

# VAL KILMER IN THE DOORS (1991)

By Marie-Renée Goulet

*In light of Val Kilmer's passing, I revisited this piece I first wrote during COVID. I fell for Val (yes, we are on a first-name basis) back in 1984, when I saw both *Top Secret!* and *Real Genius*. It's wild to think *Top Secret!* was his debut—he had to sing, dance, land rapid-fire lines with impeccable comedic timing, and deliver straight-faced dialogue in a spoof about Cold War espionage. He went all in, even then. Losing him so young is more than sad—it feels like a chapter unwritten. Had he not lost his voice to cancer, I believe we would have seen an extraordinary third act.*

## **The Challenge of Playing Morrison**

Portraying Jim Morrison is no ordinary acting challenge. Morrison wasn't just a rock icon—he was a mythmaker, often blurring fact and fiction. He publicly declared his parents dead (they weren't) and erased two siblings from existence. He performed constantly, embodying various personas as soon as fame hit. Few truly knew him, and everyone seemed to have an opinion.

When evaluating performance, I often ask: could anyone else have done this better? In this case, the answer is no. Val Kilmer wasn't just cast as Morrison—he became him. No actor has since come close.

## **Kilmer's Unconventional Career**

Kilmer's career trajectory is puzzling, given his talent. At sixteen, he was the youngest person ever admitted to Juilliard's drama program. His film debut in *Top Secret!* (1984) displayed both his comedic timing and musical ability. He followed with memorable roles like Iceman in *Top Gun* (1986) and Doc Holliday in *Tombstone* (1993). *Batman Forever* (1995) made him a blockbuster, but he walked away from the franchise to take a smaller part in Michael Mann's *Heat* the same year.

There were more strong performances to follow, but the consistency faded. That, however, is a story for another piece.



### **Preparing to Become Jim**

Kilmer actively campaigned for the role in Oliver Stone's *The Doors*. As he describes in his memoir *I'm Your Huckleberry*, he went far beyond basic preparation. He believed Morrison had to be sung—not lip-synced—to convey the performance's physical and emotional demands. Kilmer trained his voice to match Morrison's rare baritone-tenor range, rented a studio, and recorded fifty

songs. He then sent two tapes—one of himself singing, one of Morrison. The band couldn't tell the difference.

Once cast, Kilmer spent over 100 hours working with Paul Rothchild, producer of all but the final Doors album. Rothchild later admitted to calling Kilmer "Jim" during studio sessions, unable to distinguish the two. Only five lines in the final film are not Kilmer's vocals—one of which is a scream. "No one could scream like Jim," Rothchild said. He wouldn't reveal the other four.

### **Capturing the Stage and the Madness**

Director Oliver Stone emphasized realism by filming concert scenes with live audiences—often under chaotic conditions. During the "Not to Touch the Earth" sequence, filmed over two nights in San Francisco, Stone recalls two thousand locals showing up high on acid, ready for a show. Kilmer's live performance—prowling the stage, baiting the crowd, pushing police lines—electrifies the screen. It's as close as any of us will get to seeing The Doors live.

In the infamous Miami concert scene, which ends with Morrison's arrest for indecent exposure, Kilmer's portrayal turns feral. He spits lines like "You're all a bunch of fucking slaves!" and "Adolf Hitler is alive and well and living in Miami!" before calling for love. The crowd spirals into chaos. Women strip. Stone admits he lost control of the audience. It's a pivotal sequence where Kilmer, hoarse and unrestrained, delivers a masterclass in controlled disorder.

### **Morrison's Sensitivity, Briefly Allowed to Surface**

The screenplay doesn't offer many moments to explore Jim's quieter side, but Kilmer seizes the ones it does. One standout: when Morrison learns his bandmates sold "Light My Fire" to Buick for a commercial while he was away. Kilmer's restrained rage in this scene captures Morrison's feeling of betrayal. In real life, Morrison didn't throw a television, but he did threaten to destroy a Buick onstage at every show if the deal went forward. It didn't. The damage to the

band's relationships, however, was permanent. Morrison reportedly said: "I don't have partners anymore; I have associates."

Those who met Morrison in his final Paris days—people who didn't know he was famous—described him as quiet, calm, and nearly invisible. Kilmer hints at this version of Jim in a few brief but meaningful moments, letting the poet peek through the legend.

### **A Performance That Should Have Been Recognized**

Today, musical biopics like *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) or *Rocketman* (2019) all but guarantee Oscar nominations and box office success. In 1991, *The Doors* was largely overlooked. Kilmer didn't receive a nomination, and audiences didn't show up. But in terms of transformation and performance, his work holds up—and, arguably, outshines those later portrayals.

Val Kilmer was not acting. He was Jim Morrison.

My deepest condolences to his family & friends.