

STONE'S



'I'd like to leave a legacy that I was a good historian as well as a good dramatist.'

— at left with wife Elizabeth, son Sean and Bernice

SIXTIES

BY SEAN MITCHELL

There is a scene in the Vietnam film *Platoon* in which death-stalking Sgt. Barnes leans down into the face of a bawling, badly wounded soldier and screams, "Shut up and take the pain!" It's a line that any number of people might have written, yet 5 years later it says so much about the man who did write it: Oliver Stone, the Vietnam veteran who makes movies.

As has become clear from the profane and unnerving chronicle of our

times that he has been assembling on film, Stone is telling America to face up to some harsh realities instead of living in a world of beer commercials, game shows and government lies.

This is hardly what we expect from the folks who keep us entertained at the movies, which makes Stone's Oscar-winning achievement as a director and screenwriter that much more remarkable. He is an outsider working on the inside, a political left-winger making melodramas for the masses, a grunt who conquered Hollywood.

His new picture, *The Doors*, promises

to be another hopped-up ride across the dark frontier: a biography of Jim Morrison, the reptilian rocker from the '60s who, like Sgt. Barnes, regularly courted death in his sex-powered songs and managed to find it at age 27 in a hotel bathtub in Paris.

Later this spring, Stone begins work on a film that will focus on his most ominous subject yet: the assassination of President Kennedy, who he believes was killed not by lone gunman Lee Harvey Oswald but by "the military-industrial complex," which feared "that his (likely) re-election in '64 was a

significant threat to that structure."

The man drawn to these lurid pop-history tales is himself a contradictory character, half obsessive intellectual, half movie buff enamored of such escapes from reality as *Flashdance* and *Pretty Woman*. A moody conversationalist who doesn't always speak in a straight line, Stone appears to be both an antidote to Hollywood and an embodiment of it. What other director has made a horror movie starring Michael Caine (*The Hand*, 1981) and also donated money to build a clinic in Vietnam?

In the past 5 years, Stone has won the Academy Award for best director twice (for *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*), and his movies have earned hundreds of millions of dollars. With luxurious houses in Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, Calif., plus an apartment in Palm Springs, at age 44 Stone already has eclipsed the affluence of his father, a New York stockbroker from whom he rebelled at age 19 by dropping out of Yale and enlisting in the infantry.

Born close to the Establishment and sent to prep school like George Bush, Stone tore up his ticket to privilege for a chance to fight, kill and die in Vietnam alongside teenagers from small towns who had never finished high school.

Why he did this had something to do with personal demons, but he concedes it also had to do with the times—the wrenching social upheavals of the 1960s that he is revisiting in *The Doors*.

The era in which he came of age was "about experiencing everything," Stone recalls during a conversation on the patio of his red-tile-roofed hacienda in the hills above Santa Barbara. "It wasn't about limits and laws. It was about breaking through to the other side, to experience life fully, unlike our parents, who grew up in suits and ties, had strict moral codes, rigid social behavior. We looked at our parents, and what did we see? We saw divorces and addictions, we saw Vietnam and we saw Kennedy being killed.

"The social structure was shifting beneath us like an earthquake. And we had nothing to hang on to."

Some children of the '60s look back on that time with a mixture of fondness and chagrin. Many of them, now parents themselves, wince at the thought of the drugs they indulged in and the innocence they brought to the hard battleground of politics. Not Stone.

As his wife of 10 years, Elizabeth, putters in the kitchen, and their 6-year-old son, Sean, watches Saturday morning cartoons in front of a big-screen television set, Stone looks profoundly puzzled at the idea that some people think the '60s have been overrated.

"The only harm that came of the

'60s was the fear it engendered in the reactionaries to elect Nixon and allow J. Edgar Hoover to continue in office" as FBI director, he says. "So we had the repression of a security state. Otherwise, it was all good what happened. There was a dark side and a negative side, but that's a matter of personal responsibility. Certain people took too many drugs and cracked up. There was a shooting at Altamont. Big deal. There are always casualties in any movement. But you can't say that, because your son died of drugs, the whole movement was an error in human history."

Stone is prone to making speeches that sometimes leave his colleagues in Hollywood nervous or annoyed. There's his speech about the tyranny of the Hollywood studios, his speech about the immorality of U.S. policy in Central America, his speech about Vietnam, and the one about the parallels between the current state of his country and the fall of Rome.

But while he persistently broadcasts such opinions to friends and journalists, he also is a man with a common touch, the sort of man who can enjoy himself at a female mud-wrestling match after attending a Billy Idol concert. He is a fierce football fan who made sure nothing came between him and watching his favorite team, the San Francisco 49ers, during the playoffs.

He's large but not quite beefy, about 6 feet tall, with thick features and thinning black hair that sends out tendrils of unruly curls. The voice is genteel but manic and able to crack open with raucous laughter in an instant.

