

Director Stone: "I think you're always ready for Dionysus to come down and lead you into the wild, swirling orgy."

Rider on the Storm

On the *Doors* Set With Oliver Stone

By Katherine Dieckmann

Los Angeles, April 1990: When you phone the production office for Oliver Stone's latest movie, a woman chirps "Doors" and puts you on hold. Then "Light My Fire" or "L.A. Woman" blasts across the line. Not that you need to make a call to hear these tunes: a random flip of the radio dial on the freeways is guaranteed to land at some point on Jim Morrison's deep, lush voice and those doodling keyboards, a sound as perennially wedded to the bright, dreamy landscape as the Beach Boys and Fleetwood Mac.

Why do the Doors endure, not merely as FM-radio kings but, in the case of Morrison, as an icon of rock's darker side? Stone thinks it's because people can't resist a free spirit living close to the edge—or at least the idea of one. He says everybody craves a route to the subconscious, a phenomenon he refers to so frequently one might call it "the Dionysian thing." Stone freely admits Morrison is his idol (though on occasion

he'll also concede Jim was a major asshole). Last year, Stone told *Premiere* magazine that when Morrison died in 1971, "it was like the day J.F.K. died for me—it was that shattering. I worshipped him."

It's a glorious California afternoon, and the parking lot behind the Orpheum Theater in seedy downtown Los Angeles is crammed with extras decked out in full '60s regalia: fringed jackets, Jimi headbands, sideburns, beads, batik shirts. They mill about on their lunch break in a sunshiny time warp, partaking of the swordfish and pasta served on "microwaveable, biodegradable" paper plates by a girl in a tie-dye T-shirt. The menu board, scrawled in multicolor Magic Marker, reads "Peace, love, and the '60s movement." A daisy stuck in the arm of a director's chair droops in the heat. The current *L.A. Weekly* sports an ad for cellular phones reading "Everybody Must Get Phoned." Exactly four days after Earth Day 1990, the Aquarian simula-

crum is in full swing.

Oliver Stone bobs in and out of this patchouli-scented crowd, pausing to attend to the wardrobe of a beautiful blond extra (authentic in her hippedom save obvious breast implants), then slips back inside the dark, cool theater. The Orpheum is doubling for the New Haven venue where Morrison was arrested on obscenity charges in 1968, and these extras are his would-be devotees. Soon they obediently flood back to their seats, joining the cardboard hippie figures set up in the rear rows who, I'm told, actually cost more to bring in than live human beings.

Finally, the talent takes the stage, including Val Kilmer, who sits in perfect sullen repose on the edge of the drum riser, looking ever-so-Jim-like in his leathers. I've been instructed to avoid looking at him directly because he's so nervous about a writer being on the set, especially since he's about to sing. (Kilmer has a choice whether

to lip-sync along to Morrison's track or wing it himself; he's managed to work up a remarkable mimicry of the master's voice.)

I've also been informed that I am the only journalist Stone has agreed to allow on the set to observe and interview him during *The Doors* shoot. This privilege seems to stem from Stone's fond memory of an interview we did in 1986, just before the release of *Platoon*. We were in his hotel room and he suggested I get myself a soda, "maybe a Tab since you girls like to drink Tab." The testiness of my retort ("girl" was bad enough, but Tab? How outré!) established immediate rapport. It may come as a surprise that Stone, who names Rosalind Russell, Norma Shearer, and Joan Crawford as his screen heroines, actually seems to enjoy assertive women. He just hasn't figured out how to turn them into characters yet.

