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A Drummer Tries to Remember Jim Morrison

By ALEX KOZINSKI

Timed to take advantage of the hoopla generated by the Oliver Stone film about The Doors, John Densmore's "Riders on the Storm" (Delacorte, 319 pages, \$19.95) proves once again that marketing counts. Mr. Densmore, as Doors fans know, was the group's drummer—the thin guy with the mutton chops who occasionally would chuck his drumsticks and walk offstage when Jim Morrison's performance got too rowdy. Having tried to peddle his story for years, Mr. Densmore finally found a publisher who must have figured out that, what with Oliver "Mr. Social Consciousness" Stone getting into the act, the market was ripe.

There is, in fact, a none-too-subtle symbiosis between the book and the film. Mr. Densmore, who served as the movie's creative consultant, makes a cameo appearance; Mr. Stone tosses the obligatory dust-jacket bouquet, calling Mr. Densmore "a survivor and a seeker." Not that movie and book have much in common, except the derogatory and hollow way they portray Jim Morrison, the band's legendary lead singer. None of this has hurt sales of Doors records and videos. A rising royalty tide lifts all crystal ships.

But does Mr. Densmore have anything useful to tell us? The raw material was sifted through pretty finely 10 years ago by Jerry Hopkins and Danny Sugerman in "No One Here Gets Out Alive"—a memorable and insightful book. Yet neither those two, nor others who have written about The Doors, could provide us with the unique perspective of someone who was actually a member of the band.

What, for example, was the peculiar alchemy that sparked some of the most innovative and enduring rock music ever written? Why and how did Jim Morrison change from the shy youngster who was too inhibited to face his audience to the

exhibitionist who ended a concert by leading a 10,000-person conga line? What caused Morrison to flip-flop between devoted artist and obnoxious drunk? What drove a man in his mid-20s with above-average intelligence and education, a gifted singer and songwriter, to self-destruction? And why did none of the three remaining Doors—all talented musicians—manage to salvage a successful musical career? Many have speculated, but we'd like some insights from someone who was a player rather than a spectator.

Unfortunately, Mr. Densmore mostly wallows in self-doubt while taking potshots at Morrison and just about everyone else.



Bookshelf

"Riders on the Storm"

By John Densmore

His book is a rambling pop self-psychoanalysis, a middle-aged flower-child's "Portnoy's Complaint" minus the wit and humor. Sometimes it's not even English: "We were sure committed to the band, weren't we? It was kind of like being married, only it's polygamy. Without the sex. Unless you're bent that way." At other times it's merely vacuous: "We were becoming disciples in the number-one belief [in America: \$ is God]." And, "What you [Morrison] missed was that the need for the sacred must be transformed to an inner cathedral." Should Mr. Densmore wish to sue, passages like these would give him an open and shut case of editorial malpractice.

In our search for glimpses into the inner workings of the group, we muddle through a lot of filler: The author's quest to lose his virginity, his brother's battle

with insanity, the sexual foibles of various people who have no particular significance to us. We become unwilling voyeurs to Mr. and Mrs. Densmore's banal attempt at open marriage; a "touchy-feely encounter experiment with our dentist and his wife—made easy by Quaaludes and the steady increase of herb smoking." Yuck.

Which is all too bad, because there really is an interesting book to be written here. The Doors were an extraordinary musical group. Their records have continued to be popular because the complexity and beauty of their music, and the compelling imagery of their lyrics, transcend the era in which they were created. Not every Doors song is a masterpiece; some of their melodies are thin, the lyrics sometimes trite, ungrammatical and downright silly. But many of their works are remarkable for their haunting visions, accompanied by seductive, almost classical music. One wishes for a peek into the creative process that spawned them. Perhaps Ray Manzarek, the keyboard artist, who—even by Mr. Densmore's grudging account—comes off as the most interesting and visionary member of the remaining group, will give us his perspective someday.

It is Mr. Densmore's fortune or misfortune to be an utterly conventional man who was once touched by genius. Two decades after Jim Morrison left the scene, Mr. Densmore is still trying to step out from under his shadow.

The cover picture really tells the whole story: In the foreground stands Morrison, rock demigod; peering from behind Morrison with pursed lips and a flustered look is John Densmore. Next time you find yourself in a bookstore, pick up "Riders on the Storm" and take a close look at the cover picture. Then buy the Hopkins and Sugerman book instead.

Mr. Kozinski is a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit.