



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2012

Cartographies de l'Amérique / Histoires d'esclaves

Daveth Milton, *We Want the World: Jim Morrison, The Living Theatre, and the FBI*, Birmingham, Bennion Kearny, 2012, 144 pages

Claude Chastagner



Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5885>

DOI : 10.4000/transatlantica.5885

ISSN : 1765-2766

Éditeur

AFEA

Référence électronique

Claude Chastagner, « Daveth Milton, *We Want the World: Jim Morrison, The Living Theatre, and the FBI*, Birmingham, Bennion Kearny, 2012, 144 pages », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 2 | 2012, mis en ligne le 10 février 2013, consulté le 29 avril 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/5885> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.5885>

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 29 avril 2021.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

Daveth Milton, *We Want the World: Jim Morrison, The Living Theatre, and the FBI*, Birmingham, Bennion Kearny, 2012, 144 pages

Claude Chastagner

“Bring out your dead...”

- 1 Like all the iconic rock stars of the late sixties, Jim Morrison continues to attract much scholarly attention. Among the recent publications on the subject, Daveth Milton’s short, but dense book stands out for its unusual, and learned focus. The book itself is rather unassuming, divided as it is into 13 brief chapters, complemented by a chronology *cum* discography, and a list of recommended reading and references. None of these are exhaustive (though the major works are quoted), and the reader looking for a complete bibliography on the artist would have to look elsewhere.
- 2 So, what makes this little book so compelling, if not its exhaustiveness? Daveth Milton has had access to the declassified FBI files concerning James Douglas Morrison and using this information as a starting point, he draws a detailed picture of the last months of the singer’s life, as he goes from rough concerts to rowdy trips, from one trial to another. As the author warns in the first pages, a degree of dramatic license has been taken to recreate the unfolding of these events, and occasionally, the author imagines what was going on in Morrison’s head while watching a play or travelling on a plane to Phoenix, so that the book, in the author’s words, could be taken as “an interpretive sketch.” To a certain extent, the book could be compared to recent semi-fictional works on rock musicians, such as François Bon’s biography of the Rolling Stones. However, Milton goes beyond the mere biographical. One of the salient features of the book is how the author intertwines Morrison’s interest for the Living Theater’s experimentations with the development of his own stage performances. The other remarkable facet of the book is the arresting portrait Milton draws of the FBI’s founder-director, J. Edgar Hoover, and of his queer eagerness to put Jim Morrison

behind bars. In the author's words, his (the author's) "mission is to convey the desperation of the poet-singer who tangled with Hoover and his agents [...] set against the volatile politics and urgent cultural response of late '60 America—a time when the country had lost her conscience." The whole essay is written in an exquisite, probing, elegant prose.

- 3 By all accounts, Morrison's dossier in the FBI's Washington archive is thin, only 92 pages (though, Milton tells us, there is nothing on James Dean, and only 4 pages on Jerry Garcia), 3 of which are yet to be released. But what it reveals is Hoover's stubborn obstinacy, as an individual and as a representative of a whole system and society, against one of the most iconic standard-bearers of absolute freedom, the most flamboyant mouthpiece of a different way of life. As Milton advances, the dossier suggests a new story, a story in which Morrison is no longer the rather repulsive drunk, accused of exposing himself on stage and of harassing air hostesses, but the pawn of an even more repulsive FBI director who seemed to know all about Morrison and had personally decided to target him. What the dossier also reveals, beyond the inconsistencies and prejudice of the legal proceedings, is the extent to which Morrison's stage antics were an act, turned into a myth, a tragic, self-destructive act at times, whose roots are to be found in the liberating, revolutionary practices of Julian Beck's Living Theater. For indeed, Morrison was more than the singer of a rock'n'roll band, or at least, more than the crude, restrictive image given at the time by the press of what being a rock singer amounted to. He was an artist of multiple talents and interests, a student of movies, a man of words, a poet who felt close to the Beat writers (he was a friend of Michael McClure), an ever curious explorer whose own performances were drastically altered once he had crossed the path of the Living Theater.
- 4 "Bring me your dead," the chant with which Morrison opens many live renditions of "The End" was borrowed from the Living Theater's experimentations (in this case, *The Plague*, among other performances such as *Paradise Now* and *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces*), and Morrison's decision to use this sentence is rather telling of his fascination for dark corners, for shamans and martyrs alike, his commitment to experiment and take risks, as Artaud (whom he had read) had suggested, a commitment to turn performance into reality: "action [not acting], struggle, commitment" (2). Obviously, such endeavors brought him dangerously close to anarchism, and given his popular, mainstream success (much more frightening than the Living Theater's confidential following), the authorities could not remain unmoved. In the wake of the infamous March 1969 Miami concert, and its much publicized, though inconclusive subsequent trial (Morrison, accused of having exposed himself indecently on stage, was found guilty on several counts; his lawyers filed an appeal, but Morrison died before the verdict), the book reveals how the judiciary system and the media turned against yesterday's star. But beyond his occasional drunken stupor, Morrison was also a shrewd, determined experimenter. His brand of anarchism, his flirtations with the extreme, with the dangerous zones, Milton insists, were premeditated and rehearsed. The stupor was much feigned. Morrison was on a mission: to shock, as Artaud had advocated, "audience members into an infectious madness" (13). To inspire a revolution of the souls.
- 5 Milton's book exposes the hypocrisy of a whole society striving for "purity," while, as Morrison's knew, "purity [is] a dangerous idea" (46). Hypocrisy is here embodied by J.

