

The Doors and the Five Factors That Made Them Famous

TRANSCRIPT

How does someone become famous? Which factors influence popularity? Can we demystify some of the process of success? Yes Virginia, we can...

Using the Doors—the classic rock quartet—as a great example of artistic success, I have overlaid their story with five general criteria that really apply to all the arts, business, and personal achievement, what have you.

The Doors was together from 1965 to 1971, essentially. Six years. Six studio albums...about 4-1/2 hours, give or take, of music...Is that a lot or a little?... How did the group become so influential, so long-lasting that even today, anyone interested in popular music and culture has heard of the Doors?



There was—what I call—a cosmic confluence. In order to have lasting success in the arts, or any endeavor, five vectors must cross and intersect. I'll mention them briefly, and then elaborate...

1. Talent. If you're a songwriter, for instance, you have to write great songs. A dancer? Then dance better than almost anyone else. In other words, there has to be a solid platform on which to build your career.

2. Ambition. Talent is not enough. You have to want success—be it recognition, money, fame, whatever, you need goals. You have to be an achiever.

3. Mentorship. You need someone to help launch you off the rocket pad. It may be a great record producer, choreographer, business person. A teacher. An editor... You need a mentor. Rarely does it happen alone.

4. Luck. This is the vector that is the most difficult to discuss. It's like talking about spirituality... The wildcard. No one knows where it comes from. It's not a game of chance. It has something to do with being the right person at the right time at the right place. The Triple Crown. Obviously it can't be planned, strategized or funded. Not now. Not ever.

5. Historical Significance. This won't make you famous, but it will keep you famous – and your descendants rich... There are certain artists, special people who, through that cosmic confluence, come best to represent an age, a period in time, zeitgeist, often briefly, for only a few years perhaps. But their persona is a kind of short-hand that

bespeaks the tenor of the time. A few examples...F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age. Jack Kerouac and Beatniks, Andy Warhol and 60s pop art...and, dare I say, the Doors and late 60s rock, especially on the West Coast, and especially in Los Angeles.

Okay, let's apply the vectors to the Doors.

1. Talent. Four guys. Let's start with the drummer, John Densmore. Heavy jazz influence. Often very non-rock-type beats. Robbie Krieger, guitarist.... Played flamenco. Hence, never used a pick on the electric guitar. Gave it a special sound...Ray Manzarek. Keyboards. As the Doors never had a bass player – at least live – Ray would play base on a Fender Rhodes piano keyboard bass. His signature sound was that of the Vox Continental combo organ. Critical to the Doors vibe...that often eerie sound.

Jim Morrison...his lyrics, usually dark and foreboding, perfectly melded with the often eerie sound of the organ. Almost every aspect of this band – the look, the instruments, the compositions, the personalities - somehow energized each other and took it all to higher levels. Again, there's a lot of luck involved. You can't manufacture chemistry. To put it another way, the members were all on the same wavelength. 99.9% of bands don't work out. Remember, the Doors formed in 1965 and were international stars by 1967. In terms of career development, that's incredibly rare. Two years? And Jim Morrison had never sung with a band in any real sense.

So – we have four gifted musicians who managed to find each other. They played a few gigs, got a brief residency at the London Fog nightclub and later the Whiskey-a-go-go and then boom, Light My Fire.

I should add that your talent doesn't necessarily have to be original. In fact, all talent is somewhat derivative. But the *expression* of that talent has to be cast as original. There was never a band before the Doors that *sounded* like them, especially thematically. They were strangely, perversely original. Again, it's much rarer than you might think... How original is Adele? Britney Spears? Gwen Stefani? I don't know. The answer will be different for everyone. But certainly the passage of Time usually makes the final decision to that question. And the Jim Morrison Doors broke up in 1971 – a long time ago...and still sell millions.

2. Ambition. The first spark of ambition flamed up when Ray Manzarek bumped into Jim Morrison on Venice Beach. It's July 8, 1965 – Raymond Daniel Manzarek Jr. was meditating on LA's Venice Beach when a guy he'd known at film school approached and said hi. The guy was 22 year old college dropout, James Douglas Morrison.

The pair got to talking. Manzarek had been performing a lot with his band Rick and The Ravens, while Morrison had been living on a friend's roof (Dennis Jakob) and writing songs. When Manzarek asked him to sing something, Jim ran through a verse from "Moonlight Drive". Manzarek was impressed and reportedly declared on the spot that the pair should start a rock band and make a million dollars.

Volia. The Doors.

Okay—six studio albums in six years. Overlay that with relentless touring, at least until the infamous incident in Miami, and you have hard evidence of 4 ambitious guys. I've read the recent autobiographies of Robby Krieger and John Densmore—and they certainly suggest the large amount of energy and drive it takes to not *only* get to the top, but *stay* at the top. Did Jim Morrison eventually lose his ambition, his interest? I think so – and that contributed to the group's demise...along substance abuse issues and perhaps mental illness. But that's for another podcast.

