

## Syllabus for THE DOORS

Fromm Institute

8 Tuesdays, 1pm-2:40pm, starting September 15

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### Week One

#### I. The Roots of the Doors

A. The adolescence and early adulthoods of the four individual Doors: singer Jim Morrison, keyboardist Ray Manzarek, guitarist Robbie Krieger, and drummer John Densmore. The musical and cultural influences to which they were exposed before they formed the band, from jazz (John Coltrane) and blues (John Lee Hooker) to British Invasion rock (the Rolling Stones, Van Morrison & Them, the Yardbirds).

B. Their backgrounds in non-musical artistic endeavors, particularly film (which Morrison and Manzarek studied at UCLA) and beat literature and poetry.

C. After graduating UCLA, Morrison and Manzarek meet by chance on Venice Beach in summer 1965. Morrison sings some songs he's started to write, and he and Manzarek decide to form a band.

Other themes: Morrison's early rebellion against parental and social authority; Manzarek's background playing jazz and rhythm and blues with other groups; Krieger and Densmore's less flamboyant experiences as Los Angeles teenagers.

#### II. Formation and Building Los Angeles Following

A. Morrison and Manzarek start rehearsing in Venice Beach, at first with members of Manzarek's group Rick & the Ravens, bringing in drummer John Densmore. They record demos with Densmore in late 1965, and then bring in guitarist Robbie Krieger, who completes the quartet that will be known as the Doors.

B. With increasingly strong and original material, and increasingly theatrical performances by Morrison, the Doors start to build an avid local following in Los Angeles in 1966, particularly when they gain a residency at the Whisky A Go Go on Sunset Strip. A deal with Columbia Records doesn't result in any actual recordings, and the Doors look for another label.

C. Their unprecedented fusion of rock, blues, jazz, classical, and poetry draws the attention of record executive Jac Holzman, who signs them to his Elektra label. In August 1966, they record their debut LP in Los Angeles, continuing to build their local following throughout the rest of the year, when they start to play outside of L.A. as well.

Other themes: the influence of beat/underground literature on their lyrics, particularly Jim Morrison's; the influence of psychedelic culture and drugs on their music and lifestyle; and the exploding Sunset Strip rock scene of which they were a part.

## **Week Two**

### **I. Recording First Album**

A. In August 1966, the Doors record their debut LP in Los Angeles, continuing to build their local following throughout the rest of the year, when they start to play outside of L.A. as well.

B.. *The Doors*, the band's groundbreaking first album, is a sensation in the rock underground from the time of its January 1967 release. However, it's not yet a hit, and their first single, "Break on Through," is only a medium-sized hit in Los Angeles, failing to catch on elsewhere in the US.

Other themes: Elektra Records' campaign to promote the Doors (including the first billboard used to promote an album on Sunset Strip); the Doors' appearances at key festivals and San Francisco venues.

### **II. Rise to Stardom**

A. "Light My Fire" is obviously the most popular and commercial track from *The Doors*, but it's too long (seven minutes) to be a single. The Doors reluctantly agree to issue an edited three-minute version as a single. In mid-1967, it scorches its way to #1, launching the album to #2 in its wake.

B. The Doors themselves are launched to national stardom in summer 1967, starting to tour throughout the country and generate lots of media coverage.

Other themes: Increasing focus on Morrison as the most colorful member of the band.

### **Week Three**

#### **I. Consolidation of Stardom and *Strange Days* album**

A. Though not as jaw-dropping as their first album, their second LP, *Strange Days*, is released in September. It's another big hit, and also has the hit singles "People Are Strange" and "Love Me Two Times."

B. As their popularity increases, Morrison starts to court more controversy, getting arrested onstage in New Haven and refusing to alter the lyrics of "Light My Fire" for their appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, to which the Doors are never again invited.

Other themes: the Doors', and other Los Angeles bands', mixed relationship with the San Francisco rock scene; their creative methods in the recording studio.

#### **II. More Stardom, "The Unknown Soldier," and "Hello I Love You"**

A. Morrison's behavior is become increasingly worrisome and difficult to manage, to the point that the band, producer Paul Rothchild, and Elektra are finding it hard to complete their next album.

B. Before their third album comes out, they release the controversial single "The Unknown Soldier." That's followed by another song that

will be on their third album, and give them a #1 hit, “Hello I Love You.”

Other themes: Morrison’s volatile relationship with the primary woman in his life, Pamela Courson.

## **Week Four**

### **II. *Waiting for the Sun***

A. Their third album, *Waiting for the Sun*, is recorded in the first half of 1968. Not as adventurous as their early LPs, it nonetheless contains some classic songs and finds them occasionally moving into some more subtler, gentler territory.

B. Still, the album makes #1, featuring a chart-topping single, “Hello, I Love You.”

Other themes: the roles of producer Paul Rothchild and engineer Bruce Botnick in their records; Morrison’s frustrated film ambitions, and increasing sense of discomfort with his musical career and stardom; the Doors’ influence on other musical artists.

### **II. Critical Backlash, Hollywood Bowl, and European Tour**

A. Despite *Waiting for the Sun*’s commercial success, it’s not such a big hit with critics. Some feel the band are not developing as satisfyingly as they expect; others feel they’re selling out and generating more teenybopper-oriented music.

B. This does not seriously affect their overall popularity, and they continue to perform often, highlighted by a Hollywood Bowl concert in July that’s filmed.