Stone saunters over to the edge of the stage, a shambling man of 44 whose mania-

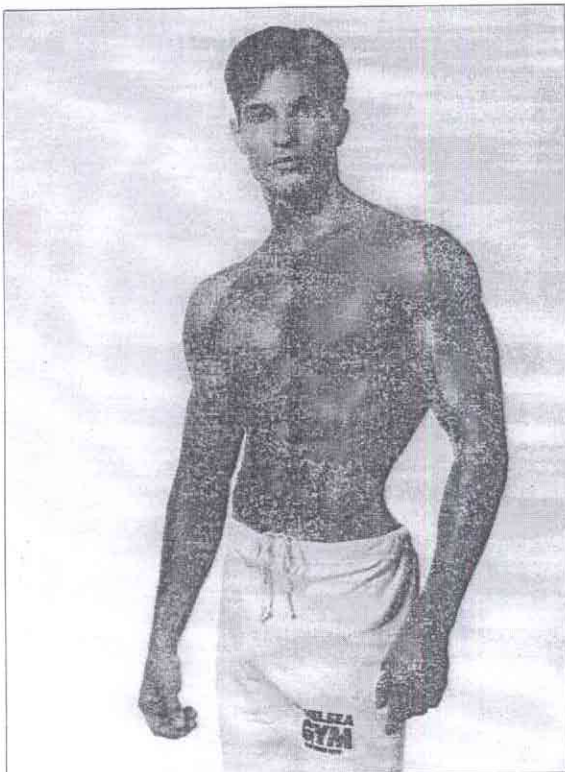


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cal dark eyes are the only indication of the weird energy churning beneath his otherwise calm exterior. "So what's the focus of this article going to be, Katherine?" he asks, smiling broadly. "My left foot? My right foot?" I demur, saying that depends. Stone shoots me a half-amused, half-paranoid look, and shuffles off to concentrate on beginning his scene. Kilmer emerges from his stupor and, practically sweating on cue, sways into full Jimness: taunting the audience, swinging his hips, opining insolently about the state of things in the U.S. of A. The crane rises above the screaming, shimmying extras, the smoke machine bellows, and the whole thing starts to feel kinetic and real. Stone is nothing if not a master of the spectacular moment.

But it's not until several takes later, when the ruffled, distracted director takes the stage to thank the "audience," that the people below truly come alive. Smiling young faces turn up toward him, eyes shining, beaming adoration. At this moment, he's succeeded in replicating exactly what he reveres in Morrison: this mass of eager humanity is looking to him for an answer. But he's so absorbed in paying homage to his prophet he doesn't even notice.

Morrison is the latest addition to the director's repertoire of agitators and fallen angels. Every Stone movie features a troubled male protagonist with whom he identifies to some degree—the grunt nails in his Vietnam diptych, *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, the abrasive truth-tellers and compulsive fuck-ups in *Salvador* and *Talk Radio*, the go-getter besmirched by capitalist greed in *Wall Street*. *The Doors* is no different. Morrison the self-destructive genius, both embraced and excoriated by the press, clearly serves as an analogue for Stone—a man so sensitive to criticism that

"Jim represents a more basic, primeval form of rebellion that is very useful now," Stone says. "What more can you expect from a rocker?"

he can virtually quote verbatim from every negative review of his films.

But unlike the other misbegotten heroes who undergo a classic rise-fall-redemption trajectory in Stone's populist dramas, Morrison comes with a certain amount of baggage. In 1991, he still stands as a demigod; the candles never go out at his Père-Lachaise gravesite in Paris. Ex-bandmates, family, and fans all have a private image of the lizard king they'd like to keep intact. (An article in the current *Premiere* details Stone's Herculean struggle to appease all major parties during the production of the film.) And of course Stone has his version: rapturous before Morrison's bloated, swoony poetics, and voyeuristic when it comes to depicting the rocker's abusive excesses. Any way you slice it, he stands to piss people off with this movie.

More pressing is the question of exactly how Stone, who identified himself as a Republican and served in Vietnam during the crucial period depicted in the film (before he, like *Fourth of July* protagonist Ron Kovic, experienced a liberal awakening), will manage to recreate a vision of the '60s that he basically missed out on. Stone has proven himself expert at humanizing soldiers. But what about the flip side of the '60s, the acid trips and swirling psychedelia and free love—phenomena he came to belatedly, if at all? Without connecting these activities to a greater ethos of liberation, he risks making them seem as faddish as Cabbage Patch dolls. As Eve Babitz notes in her piece on Morrison and '60s attitude in this month's *Esquire*, "Oliver Stone was such a nerd he became a soldier, a Real Man. He didn't understand that in the '60s real men were not soldiers. A real man was Mick



The ever-so-Jim-like Val Kilmer

Jagger in *Performance*, in bed with two women, wearing eye makeup and kimonos."

Second-guessing Stone's interpretive stance is no mean feat, given that the man is a gigantic bundle of contradictions. At once shamelessly bombastic and coolly pragmatic, Stone has always been perched between camps. Reviled by the left early in his career thanks to the macho, racist posturing in his screenplays for *Year of the Dragon* and *Scarface* (which he refers to as "*Scarface*, my opera"), he's now become a prime target for neocons, especially since the *New York Post* quoted him as saying there's no hope for George Bush, because "essentially, his soul is dead."

