

Cultural Daily

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Susan Hayden: “1971 Was A Bad Year For Certain People”

Susan Hayden · Wednesday, July 1st, 2020

1971 Was A Bad Year For Certain People

ONE

“Riders On The Storm” was my father’s favorite Doors song, long before I’d understood its meaning. My father was about to turn 40, had missed the 60s altogether, that kind of music made him feel included. He’d thought sitting in the Orchestra Pit at synagogue would bring him closer to G-d but the choir, with its *rinah u’tefillah* – temple songs written to open the heart – pushed him away, he was more drawn to the Fender Rhodes electric piano pretending to be rain, my father also pretended to be rain, dropped from Manzarek’s fingertips; echo effects from Morrison’s lips into our candles on Shabbat and Hanukkah. Year-round soundtrack, other parents were listening to Petula Clark, Sergio Mendes and Brasil 66, Bacharach – but this Doors thing was my father’s obsession; his own heart a Venn Diagram: circular, logical, somewhat closed; imposed with decorum. And yet earthy renegades outweighed and swayed his better judgment.

TWO

“Riders On The Storm” turned me on and terrorized my entire childhood. Pulled me into the land of the Zodiac Killer, HARD LUCK tattooed on the hand of Billy Cook. Look, I wanted to love that song but I thought it was about murder and I was 8. Who knew this would be the coming age of future crime sprees? Son of Sam, Ted Bundy, Hillside Strangler, Jim Jones. Hollywood High teenaged runaway with ligature marks, an honors art student injected with Windex.

I already dreaded otherworldly forces whose DNA and fingerprints went undetectable in an era when forensics meant trying to catch someone with the limited technology of bare hands.

THREE

“Riders On The Storm” played tricks with my head involving bloodshed and trepidation, where I would pretend to be a victim of crime scenes, the void inside a chalk outline. I’d seek out signs whenever in the dark, as I practiced martial arts under the covers in a Lanz nightgown; bending down, kicking up, punching air, a nightly bedroom prayer, where I mastered open-hand techniques, while exploring the faceless drifter in me.

FOUR

“Riders On The Storm” blasted through a house where everything unjust in the world was kept hidden, like The War; the horror show my father would watch on Eyewitness News at 6 PM. He was oblivious of my fears and to the fact that 1971 was a bad year for certain people, including me. He kept tuning into the song and tuning out my bleak reality, criticized me for wearing army pants, but failed to share his feelings about combat, collateral damage, inequity of modern men. He didn’t trust his kids with uglier truths of existence, would never bring up Current Events. Instead, he’d reference The Ten Commandments, which he’d memorized. He lionized Judaism; had honor, courage, strength; bestowed on us at length his personal code, an ethics discourse.

FIVE

“Riders On The Storm” was my father’s all-time favorite Doors song; even with Morrison’s laundry list of known offenses: Indecent exposure, profanity, unpredictable scenes, mood swings, breakdowns, asthma, ulcers, bloating; clinical despair; with the stunted air of liquor breath and the ever-present death wish. He’d once been a UCLA guy, like my father. Behind a desk, folding corners of his homework into paper airplanes. But Morrison graduated and then “dropped out.” Let’s face it: The Doors embraced uncertainty. My father was presence in reverse, immersing himself in plans and answers; saw an alter ego in mystical Jim, a sliding door of what could have been, had he risked being an artist.

SIX

“Riders On The Storm” was the oft-heard song
coming from overhead speakers at my father’s secret spot,
The Third Eye, a psychedelic Garden of Eden
where he’d buy me love beads.

My long waves with a middle part, yin-yang necklace,
patchwork halter top. It was a head shop selling pop-art,
Oaxacan wedding dresses, hand-crafted leather.

It was Morrisonesque. Hippies and straights would commune
in the same blacklight room, drink Bonny Doon straight from the bottle
and stare at the posters: Dr. Strange Meets Eternity; Lost Horizon;
2000 Light Years From Home; Butterflies and Dogwood;
Symbology; Love is Love. Never seen colors so vibrant.
Never been high, not even close, but glow and vibrations,
ultraviolet energy made me believe I’d entered a new dimension.

There was a hand-painted school bus parked out front;
a bathtub stuffed with nasturtiums; bohemians hanging
with vets just home from Vietnam, jamming on guitars,
reflecting on battle scars, smoking hand-rolled cigarettes
and weed. I felt urgent, paid attention to their stories,
listened in, touched straggly beards. My father would say:
“Stay away from those shell-shocked men.” But I didn’t.

SEVEN

“Riders On The Storm” – the single- debuted on Billboard’s Hot 100
in June of ’71, just before that last overdub ending in Le Marais,
sending my father into situational depression.

Attached to a rock star defined by transgression, he played
the “Storm” song as a form of Kaddish. It seemed to soothe him.
The day Jim Morrison died, I sneaked out of my house
and into The Third Eye, to spy on freedom and linger
in The Bead Room, which had cracks in the cement floor
from the Sylmar earthquake. No one from home knew I was gone.
My eyes fixed on the wall of shelves with bowls of colored glass,
puka shells and seed beads, as I settled into a corner, and listened,
not to Riders but to L.A. Woman, realizing that in about ten years,
I would be one. A teenaged girl on a bean bag chair kept smiling.
I smiled back and wanted to ask, “*Are you a free spirit?*”
She could have been on the cover of Seventeen magazine
with her lean frame, freckled face and empty gaze;
like Morrison’s “cosmic partner,” Pamela, nothing seemed
to faze her, like she’d dropped too much of something
and was on a trip somewhere I’d never get to go.

She was a tableau of all the beautifulness one might find
on a good day in 1971; how I'd imagined a free-thinker to be,
fearless and carefree, the way —not just my father—
but I dreamed of being.

EIGHT

“Riders On The Storm” came on five songs later,
brought the girl to tears and the Third Eye volunteers behind the counter
were also crying. “Dying will make him more popular,”
she said, twirling her hair, which was red and partially French-braided.
She wore a stainless-steel bracelet with a man's name
engraved on it, saw me staring and said, “P.O.W.. M.I.A.
It shows a soldier's rank and date of the last time he was seen. I mean,
he's probably been blown to pieces.”
Then she took the ID bracelet off her wrist, handed it to me, insisted
I keep it. I sat there long after she'd left, at once bereft
at imagining the unaccounted-for army man, whose loved ones
were awaiting his arrival or death- and elated at this unlikely gift
I had been given. Later, when the bracelet was next to my skin,
alone with the essence of this veteran, and the absence of Jim,
I could only envision my father, who was disappeared
in a different form. I wanted more than his watchful eye, more than
having to listen to his favorite music.
I didn't know he loved me back then; he never said those words outloud.
Did he have to detach to shield me from harm's way? Did he
have to conform, pay the cost, by letting his own free spirit get lost,
and stay Missing In Action?

(Author photo by Mila Reynaud)

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