"He's definitely a 'Type A' personality," says wife Elizabeth, a blond Texas native and one-time aspiring actress whom Stone met at a party in 1979. "He's in overdrive all the time."

"I think his movies are very much him," says Alex Ho, Stone's longtime co-producer. "I see him in his movies: intensity plus softness."

Working at his current pace — he has made six movies in 5 years — he hardly has time for friends, but what socializing Stone does tends to be with artists and liberal politicians more than with the Hollywood crowd.

"During *The Doors*, he was hanging out with rock 'n' roll people a lot," says Andrea Jaffe, the publicist for his movies. The world of the film so absorbed him that his jargon even changed. "He started calling everybody 'man.'"

Although Stone didn't discover the music of the Doors until he went to Vietnam, he ended up in the war because of a rupture he likens to Morrison's flight from his parents. "He cut off from his parents totally. Never saw them again after '66. Never saw them

after all his success. I went to Vietnam, I cut off from my parents and never saw them the same way again. The Far East for me was a second home."

By the time Stone returned to the USA in 1969, he had been initiated into the "madness and the folly and the blood and the lust" of war — but also into the music of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Smokey Robinson, the Temptations and other rock 'n' roll artists he had not been allowed to hear as a boarding student at the boys-only Hill School in Pottstown, Pa.

These sounds of the '60s applied a balm to his troubled soul. "I love music, always have, and have been influenced by it. It's been a liberating force in my life. And I wanted to pay homage to those first music moments of the '60s, when my mind was freed in Vietnam."

Most of all, he wanted to pay hom-

age to the Doors and Morrison, their lead singer, once described by essayist Joan Didion as "a 24-year-old graduate of UCLA who wore black vinyl pants and no underwear and tended to suggest some range of the possible just beyond a suicide pact."

"I wrote my first script in '69 when I came back from Vietnam, and it was called *Break*," Stone remembers. The title referred to the Doors' song *Break on Through to the Other Side*, which pretty much summed up Morrison's philosophy of excess as a path to wisdom. The script, which Stone never sold, "was filled with Doors imagery and songs," he says. "I even wrote the songs in."

Twenty years would pass before the young soldier-turned-filmmaker would have a chance to return to the influence of the Doors and their uneasy anthems, such as *Light My Fire*, *People Are Strange*

of women — and then for him. And his early death. I doubt I would have done the movie if he were still alive.

"He lived his art. His life became the working out of his lyrics. He wouldn't be like Mick Jagger and put it away into a suitcase when he came off the stage. After a performance, he kept on being Jim. He'd talk to anybody. He was a democrat."

For Stone, Morrison symbolized a new, liberating approach to what had been a life of prep-school discipline and repression.

"Sexuality in the 1950s and '60s was terrible in this country — for me. He put us in touch with our pagan, animal self, our senses. He was of the senses."

"When he died in 1971, I was very sad that day. It was like the day Kennedy died for me. It was a very significant day."

OPENING FRIDAY: 'THE DOORS'

What is it about Jim Morrison, the gloomy lead singer of the Doors, who died of heart failure at age 27 in 1971, that the hairy-chested Oliver Stone wanted to make a movie about him?

Among the '60s rock stars Stone first heard on record while serving in Vietnam, Morrison "is the one I identified with most. He had some residual rebellion, some James Dean quality, something Brando-esque. He was devil and angel combined. And he was intelligent. The lyrics were very clear in (the Doors') songs, about life and death and fear and sex. Your mother, your father, the snake. 'Ride the snake.' The lizard imagery. The attention to myth, to Greek myth, Oedipus stories, Irish Celtic mythologies. He told a good story through song."

"Certainly, there was his physical beauty, and his adoration

STONE'S STORIES OF PAIN

Oliver Stone has written gritty screenplays about drugs ("*Midnight Express*," in 1981, and "*Scarface*," in 1983) and directed a movie about hate ("*Talk Radio*," in 1988). He's the writer and director of these tales:

- U.S. complicity in repression in Central America: *Salvador*, 1986
- The secret shame of Vietnam: *Platoon*, 1986
- Greed-gorged speculators on Wall Street: *Wall Street*, 1987
- A gung-ho Vietnam recruit who discovers he gave his legs for a cause he no longer believes in: *Born on the Fourth of July*, 1989
- Morbid rocker Jim Morrison: *The Doors*, 1991
- The "conspiracy" behind JFK's assassination: untitled, work begins this spring

and *The End*. First he would try to write a novel in Mexico, then get busted for marijuana possession at the border, then enroll at New York University's film school and spend years in New York City trying to sell his first script while working as a cabdriver and a messenger.

