Krieger, and keyboard player Ray Manzarek. Ray was a practitioner of Transcendental Meditation; however, Jim favored drugs and shamanism, which he considered not only his path to higher consciousness but also to his creation of many of the lyrics for his songs:

What have they done to the earth?
What have they done to our fair sister?
Ravaged and plundered and ripped her and bit her,
Stuck her with knives in the side of the dawn,
And tied her with fences and dragged her down.

But other lyrics were less than shamanistic, drawing upon other influences:

We want the world and we want it now....
So when the music's over,
Turn out the lights.

Light My Fire

In 1967, the group's first album, "The Doors," was released, and early that year they played at San Francisco's legendary Fillmore Auditorium. Third billed, the Doors' presentation included a song, "Take It As It Comes," dedicated to the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation. But it was "Light My Fire" that was to become the Doors' signature song. Years later, listeners told the surviving Doors members that "Light My Fire" was playing when they first made love, or when they smoked marijuana in Vietnam to temporarily escape the horrors of war.

Come on baby, light my fire
Try to set the night on fire.

Later, they played at Ciro's on the Sunset Strip, where Jim did a shaman's dance onstage, whirling, leaping, and singing into the microphone. A week later, they played to 10,000 enthusiastic fans in a San Fernando Valley stadium where they opened for the Jefferson Airplane. After the Doors played their set, one third of the audience walked out.

The *Village Voice* called Jim a "sexual shaman"; *Vogue* magazine observed that his songs "are eerie, loaded with somewhat Freudian symbolism, poetic but not pretty, filled with suggestions of sex,

death, transcendence”; in a *Time* magazine interview, Jim spoke of the importance of ritual in his work: “The Doors are looking for...a ritual...We hide ourselves in the music to reveal ourselves.” And to a reporter from *Newsweek* magazine, Jim referred to his music as “a purification ritual in the alchemical sense.” For the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the Doors’ music “speaks of madness that dwells within us all, of depravity and dreams, but it speaks of them in relatively conventional musical terms. That is its strength and beauty, a beauty that terrifies.”

In a memorable *Rolling Stone* interview, Jim described “ritual” as a “human sculpture. In a way it’s like art, because it gives form to energy, and in a way it’s a custom or a repetition, a habitually recurring plan or pageant that has meaning. It pervades everything.” Jim’s references to ritual suggest that he was aware of the shamanic use of ritual as performance. The step-by-step pattern found in shamanic rituals provides a way for them to enact a community’s mythology as well as to display their own virtuosity, whether it be singing a healing song, uttering a protective prayer, or giving a celebratory oration. For many members of the audience, a Doors performance was akin to ritual, providing a safe structure in which to enjoy the community of other Doors adepts and to glory in the musicianship of the band. Jim’s devotion to ritual was played out in 1971 when he and Patricia Kennely were married in a Wiccan ceremony by a high priestess and witch. After the ceremony, Jim fainted.

One of the songs in the Doors’ 1969 album, “The Soft Parade,” was titled, “Shaman’s Blues,” while Jim’s poem, “Celebration of the Lizard,” was printed inside the album’s sleeve of their 1970 album, “Absolutely Live.” This poem contained the lines, “I am the Lizard King; I can do anything.” Jim once commented that the lizard is identified “with the unconscious mind and with the forces of evil.” He also described his poem as an “invitation to dark forces.” However, the Lizard King image he projected was not to be taken seriously; Jim remarked, “it’s all done tongue-in-cheek....That’s just an aspect you keep for show. I don’t really take that seriously. That’s supposed to be ironic.”

Jim’s identification with the lizard is reminiscent of shamanic power animals, and his reference to irony recalls the shaman’s role as trickster. However, Jim’s combination of the two images is not to be found in shamanic traditions. Once the shaman had discovered a power animal, it was given a special place in healing rituals and called upon for advice and counsel. The power animal was taken quite seriously, and sometimes assisted shamans when they acted as tricksters to jolt their communities or their clients out of old, dysfunctional ways of thinking and behaving.

In addition, Jim’s equation of the lizard with “evil” and “dark forces” is not consistent with shamanic traditions. One shamanic function was to guard the community against evil, especially that engendered by sorcerers from enemy communities. But the power animals of these sorcerers, or even of rival shamans, were not evil themselves, even though they might be put to evil purposes. To the contrary, many shamans saw the lizard as having special powers, since it was able to exist comfortably in the water as well as on the land, and because its protective coloring helped it to blend in with the environment.

The Road of Excess

Jim kept trying to expand his artistic frontiers, taking an interest in movies. He and some friends met with Carlos Castaneda, attempting to secure the film rights to *The Teachings of Don Juan*, only to be told that they were too late. In the meantime, his poetry won him wide acclaim even among some established poets. Michael McClure was one of several writers who were impressed by Jim's poetry. He pictured Jim as an androgynous half-spirit, half-man who "lived in the woods" and worshipped intellectual beauty. McClure also recalled another Blake line, "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," and felt that Jim understood this path. "He perceived with his senses," wrote McClure, "and he altered them with alcohol (sacred to Dionysus, the god of drama and intoxication), with acid, and with the interior elixir of his own ebullience and exuberance....I know of no better poet of Jim's generation....Few poets have been such public figures or entertainers...and none have had as brief or so powerful a career." Jim's poems were described by his biographers, Jerry Hopkins and Daniel Sugerman, as representing "a grotesque otherworldliness" with frequent animal references—lizards, snakes, eagles, salamanders, and wild dogs."