And the Doors sold well, right out of the gate. Here are some stats:

Original Album Sales

Year	Title	Sales
1967	<i>The Doors</i>	13 800 000
1967	<i>Strange Days</i>	5 760 000
1968	<i>Waiting For The Sun</i>	6 270 000
1969	<i>The Soft Parade</i>	4 590 000
1970	<i>Morrison Hotel</i>	7 130 000
1971	<i>L.A. Woman</i>	10 130 000
1971	<i>Other Voices</i>	700 000
1972	<i>Full Circle</i>	660 000
1978	<i>An American Prayer</i>	2 930 000

You've got to want something...badly.

3. Mentorship. It may be the arts. It could be business. It could be the trades. Doesn't matter. You can't undervalue mentorship—that is, someone with power and influence who pulls you up to a level at which you're going to get noticed. The Beatles had Brian Epstein and George Martin. Iggy Pop had David Bowie...kind of. Bob Dylan had Albert Grossman. And the Doors? They had Jac Holzman.

Holzman founded Elektra Records and signed the Doors when no one else would touch them...way too weird. Not commercial. He signed people and groups like Jackson Browne, Queen (US only), Love, Carly Simon, the Stooges, MC5, Harry Chapin, and Bread. Someday we'll do a podcast just on Jac Holzman. He was – and remains at age 90 – a giant. Regarding the Doors, I think of him in kind of the Fifth Beatle mold – perhaps sandwiched in with producer Paul Rothchild.

4. Luck. This is a tough one. This is an extract from Scientific American magazine – from an article that discusses a study about the role of luck in determining success. “In terms of success, talent was definitely not sufficient because *the most talented individuals were rarely the most successful*. In general, mediocre-but-lucky people were much more successful than more-talented-but-unlucky individuals. The most successful people tended to be those who were only slightly above average in talent but with a lot of luck in their lives.”

That’s something we all know—or have seen. You just learn to accept it. So how were the Doors lucky? In a thousand ways—but let’s focus on a few obvious aspects. First, they were lucky in finding each other. If you’re interested in how they all met, the story is in a hundred books.

Next, Jim Morrison, who for much of his early life, was somewhat overweight, took a lot of acid in 1965, didn’t eat much due to lack of money, and lost a lot of pounds. What emerged was this Adonis. He even had great hair. And replete with leather pants, Morrison created the mold for what a male rock star should look like, even to this day. Check out his so-called young lion photos. Like Elvis, he looked the part. The early Beatles *looked* the part – with their mop-top haircuts and Pierre Cardin collarless suits. They looked liked their songs. Bobby Darin wore a tuxedo for a reason... You have to look like your songs...With the Doors, it was beyond central casting.

They’re lucky to have appeared at a place in history that was especially receptive to eccentrics. And with their dark vision and general funereal ambience, the Doors was an eccentric band. Whereas most bands at the time were warbling about love, the Doors sang about death and incest and murder. As some critic once said, Bob Dylan could only have made it in the 1960s....The disco-era would not have especially receptive to a whiny-voiced folk singer.

Earlier, I mentioned the name Jac Holzman. The Doors were incredibly lucky to be signed by Holzman. They’d been turned by a lot of record companies – and had even been fired from nightclubs. But Jac heard something different, as he said later, something exciting and unique, and off he went. And I should note that he was honest with the band over the years. He never ripped them off, unlike a lot of record companies at the time – and to this day the surviving Doors are friends of Jac. Luck indeed.

The list of lucky breaks could go on for a while—for all successful people. I’ve just illuminated some of the more apparent ones.

5. Historical Significance. This criteria isn’t necessary to *achieve* success—but it is required to keep it....Let’s look at it this way: can an artist, just by the very mention of their name, provide a kind of cultural portal to a specific time and place. When we think of the Grateful Dead or Jefferson Airplane, we tend to conjure images of 1960s counterculture San Francisco. We always will...for generations to come. These bands are embedded in historical amber denoting a specific time and place.

There’s no way an artist can set out to achieve such significance. The Beatles belong to the 1960s. Period. There were lots of great bands from the 1960s, for instance, that you’ve never heard of because they engendered zero historical significance – through

no fault of their own. On the flip side, many bands with lousy songs made their way into history books under the Luck umbrella...right place, right time, right people.

The Doors enjoy relevancy today. So does F. Scott Fitzgerald. The point is that talent is timeless, but image is usually time-stamped.

So – we have the Five Factors – Talent, Mentorship, Ambition, Luck, and Historical Significance. The Doors nailed them all...and their music will obviously outlast the longevity of its members.

If you're interested in rock, and wonder why some bands survive yet most die off, think of the irrefutable Darwinism of the Five Factors. It will help – and remember, the Ferris Wheel Serious Rock Talk Podcast is *here* to help *you* 24/7, 365 a year.

This has been Dr. Ian Clarke...and I have left the building.