

## Lizard King: R.I.P. | Macleans.ca - Culture - Entertainment

Before the morning of July 3, 1971, Alain Raison, a French fireman, had never heard of the American singer and poet Jim Morrison. As Raison describes it today, his encounter with the man that he found unconscious in a bathtub full of lukewarm water was "short, intense and very real." Raison and his team of five firemen tried to revive him, but failed, and within minutes of arriving at the light-filled apartment on 17 rue Beautreillis in the Marais district of Paris, it was Raison who pronounced "Mr. James Morrison" dead.

"I didn't know he was famous," said Raison, who is retired in Rio de Janeiro and lives in an elegant, antique-filled apartment a few blocks from the beach. "Nobody knew he was famous until about a month later, when the media started to call." They haven't stopped calling, even today, 36 years after the death of Morrison, the lead singer and main lyricist of the Doors, who achieved a wild cult status after his death in Paris. Morrison's graffiti-scrawled grave at the Père-Lachaise cemetery is still a main tourist attraction for Doors fans. The rented apartment he lived in for only a few months in 1971 is also the scene of a vigil every year as hundreds of fans still crowd the street holding lit candles on the anniversary of Morrison's death.

"Every year, they steal all the hardware from outside the building," says Raison, shaking his head in mild amusement. Still, it's thanks to Morrison that Raison, an actor in an amateur theatre troupe in the French community in Rio, is a minor celebrity today. He is frequently introduced at parties of Rio's French association, for which he is the treasurer, as "the last man to touch the body of Jim Morrison."

Recently, a Canadian film company flew Raison, 59, from his home in Rio to Toronto in order to tape an interview with him for a documentary on Morrison's life. Last year, French TV featured Raison in its own documentary, which aired on the anniversary of Morrison's death. In 1991, when Oliver Stone's biopic on Morrison had its Paris premiere, Raison was one of the guests of honour at the Champs Elysées screening. "James Morrison is a great myth," says Raison, who has over the years pondered the cult fame of the singer who combined blues, rock and psychedelic influences in hits such as *Light My Fire* and *Touch Me*.

But what Raison tells the interviewers over and over again does not square with the image that many have of the handsome Bohemian singer with wavy shoulder-length hair, who moved to Paris with his common-law wife Pamela Courson at the height of his fame in March 1971, in order to focus on his poetry. Morrison, who died at 27, had a long history of drug and alcohol abuse. "When I got there I saw a fat man in a bathtub full of water," says Raison. "The water was still warm, and we carried him onto the bed in the bedroom

to do the cardiac massage."

The cause of death appeared to be heart failure, and because there were no bruises or any other marks of violence on the body (Raisson insists he saw nothing that would arouse suspicion), the police who arrived shortly after Raisson's team decided not to proceed with an autopsy -- a decision that many of Morrison's fans still question today. "If anyone in the police had known he was famous, I am sure they would have done an autopsy," says Raisson, who will not speculate on what caused Morrison's apparent heart attack. Before her own death in 1974, Courson told reporters that the cocaine-addicted Morrison possibly snorted heroin by mistake. "That is not a matter for me to discuss," sniffs Raisson with a French civil servant's air of professionalism.

All he knows is that Courson made the emergency call at 9:20 on that fateful Saturday morning. Raisson and his team arrived four minutes later, and found her distraught, still in her nightgown. She told them that Morrison had awoken at 6 a.m. and told her that he was not feeling well, and would take a bath. When he wasn't in bed nearly 3 1/2 hours later, Courson went to investigate and called the emergency number. "That was the encounter, very intense and very brief," repeats Raisson, rising from his chair.

But, one last question, what does Raisson think of Morrison's hit songs? Has he listened to a Doors CD lately? Raisson avoids the question. "I prefer classical music," he says.