Nor did Jim's professed appreciation for shamanic ritual reflect the discipline and structure that is an essential part of these performances. At one minute, Jim was a raconteur, telling party-goers fascinating stories, but the next minute, he could be a raging drunk, standing on a couch, destroying the expensive paintings on the wall. Jim extolled the insights afforded him by LSD, but he also lived a life of excess and substance abuse, ingesting huge amounts of alcohol, cocaine, and other drugs. Jim's erratic behavior onstage reached a peak when he supposedly dropped his pants during a Miami gig. The stunt got the Doors blacklisted in some cities and turned the quartet into a circus act for what Ray Manzarek called a new mob of "rock and roll voyeurs" who came not to commune with Morrison but to watch him self-destruct. However, the *Rolling Stone* commented, "It was Morrison's willingness to appear ridiculous that also made him great."

The Doors last performed as a quartet in 1970 in New Orleans. Ray recalled that he saw Jim's spirit leave him that night: "Everyone who was there saw it, man. He lost all his energy about midway through the set. He hung on the microphone and it just slipped away. You could actually see it leave him. He was drained." "Peace Frog," a song from the Doors' 1970 record, "Morrison Hotel," contains the lyrics:

Indians scattered on a dawn's highway bleeding
Ghosts crowd the young child's fragile eggshell mind.

Ray's description suggests that the Indian spirit purportedly incorporated by Jim on the highway to Albuquerque had finally left him.

In his conversations with friends, in his poetry, and in his music, Jim was preoccupied with death:

Before I sink into the big sleep
I want to hear
The scream of the butterfly.

When the Rolling Stones guitarist Brian Jones died, Jim distributed to his audiences copies of a poetic tribute; in several interviews, Jim suggested that his life would be a short one.

Over the years, there had been dozens of rumors of Jim's demise so, in 1971, when news reached his friends of his death in Paris, there was widespread disbelief. In the company of a female friend in their Paris flat, Jim indeed had died, perhaps of a heroin overdose, perhaps of cocaine, perhaps of a heart attack, perhaps of foul play. His lady friend died three years later, and there are still people who insist that the death was a hoax and that Jim is still alive, waiting for the right moment, shaman-like, to be reborn. Thirty-six years after his death, a less fanciful scenario was presented by Sam Bennett who claimed that Morrison had died on a toilet seat in a night club and that his body was taken to his apartment and dumped into his bathtub. In any event, Greg Kot, in the *Rolling Stone*, observed that Jim saw rock music "as a theatre of chaos, an opportunity to be pursued with reckless, sometimes self-destructive zeal....In the end, he was rock and roll by refusing to live up to anyone's definition of it but his own."

Years after Jim's death, Ray told an interviewer for *Sixteen* magazine, "When the Siberian shaman gets ready to go into his trance, all the villagers get together and shake rattles and blow whistles and play whatever instruments they have to send him off. There is a constant pounding, pounding, pounding. And these sessions last for hours and hours. It was the same way with the Doors when we played in concert....It was like Jim was an electric shaman, and we were the electric shaman's band, pounding away behind him."

The Wrong Issues

Val Kilmer, who played Jim in the Hollywood film, "The Doors," commented on the musician in a 2000 television interview for "The Actors' Studio." Kilmer's appraisal was that "He chose the wrong issues." Morrison and the Doors had recorded five gold albums in a row. The quality of their live performances was uneven, but they were certainly, as Hopkins and Sugerma state in their biography of Morrison, "the most dramatic group on the circuit." But during many of these appearances, Jim appeared stoned, drunk, or belligerent, and many of the Doors' gigs were marred by injuries, riots, and arrests. At one time, there were over a dozen paternity suits filed against Jim. I attended the Doors' January 1969 Madison Square Garden gig. Decades later, I discovered that my friend, photographer Bonnie Colodzin, had also heard the Doors, recalling that Jim's music was "of another world, and he seemed to be in that other world when he was playing."

What went wrong? What were the "wrong issues" that Jim chose? Traditional shamans often engage in wild, chaotic behavior. But it is a performance, not a life style; shamans respect the needs of their community and conserve their energy for their roles as healers, mediators, and protectors. Jim was out of control more often than he was in control. His music and his poetry reflect craft and skill, his life style does not. He chose dissipation over control, rage over compassion, death over life. His early demise indicates his lack of concern for his own well-being. Nor, unlike traditional shamans, did he manifest concern for the audiences who idolized him and were transported by his music into other worlds. Nevertheless, the

surviving members of The Doors still perform, and Morrison's albums still enjoy brisk sales, especially among new fans, especially those assigning him heroic status.

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