

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



THE LORE OF THE DOORS: Celebrating Santa Barbara connections as legendary rockers mark milestone

KARNA HUGHES, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

February 11, 2007 8:18 AM

Some say The Doors' late singer Jim Morrison wrote "The Crystal Ship" when he was dropping acid on an Isla Vista beach one night, transfixed by the glittering lights of Platform Holly, an offshore oil rig.

Whispered rumors, legends and contrary accounts go hand in hand with iconic rock bands, and Santa Barbarans aren't immune to the mystique of The Doors.

But though recirculated stories often stretch the bounds of credibility, the Los Angeles band does have some curious connections to Santa Barbara County. When The Doors receive a lifetime achievement Grammy Award tonight, some locals can even claim they knew the boys back in the beginning.

In tribute to the band's 40th anniversary, being celebrated this year, we collected local trivia related to the group. Maybe you'll find yourself a few degrees from The Doors.

- Before becoming The Doors' ace guitarist, Robby Krieger (then Robert Alan Krieger) was a student at UCSB, where he studied psychology from 1964 to 1965. He taught flamenco guitar to kids and practiced his grooves in the laundry room of his dorm.

"It was a total party school," Mr. Krieger recalled in "The Doors by The Doors" (Hyperion, 2006). "There was a band of hippies at UCSB. Longhairs few and far between at that point. We were doing acid and stuff, but there weren't a lot (of) us, maybe twenty people that were hip, you know."

- Montecito resident and location scout Ronnie Haran Mellen discovered The Doors when they played at The London Fog in L.A. in May 1966. Then a booking agent for the Whisky a Go Go, she helped turn the group into the house band for the club. She also put Jim Morrison up at her apartment a few blocks from the famous club.

"I knew Jim had star quality the minute I saw him," she recalled in "Break on Through: The Life and Death of Jim Morrison" (William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991). "In those days he was living on the beach and no one knew quite where . . . I had to dress him, get him some T-shirts and turtle necks at the Army-Navy store & 151; the leathers (the singer's trademark pants) didn't come until several months later."

When reached by phone, Ms. Mellen remembered Morrison and keyboardist Ray Manzarek as "intellectual geniuses." "We were always talking about things like Nietzsche or the events of the day," she said. "But it was also depressing because you just knew any minute (Morrison) was going to kill himself & 151; throw himself off a roof or something."

"He always, always, always flirted with death. He wanted to die . . . Everything he did was to tempt fate . . . You didn't really want to hang with him socially." It's long been reported that Morrison died in 1971 in Paris under mysterious circumstances. The 27-year-old singer's body was found in a bathtub.

- The Doors played seven gigs in Santa Barbara in the sixties. The first five were at Earl Warren Showgrounds between July 1966 and August 1967.

Jim Salzer, former concert promoter and current owner of Salzer's Records in Ventura, brought the L.A. band up the coast on a tip from his friend Ronnie Haran.

In the early days, the group was relatively unknown, and Mr. Salzer paid them \$150 a show. After The Doors' self-titled first album was released in January 1967, locals started to take notice and "Light My Fire" played frequently over the airwaves. For their last Earl Warren gig, the band got top dollar: \$2,500. Several thousand people turned out for that show, according to Mr. Salzer.

"When (Jim Morrison) would perform, you could hear a pin drop," recalled the promoter. "He was very magnetic, very forceful and strong and compelling." At the same time, "he liked to torture people. We would have rounds of things where he would be annoying," he said.

Mr. Salzer cited a gig at the Starlight Ballroom in Oxnard, where "the band asked me

to do whatever I had to, to get him on the stage." The singer was notorious for getting loaded before shows.

"I had to grab him by the throat and pin him against the wall and force him on the stage," he recalled. "Two weeks later, when they played at Earl Warren, I had a feeling he didn't remember."

- The group's last local gigs were at UCSB's Robertson Gym Oct. 28, 1967, a sold-out benefit for the school's crew team and SBCC's La Playa Stadium on June 28, 1968.

"I still don't know what to make of the Doors," wrote Jim Bettinger in *El Gaucho*, the UCSB student newspaper, after the group's 1967 show. The band played its most popular songs from its album, including "Light My Fire," "Backdoor Man," "People Are Strange," "Whiskey Bar," "The End" and "Break on Through (to the Other Side)."

"Morrison does not just sing, he shouts and screams and moans, all the time jumping and dancing around the stage," wrote the reviewer. "He does not disappear from the picture when his cohorts stretch out on their individual solos, but instead remains to add his own little visual effects to the music being produced."

In the end, Mr. Bettinger compared the concert to "a Gothic horror story," using "terror and alienation to produce an emotional experience."

"With the (psychedelic) light show provided by Dry Paint, not one of the senses was left empty to sensation & 151; the effect was so total that you could feel, taste, and touch the experience," he reported. "A lot of people . . . are walking around with their minds kind of spaced now."

- Leon Barnard, who lives in Buellton, worked for The Doors as their one-time "barefoot, inhouse press agent" beginning in March 1968. He promoted the band's concerts in Europe, arranged interviews and went on the road with the group for a while.

When he wasn't traveling, Mr. Barnard lived at a historic horse ranch in Ballard, known for a while as Sun Country Farm. When the FBI sought Jim Morrison for indecent exposure at a Miami concert in March 1969, "Jim was asking about coming out and hiding out at the ranch for a few days," claimed Mr. Barnard. Instead, the singer turned himself in to the FBI's L.A. bureau.

