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Wednesday, October 07, 2009

Memories of Jim - Part 4

PART 4

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I got turned on to Jim sometime around the early 80s after seeing the classic picture of him on stage with Keith Richards in the "Random Notes" section of Rolling Stone magazine. I was a huge Stones fan and went out and immediately bought the Basketball Diaries. I devoured it and became an instant disciple, preaching the gospel of Jim to anyone that would listen. I circulated my dog-eared paperback copy of the book throughout Fredonia State College and succeeded in converting most of my friends. Tacked on to the end of my edition was a major tease. An ad for the album - "Coming soon on Rolling Stones records and tapes." I couldn't wait.

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When I opened the record jacket and saw it was on Atco Records not Rolling Stones Records, I was disappointed. The disappointment lasted only until the needle dropped. Holy shit. What a sound. It was everything I loved about rock and roll. Instantly classic lyrics that painted the picture of a world I desperately wanted to know. A ferocious band, that drew on the raw power of punk, but who could be subtle when they had to be and never overwhelmed the lyrics.

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In some of the early promotional copy that I wrote for Jim's lecture tours, I used the term, "rock poet". He hated that. In his eyes, writing poetry and rock and roll lyrics were two completely different art forms (he also considered spoken word and poetry on the page completely different). "You need to make rock and roll 'sing-able'," he would say and that song lyrics needed to be more "immediate and direct" than poetry. He also hated it when critics lumped him in with "fellow rock poet" Jim Morrison whose attempts at poetry he dismissed as amateurish at best.

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I saw the band as soon as I could. It was at a small club near my hometown called "My Father's Place" and I was blown away. I loved them. I sweated my ass off in the pit, doing the pogo and slamming all night long. They did two shows and I stayed for both of them.

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Once Sanchez and Tiven joined the band they were never as powerful. When I first asked Jim why the band began changing personnel he said that original guitarist Terrell Winn was overly reliant on "Chuck Berry licks" and he wanted a more varied sound. Later I got more of the real scoop. Jim said he had written all the songs on Catholic Boy and graciously gave the others songwriting credits to only keep the peace and spread the wealth. He felt burned when the others complained about writing credits and the focus of the group being on Jim. Money and drugs also played their usual insidious role in deteriorating inter-band relationships.

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The next two albums had some great songs, but sound was weak compared to Catholic Boy. I would complain to Jim that the band sounded wimpy on those records, apparently adapting their sound to the new wave flavor of the day. Jim didn't argue that the later albums were inferior but preferred to lay the blame on the mix. According to Jim, it was about money. Bob Clearmountain (Stones, Springsteen) mixed the first album but he was expensive. The band and management didn't want to pay Clearmountain his asking price. Jim always regretted it, "We should have paid him."

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One of the great songs on the last two albums was "Love Crimes". We were backstage at Lehigh University as Jim was downing his pre-show ritual, a single margarita without salt, when that song came up in conversation. (BTW the Ivan in the song is NOT former Patti Smith Group member Ivan Kral.) In the staircase on the way down to the auditorium we started singing, "Hollywood looks good at night. The TVs get fine reception..." then upon reaching the climactic line we shouted, "just make sure that your underwear is CLEAN!" There were a couple of frat guys at the bottom of the stairs eye-balling us and we just laughed our asses off. What a blast. Unfortunately, it was the last time I would ever see him.

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The night he died I went out and bought a bottle of tequila, came home, cracked it open, and poured a strong one. I put on "Love Crimes" and cranked it all night long.

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