Edgar Hoover. His personal defense of public morals, and his struggle against African-Americans, the Civil Rights Movement, and sexual perversion must now be read against the backdrop of his probable homosexuality and African ancestry, and well-documented treachery and deceit. His battle against Morrison was waged on the basis of the singer's alleged (but never proved) obscenity, a key word in the fight against popular music in the United States, which began much earlier than the '60s, and peaked in the '80s, with the works of the PMRC.

- 6 If in the American context "pornography" only has a common meaning, "obscenity" has a legal one. It describes a category of speech not protected by the First Amendment, namely speech about sex. However, many legal scholars find no basis in history or logic for the "obscenity exception" to the First Amendment. Although other categories of speech initially left outside First Amendment protection were progressively included ("libel" in 1964, "profanity" in 1971), on the contrary, the stand against obscenity steadily hardened. Though the first laws against obscenity were passed only at the end of the 19th century, in the 20th century, the pace quickened and several Supreme Court rulings shaped the current definition of obscenity. In 1957, in *Roth v. United States*, obscenity was defined as "a speech about sex that is utterly without redeeming social importance." Two more criteria were added in the sixties, "patently offensive" and "appeal to prurient interest in sex." The line separating what is obscene (thus illegal) from what is pornographic (and as such under First Amendment protection) is thus often dim and uncertain.
- 7 In 1973, *Miller v. California* modified one more time the definition of obscenity. The new criterion became "lacking seriously literary, artistic, political or scientific value," with all the ambiguities regarding the appreciation of "value" in artistic works. Another major change was that from then on, "contemporary community standards" were used to decide whether a given material was "patently offensive" or appealed to "prurient interest in sex." This implied that depending on the State or the city, the same material could be judged illegal or not. This legal frame was strengthened by the establishment of another category of speech, indecency, which, though not obscene, can all the same be restricted by law. It applies to "patently offensive depictions or descriptions of sexual or excretory activities or organs." These various definitions, because of their looseness, leave room for subjectivity and led to numerous convictions for obscenity and indecency by local courts. This is the legal background against which Hoover's FBI deployed its strategies against Jim Morrison, which led his lawyers to enter on several occasions (though to no avail) First Amendment pleas.
- 8 The reader puts down this committed, though evenhanded book with a renewed awareness of Jim Morrison's powers and frailties, of the way the judicial and media machines have been deployed "without neutrality" to prevent the disappearance of the society its key players had always known, and to corner one of its freest souls into a fugitive, a wanderer, for ever on the run. However, Morrison also stands as an "adroit social critic" (93), publicly turning civil disobedience into art, very much aware of the signs of the time, publishing a pacifist poem after the Kent State University deaths. As Milton asks, "How many 'criminals' do you know who have a social and metaphysical project?" (71).
- 9 Morrison died in Paris on July 3rd, 1971, after a few refreshing days haunting the streets and cafés of the capital, as told by Alain Dister, who eventually became intimate with Morrison, in *Les Doors*. Morrison never actually went to jail.

- 10 In December 2010, Florida's governor Charlie Crist granted a pardon for Jim Morrison's alleged exposure in Miami on the basis of the singer and poet's significant artistic legacy. Daveth Milton's last words quote Morrison: "I am not mad. I am interested in freedom" (113).
-

INDEX

Thèmes : Recensions

AUTEUR

CLAUDE CHASTAGNER

Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3