C. The group tour Europe for the only time with Morrison, getting filmed for a documentary at London’s Roundhouse, and also playing in several countries outside the UK, sometimes with Jefferson Airplane.

Other themes: The group's reception and impact in the UK and Europe; the underground press attitude toward the Doors.

## Week Five

### I. 1969: *The Soft Parade*

A. The Doors finish their fourth album, *The Soft Parade*, in the first half of 1969. Although it has a big hit single with "Touch Me," and expands their instrumentation with the occasional use of jazzy brass, it's considered to be the weakest of their LPs.

B. Although *The Soft Parade* makes the Top Ten, it's their least successful record, both commercially and critically. Some critics, and some listeners, feel their sound is getting diluted and less daring.

Other themes: the use of session musicians on Doors recordings.

### II. The Miami Bust

B. On March 1, their concert in Miami ends in a near-riot. Jim Morrison is subsequently charged with a felony and several misdemeanors, the most serious of which is an obscenity charge for allegedly exposing himself.

B. Although this marks the first time Morrison gets in serious legal trouble, it's the culmination of numerous incidents in which he's invited problems through drunken or provocative behavior, onstage and offstage.

Other themes: other late-'60s efforts by authorities to bust popular rock stars, in part because of the threat they oppose to traditional values.

## Week Six

### I. Canceled Tours and Shrinking Popularity

A. In the wake of the Miami incident, and the looming threat of prison for Morrison, numerous promoters cancel Doors concerts. The band is now finding it difficult to tour, and their very career is threatened.

B. Now overweight and in general declining health, in part due to substance abuse, it becomes increasingly questionable whether Morrison can continue in his role, let alone maintain his earlier image as sex symbol.

Other themes: the influence of the growing rock press when evaluating acts such as the Doors; the evolution of the rock touring circuit, which the Doors both helped develop and then ran into problems with after the Miami concert.

## II. 1970: *Morrison Hotel* and a Return to Touring

A. In early 1970, the Doors release *Morrison Hotel*. It's an unexpected critical and commercial comeback, despite the absence of a big hit single, and marks a return to a harder-rocking, bluesier sound.

B. Although they're now encountering less problems finding work, they still have trouble getting as many concert engagements as they'd like.

C. While he's still a full-time member of the Doors, Morrison is exploring other fields. He produces the film *Feast of Friends*, based in part around footage of the Doors in concert and offstage. He's also self-published a couple books of poetry, though he'll never find remotely as much success as a filmmaker or poet as he does as a musician.

Other themes: FM radio's role in popularizing the Doors; UCLA film associates of Morrison and Manzarek.

## Week Seven

### I. *Absolutely Live* and the Miami Trial

A. In July 1970, the Doors release the double album *Absolutely Live*, a compilation of concert recordings taped over the previous year. Although not a huge hit, it sells well, reaching the Top Ten.

B. Morrison is on trial in Miami on various counts. In September, he's convicted of indecent exposure and profanity, and in October, he's sentenced to six months in prison, though he remains out of jail as his case is appealed.

Other themes: differences between their live performances and studio recordings; the Doors on film.

## II. Final Shows with Morrison and the Final Album

A. The Doors do their final concerts with Morrison, including a filmed appearance at the massive Isle of Wight festival in August. Their last show in New Orleans on December 12 goes poorly, ending prematurely when Morrison smashes the mike stand into the stage and walks off.

B. The Doors start their final album with Morrison. Longtime producer Paul Rothchild quits early in the project, feeling the Doors are playing poorly and Morrison is in even poorer shape.

Other themes: Morrison's strained relationships with both Pamela Courson and the other Doors.

## Week Eight

### I. 1971: *L.A. Woman* and the Death of Jim Morrison

A. In April, the Doors release their final album with Morrison, *L.A. Woman*. Although producer Paul Rothchild has quit, they complete the record with longtime engineer Bruce Botnick. Despite the problems, the album is another critical and commercial success, including the hits "Love Her Madly" and "Riders on the Storm."

B. But the threat of a prison sentence continues to loom over Morrison as his appeal drags on. He and his common-law wife, Pamela Courson, move to Paris, and the future of the Doors or

whether Morrison will perform or record with them again is in doubt.

C. On July 3, 1971, Morrison dies in a bathtub in his Paris apartment under mysterious circumstances that continue to be debated to this day. No autopsy is performed before he is buried in Paris in Pere Lachaise Cemetery shortly afterward.

Other themes: the resurgence of blues as an influence on the Doors; media reaction to Morrison's death.

## II. The Legacy of the Doors

A. The other Doors continue as a trio in the early 1970s for a couple of albums, touring as well. However, these records are far weaker than their previous output, and don't sell well. On September 10, 1972, they give their final performance, at the Hollywood Bowl.

B. Compared to the biggest 1960s rock groups, the Doors aren't as popular for the next half-decade or so, and seem in danger of being semi-forgotten, as they're not played nearly as often on classic radio. But the publication of a best-selling Morrison biography, *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, in 1980 revives their music in spectacular fashion. From that point onward, they're again hugely popular among several generations, and continue to be today.

C. Interest in the Doors, and particularly in Morrison, continues to the present day. This is stoked by an Oliver Stone biopic, but also by many interesting archival releases of Doors recordings and film footage, much of which was not issued while the group were active. They continue to be an influence on many musicians, although their sound has never been replicated.

Other themes: the posthumous Morrison/Doors cult; theories surrounding his death; the emergence of his grave in Paris as a popular tourist attraction.

