

“The Doors” —The Doors (1967)

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Essay by Richie Unterberger (guest post)*



Original album cover



Original label



The Doors

One of the most explosive debut albums in history, “The Doors” boasted an unprecedented fusion of rock with blues, jazz, and classical music. With their hypnotic blend of Ray Manzarek’s eerie organ, Robby Krieger’s flamenco-flecked guitar runs, and John Densmore’s cool jazz-driven drumming, the band were among the foremost pioneers of California psychedelia. Jim Morrison’s brooding, haunting vocals injected a new strand of literate poetry into rock music, exploring both the majestic highs and the darkest corners of the human experience.

The Byrds, Bob Dylan, and other folk-rockers were already bringing more sophisticated lyrics into rock when the Doors formed in Los Angeles in the summer of 1965. Unlike those slightly earlier innovators, however, the Doors were not electrified folkies. Indeed, their backgrounds were so diverse, it’s a miracle they came together in the first place.

Chicago native Manzarek, already in his late 20s, was schooled in jazz and blues. Native Angelenos Krieger and Densmore, barely in their 20s, when the band started to generate a local following, had more open ears to jazz and blues than most fledgling rock musicians. The charismatic Morrison, who’d met Manzarek when the pair were studying film at the University of California at Los Angeles, had no professional musical experience. He had a frighteningly resonant voice, however, and his voracious reading of beat literature informed the poetry he’d soon put to music.

Rehearsing at Manzarek’s pad in Venice Beach, the quartet soon generated a wealth of original material that sounded little like the folk-rock, garage rock, soul, or British rock ruling the mid-’60s airwaves. Spooky, minor-key melodies fueled Morrison’s meditations on sex, death, and metaphysics. Although they filled out their early sets with covers of blues and rock’n’roll classics, their own songs were the ones that made them stand out from an ultra-competitive crowd jostling for a foothold in the mushrooming L.A. rock scene. Those songs also helped land them an extended residency at the Whisky A Go Go on Sunset Strip, and a contract with Elektra Records after the label’s boss, Jac Holzman, caught them in action at the club.

“The Doors” is an astonishingly assured maiden LP from a band that had been playing together only a year, and had (with the exception of some rudimentary demos done before Krieger joined, and a few forgettable singles Manzarek had recorded as part of a prior group) no recording experience. It arrests your attention from the very first bars of the opening track, where Densmore’s compelling bossa-nova patterns are joined by Manzarek’s Ray Charles-gone-psychedelic electric keyboard riffs and Krieger’s fuzz guitar.

But these are just a prelude to Morrison’s urges—almost commands—to “Break on Through (To the Other Side),” a kind of manifesto for the band’s mission to transcend barriers and induce altered states. Fears that drug-suggestive lyrics might curtail airplay led to the elimination of the “high” from Morrison’s “she gets high!” exhortations in the mid-section (restored to the mix in CD reissues). But if anything, listener’s guesses as to what “she gets” only heightened the excitement.

All but two of the eleven tracks on the LP are originals, and maintain a start-to-finish energy and quality rare among any albums, let alone debuts. Highlights are hard to pick in a batch of such consistency. But the seven-minute “Light My Fire”—which brought side one to a mesmerizing close in the vinyl age—was an immediate standout, both on record and in concert. Written primarily by Krieger, this was psychedelic music at its most intoxicating. Morrison alternately crooned and shouted vocals in the verses, while an extended instrumental break showcased Manzarek and Krieger’s chops as soloists, almost losing themselves and listeners in a trance before forcefully heading back to the verses for the finale.

“Break on Through” and “Light My Fire” were issued as the Doors’ first and second singles respectively, but there was much more to the band than hit 45s. “The Crystal Ship” boasted a languid classical-jazz melody just as evocative as the stream-of-consciousness lyrics. The glissando guitars and funereal organ of “End of the Night” (its title taken from Louis Ferdinand-Celine’s novel “Journey to the End of the Night”) served notice that Morrison was not just willing to delve into the dark side, but eager to take listeners with him.

The more upbeat, lusty “Twentieth Century Fox,” “Soul Kitchen,” and “I Looked at You” proved the band could celebrate more everyday pleasures. The more menacing “Take It As It Comes” had hook-heavy riffs and doom-laden descensions, yet (like everything on the record) was played with economic precision and recorded (by producer Paul Rothchild and engineer Bruce Botnick) with clarity emphasizing the piercing highs and booming lows. Even the two covers, of Howlin’ Wolf’s blues classic “Back Door Man” and the less expected Weill-Brecht theatrical standard “Alabama Song,” were done with imaginative verve.

The most controversial track on “The Doors” was the eleven-minute closer. “The End” mutated from a dreamy ode to a re-enactment of the patricide in “Oedipus Rex,” complete with chanting of the most famous four-letter word. That couldn’t be heard in

the mix on the original LP, though subsequent editions have brought it out in all its incantational glory.

Recorded quickly in late summer 1966, with help from a session bassist on a few tracks, “The Doors” was surprisingly slow to take off after its release in January 1967. Its leadoff single, “Break on Through,” only found significant airplay in Los Angeles. For several months the Doors remained an underground phenomenon, if one whose cult was rapidly expanding by word of mouth as more and more youngsters saw the band and heard the record. When the foursome were convinced to allow an edited version of “Light My Fire” out as a single—with most of the instrumental break removed—the song shot to #1 in the summer, sending the LP to #2 in its wake, and vaulting the band to superstardom.

Jim Morrison would remain in the Doors for four more years, the quartet releasing half a dozen more fine (if more uneven) albums before their singer’s death in mysterious circumstances in Paris in July 1971, aged just 27. None of those records, however, were as stunning as “The Doors,” which bursts with a potent mysticism few musicians can emulate, let alone match.

Richie Unterberger is the author of a dozen books on rock music, including “Unknown Legends of Rock ’n’ Roll”; “White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day-By-Day”; and “Jingle Jangle Morning: Folk-Rock in the 1960s.” His book “The Unreleased Beatles: Music and Film” won a 2007 Association for Recorded Sound Collections Award for Excellence in Historical Recorded Sound Research. He teaches courses on rock history at several colleges in the San Francisco Bay Area.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.