But as much as Stone may skirt clear positions—and promote a film aesthetic that seems crudely energetic to some, unbearably explicit to others—he has still turned out as provocative and varied a roster of films in the past eight years as any other American director. With last year's Oscar for *Born on the Fourth of July*, he's even been anointed a national healer. His sincerity is unimpeachable. Still, people love to hate him. And if any movie is going to bring on the Stone-bashers, it's *The Doors*.

"So what you're asking is how can I translate Jim's transgressions for a '90s audience?" Stone muses. "Like, when he went onstage at the Whiskey and said, 'Mother, I want to fuck you?' Is that what you mean?"

It's several days after the shoot at the Orpheum, and Stone and I are sitting side by side on a couch in his trailer. He's midway into filming a press conference scene, and is preoccupied with rallying his actors' energy; getting him to focus is a challenge. "Well, we shot the Whiskey scene a couple weeks ago," he continues. "And at first the extras thought it was real groovy, like heavy-metal or something. They were all bobbing their heads in unison. So we had to stop and say, 'Now look. This is not the reaction we're going for here. People were shocked when this happened.' Finally they got it, but it was like having to explain a taboo of the times."

Right, so how do you make those taboos legible? "Well, the theme of the movie isn't the '60s, it's Jim Morrison's spiritual quest," Stone says. "The hero's journey through this landscape where he has to find something, and he doesn't know what it is. He's a man who sails from island to island, looking for himself, looking for home. A man frustrated by limitations. He could never be happy, he always needed more, more, more—that's a line from the script. So it doesn't have to do with the '60s per se, it's more a mythic story that belongs to any era."

Except that this era is the '60s, and even if the *Doors* weren't overtly political, it's problematic to use that period as mere backdrop. "Yes, but I'm trying to show how Jim represents the desire for Dionysus," Stone says, "which is something we all want in our fundamental soul. He lived the unconscious, he acted out every single day,

And he lived with death every day, he wanted death." A violent rainstorm suddenly begins pounding the trailer, which Stone seems to take as nature's cue. "No matter what time you live in, I think you're always ready for Dionysus to come down from the mountains and lead you into the wild, swirling orgy."

But what if the rest of the world is saying "Get a job?"

Stone cackles with delight. "All the more reason you want the exception to the rule! Jim could have come at any time. He would have been special. I think the fact that he died young allows him to live in our minds forever as a teenage rebel, like James Dean. Forever frozen and beautiful in our minds. Like on a Grecian urn."

Fine. Grecian urns, whatever, but this character didn't dwell in some ahistorical vacuum. "True." Stone replies, then falls silent a moment.

"You know, all the extras so far have been so into the spirit of the '60s. You can see it in their faces. They're dying for the '60s to come back. They're dying for some sort of spiritual nourishment." I start to tell him that it seemed to me they were dying for him—to which he grins. "That's because I did the Gap ad"—when a production assistant raps on the door and says he's needed on the set.

"It was a great era, you know," Stone says as he hustles out the door. "If you remember it correctly."

New York City, June 1990: "It's been a long week. We did the death scene, we had a 23-hour day to wrap out Los Angeles, and I'm on my way to Paris. I gotta get to the plane, Mandela's in town, I gotta stop by *The Nation*. I'm exhausted. That's why I'm not going to make any mistakes." A bedraggled Stone leans across his oysters at Bradley's. He's anxious about our last meeting. He says I keep getting him when he's tired and vulnerable.

Okay, I say, let's talk about something a little less direct like how *The Doors* might fit into the current climate in this country. The MPAA ratings controversy is in full swing (NC-17 has yet to be introduced) and the 2 Live Crew arrest has just gone down in Florida (where Morrison himself went on trial after exposing himself on stage).

"Well, I don't want to get into that," Stone averts. "It's good for you, but I don't want it to become an issue for the film, because that detracts from it." Fine, then let's talk about drugs. If anything, the script suggests that you're prodrug, or at least prochoice about drugs in *The Doors*.