"I was writing two scripts a year, getting them to agents. They wouldn't read 'em. I was writing stuff about Vietnam, and they didn't want to know about it. It just didn't work for me in New York. It wasn't meant to be my home. My destiny lay in the West."

After reaching age 30 without a film credit to his name and with very little money, he moved to Los Angeles, where his luck changed. Hired to adapt the novel *Midnight Express*, Stone turned in a searing script about an American student held in a horrendous Turkish prison for smuggling hashish. The movie was a hit, and the screenplay won Stone an Academy Award in '78.

But the success and money that came with the Oscar still didn't give Stone enough power to make the kinds of movies he wanted. For 8 more years, he toiled largely as a hired hand in Hollywood, writing such movies as *Conan the Barbarian* and *The Year of the Dragon*.

It wasn't until a tiny British film company in 1986 backed him with a minimal \$6 million budget and allowed him to direct his script of *Platoon* that Stone got the chance to become the filmmaker he had always wanted to be.

Platoon was a script he had written by himself 10 years earlier when no one would listen to him. In more recent years, he has collaborated on scripts with the people his movies are about — people like Richard Boyle, the photographer upon whom *Salvador* was based, and disabled Vietnam vet Ron Kovic, for *Born on the Fourth of July*.

"I like to make 'em realistic," he says, "at least until now. I like to get real people around me who have lived that thing and can tell me if I'm making it false. And I think I've been pretty close, though not quite exact."

"I was in Vietnam, and I was in the infantry, and I know that *Platoon* is only up to a certain degree a reflection of that reality. But I never confused the two and said it was reality."

The Doors stars Val Kilmer, best known as Tom Cruise's rival in 1986's *Top Gun*. While making the movie, Stone says, "at times I would see Val Kilmer's face glint in the sun and the light, and I would say, 'That's Jim.' And he's there for that moment. But it's never quite exactly Jim. A movie is only a reflection. It's a painting on a cave wall. That's what movies are: dreams on a wall."

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Stone is quick to distance himself from liberals who seize on his films as welcome alternatives to Hollywood's usual confections. He says he finds pleasure in spectacles and "purely physical, sensual movies" like *Flashdance*, the 1983 Cinderella tale about a female welder who dreams of being a ballet dancer, or *Pretty Woman*, last year's blockbuster about a hooker swept off her feet by a rich Prince Charming.

To him, such movies are "about a need for transcendence. We all need that. It's the same reason people play Lotto. They want to believe. I'm not a moralist in that sense."

Still, Stone's own movies have been notably lacking in Prince Charmings and baller auditions. Pulp, acerbic, tough and broadly entertaining, his pictures have been criticized by some reviewers for a lack of subtlety and humor and an underlying machismo that leaves little room for female characters of substance.

Stone, who's concerned about such criticism, responds: "War is a loud thing; it's not a soft thing. In the case of *Born*, we were dealing with a protagonist who was very direct and very outspoken, and the film reflected that. *Talk Radio* was not about a subtle personality. The aesthetic is determined by the subject. There are subtleties in these films that maybe will be noticed years from now."

He notes that young people in New York came up to him after seeing *Wall Street* and told him they wanted to be just like Gordon Gekko, the suave, cold-blooded financier played by Michael Douglas in an Oscar-winning performance. "Gekko was a hero in New York," Stone says, arguing that even his villains are not two-dimensional.

Whatever criticism may be made of his films, Stone has little cause to worry. He has reached the pinnacle of success in Hollywood and can do as he pleases with his work. And he seems to have made peace with the memory of his dad, now deceased, from whom he broke off so dramatically but whom he thanks for leaving him his instinct for storytelling.

"When I die," Stone says, anxiously looking at his watch and worrying about missing the start of an impending football game, "I'd like to be able to say, 'Hey, those films reflected a time and place that was pretty accurate. We caught a piece of Vietnam, we caught a piece of the Doors and what was going on in the late '60s, a piece of the madness on Wall Street in the '80s.' I'd like to leave that kind of a legacy: That I was a good historian as well as a good dramatist. That I told stories in an interesting way so that the other people around the fire in the cave could kind of look up and remember and think, 'That was a good story.'"

HOLLYWOOD'S NEXT WAR

As U.S. troops massed in Saudi Arabia before war with Iraq broke out, Oliver Stone was surprised to learn that one of the movies the soldiers were being shown was *Born on the Fourth of July*, his adaptation of a Vietnam veteran's virulent anti-war autobiography.

"Either they're very confident about their position and they're being honest about the film and just showing it," Stone says of the military authorities, "or else they just don't take movies that seriously."

Stone already imagines the next generation of war movies: "I see Americans coming back years later and talking about it for the rest of their lives. I see movies about the Iraqi war becoming another sub-genre. I see the whole march of it through time. We're part of a timeless genetic process that repeats itself. The genes have to go to war."