Now a photographer and writer, Mr. Barnard still feels the pull of Morrison's poetry. He published a tribute to Morrison, "Waiting for an Echo," in March 2004 and

frequently contributes to thedoors.com message boards. He's also posted anecdotes about Morrison in voice recordings on myspace.com/morrisonmoments.

- Penny and Columbus "Corky" Courson have lived in Santa Barbara for many years. Their daughter Pamela Courson was Morrison's common-law wife. She died from a heroin overdose in April 1974 at the age of 27, the same age Jim was when he died three years before her. After her death, the Coursons inherited part of Morrison's estate, including the rock legend's poetry and writings.
- When director Oliver Stone shot the 1991 film "The Doors," he was living in Montecito. Among the film's consultants were the Coursons, Jim Salzer, Ronnie Haran Mellen and Leon Barnard.
- Goleta manufacturer Seymour Duncan, renowned in his own right, has made custom electric guitar pickups for Robby Krieger since the sixties. That includes the mini-humbucker on Krieger's 1955 Les Paul custom guitar, which was used to record Doors hits, such as "Hello, I Love You" and "LA Woman."

These days, "when I meet him, we're just two guitar guys, like two little kids talking about their baseball card collection," said Mr. Duncan.

- The late Aldous Huxley gave a series of lectures as a visiting professor at UCSB, and at the Vedanta Temple and in the Santa Barbara area, in the late fifties. The Doors are named after the acclaimed author's account of his experiment with mescaline, "The Doors of Perception." (The book title itself is a reference to a William Blake poem.) It's reported that Huxley lived on Del Playa Drive in Isla Vista.
- Local urban legend cites Platform Holly off the coast of Isla Vista as the inspiration for "The Crystal Ship," The Doors' song in which Morrison pines poetically for "one last kiss." The rig, installed in 1966, "used to be called The Crystal Ship back in the day by stoners, hippies or students," said Nick Hoffman, 60, of Santa Barbara.

Mike Edwards, vice president of Venoco, which now owns Holly, said he's heard the rumor over the years, but usually in reference to Heidi, Hope, Hilda or Hazel, the platforms erected by Standard Oil of California along the Carpinteria coastline, beginning in 1958. (All were removed in 1996.)

In a 1990 letter to the editor of the Los Angeles Times, drummer John Densmore reported that Morrison wrote "The Crystal Ship" as a "goodby (sic) love song" for his ex-girlfriend Mary Worbelo, but he makes no mention of the ship's origin.

- The Lizard King lives on in David Ray, who fronts Kingsnake, a local Doors tribute

band, which plays at Santa Barbara clubs like SOhO. "I was worried at first because I look more like Jack Nicholson than I do like Jim Morrison," said Mr. Ray. But he's found a local audience for the shows, which include covers of 43 Doors songs, with standards like "People are Strange" and "Break on Through" interspersed with Morrison's poetry.

"I found grandparents bring their 20-year-olds to the show," said Mr. Ray, who declined to give his age, but hints he's in his late 50s or early 60s. "Twenty-year-old guys really dig the music. Afterward they want to help us break the (equipment) down and carry it. They want to hang around . . . They're really entertained by this music from 40 years ago." To look up Kingsnake's next gigs, visit kingsnake.arefuge.com.

• • •

LOCAL SHOWS1966:

July 28, Earl Warren Showgrounds

Aug. 6, Earl Warren Showgrounds

1967:

April 29, Earl Warren Showgrounds

May 27, Earl Warren Showgrounds

Aug. 5, Earl Warren Showgrounds

Oct. 28, UCSB, Robertson Gym

1968:

June 28 SBCC, La Playa Stadium

• • •

LOVE THEM MADLY

The rock band that hooked listeners with its psychedelic keyboards, backroom blues and the wild persona of its boundary-less frontman, is marking its 40th anniversary in 2007.

The yearlong celebration of The Doors kicked off last fall with the release of "The Doors by The Doors," an autobiographical coffee table book, written with Ben Fong-Torres, and "Perception," a 12-disc (6-CD/6-DVD) boxed set of all of the band's remastered albums, plus the dedication of the Whisky A Go Go as a historical landmark.

Tonight The Doors will receive a lifetime achievement Grammy Award at Staples Center in Los Angeles, along with other sixties icons, the Grateful Dead and Joan Baez. The show will be broadcast at 8 p.m. on CBS.

On Feb. 28, the band will be honored with the unveiling of a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in front of the Virgin Megastore in Hollywood.

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio, will host "Break on Through: The Lasting Legacy of The Doors," from May 25 through the end of the year. The special exhibit will feature one-of-a-kind artifacts, original manuscripts, rare concert posters, photographs and video.

Closer to home, John Densmore, the drummer for The Doors, will appear March 5 during a Mind & Supermind presentation featuring intuitive healer Dr. Judith Orloff. The event, titled "Awaken Intuition for Healing, Healing, and Global Peace," will begin at 7:30 p.m. at the Lobero. It's free through SBCC's Continuing Education program. Information: 687-0812.

All Content Copyright © 2007 Santa Barbara News-Press / Ampersand Publishing, LLC unless otherwise specified.