Stone howls. "Oh Katherine, you're going to bury me with this! Look, it's okay if you want to say that, but I can't. It's Jim's life, and I just wrote it the way I thought it should be written." He pauses, leans back, then launches in. "Drugs in the '60s were about opening minds and making people more conscious. To turn your back on that fact is an obscenity. When I showed Vietnam, I showed that people on our side killed each other. In the same way, I want to show that drugs did work for some people."

But you have to distinguish between cocaine, between the cocaine cartel and a martini lunch." Stone leans forward. "Cocaine the bogyman has always been a Republican issue. It has nothing to do with the root problems, which are education and social conditions. Of course the Republicans don't mind black people taking drugs, it's easier that way."

On that progressive note, what about the female characters in *The Doors*? "Ah-ha!" Stone lets out an edgy chuckle. "You tell me." So I do. "Well, none of them were feminists you know, in the sense of wanting to be a doctor or a lawyer or whatever." All right, but when are you going to make a movie without a bimbo in it? "I wrote the script for *Evita*, you know, which I really wanted to do." Stone says defensively. "And I have another piece I'm working on where the protagonist is a woman." He pauses. "Anyway, women characters who you might see as accessories I see as supporting, because you're more sensitive about the female issue."

The fact remains, however, that women in your films do tend to be ornaments or

love slaves or both. Do intelligent women seem like they dwell in some alien universe? "No, not at all, not at all." Stone frowns. "But I can't do everything at once." Our meal is drawing to a close and he shoots me that I'm-pressed-for-time look. "Remember, I'm still in my first real decade as a filmmaker."

On the phone from New York to New Orleans, February 1991: "You've got hours and hours with me! I don't even know what I said half the time! You're going to assassinate me. I just know it." Stone, calling from New Orleans, is overidentifying again. "This is going to be an assassination piece!" he reiterates, though he's laughing. Stone is busy scouting locations for his next piece of '60s revisionism—a film on the Kennedys, due to begin shooting in April (which he refuses to discuss now). Wracked by fatigue, he says he still feels he has to plow onward, because "this is a very important movie to make and it's more important than my health."

I tell him it feels funny to talk about *The Doors*, what with the war on. Actually, it seems more like the perfect time to re-release *Born on the Fourth of July*. "Oh, you think so?" Stone asks. "Listen, CBS won't even play it on TV! They were ready to move the airdate up to February and then the war broke and now they won't

touch it with a 10-foot pole. If *Born* came out now, it would die in a week. It would be too depressing for people."

Well, I say, it would tell them something they don't want to know. "Exactly. But sometimes you really don't want to know, and this is one of those times."

Stone lets out a long, demonic laugh that's tinged with sadness. "It's a very awkward situation." Awkward?

"What I mean is that I deplored the conditions under which we started this war, but now that it's underway, I'm in a very confused position. Because my heart goes out to the men and women who are going to make the ultimate sacrifice, so I'm with them in that sense. But obviously it's a war that could have been prevented. Listen, I spoke to *Newsweek* just before January 15th and I made it very clear where I stood on this issue, and they never printed it. The powers-that-be are much smarter and far more Orwellian than during Vietnam."

So how does it feel to send *The Doors* out into the current climate? "The film is like a beautiful child to me." Stone says without a trace of irony. "And I think it's the perfect antidote for the present moment, because it reveals a more liberated form of behavior and thought in a time of great repression and conservatism." He hesitates, clearly waiting for some response to his movie, which I've seen the night before. But apart

from some questions about his imagery—"I can just see it coming," he frets, "heavy-handed, sixth-grade American Indian symbolism"—I keep my mouth shut.

What I want to know is this: Does he truly believe *The Doors* can teach a lesson right now, however hazily defined that lesson might be (just how do you "break on through to the other side," anyway)?

"The only overt political statement Jim ever made—and we've talked about this before—was in his 'Unknown Soldier' song, which was taken as a statement against the war and banned by radio," Stone offers. "I had to cut that scene from the film for reasons of length. In light of Iraq, maybe that was a mistake." He pauses. "To me, Jim represents a more basic, primeval form of rebellion that is very useful now. That in and of itself is a political statement. What more can you expect from a rocker?"

But kids might not get it. The level of brainwash in this country, I say, may be higher than you think.

Stone audibly grows more somber. "Maybe so, maybe so," he sighs. "All I can say is that I do think young people will really want to hear what this movie has to say." There's a long pause on the telephone wire, and I'm tempted to tell him I still have no idea exactly what that is. Then he says, "At least I think so."

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