



Jerry Hopkins at Nana Plaza, Bangkok 2012

Music //

RIDER ON THE STORM

Jim Morrison biographer Jerry Hopkins finds a strange kind of bliss in Bangkok

BY GARY JONES

The brazen hedonism of Bangkok agrees with Jerry Hopkins. The co-author of *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, the best-selling portrait of iconic Doors frontman Jim Morrison, Hopkins has been described as “the dean of pop biographers.” He laughingly refers to himself as a free-spirited “bottom feeder” with good timing.

“I’ve been in the right place at the right time often in my life, just like Forrest Gump,” says the 77-year-old wordsmith, who also penned the first bio of Elvis Presley, as well as accounts of Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie and Yoko Ono. As Los Angeles correspondent for *Rolling Stone* magazine in the late 1960s, Hopkins experienced flower power in full bloom.

Four times married, Hopkins has lived in Thailand since 1993; his current Bangkok apartment nestles on a restful downtown side street. With his thinning gray hair and trimmed beard, thick spectacles, beige slacks and gaudy, open-necked shirt, the writer has the avuncular air of a retired civil servant.

A short stroll from Hopkins’ hideaway, however, lies the Thai capital’s main sex-tourism avenue, Sukhumvit Road, where street-side stalls ply hard-core porn DVDs, DVDs and Viagra, as well as chromed knuckledusters and ninja throwing stars.

“Being a bottom feeder has a long literary tradition,” Hopkins says. “There’s a whiff of danger about Bangkok. I hate to roman-

tize dirt, but we’re talking whores and drugs and the fun things in life.”

Over half a century, Hopkins has authored three dozen books, covering everything from groupies to the history of the condom. Originally rejected by some 30 publishers, *No One Here Gets Out Alive*—the first rock biography to reach No. 1 on *The New York Times* best-seller list—has never been out of print since its publication in 1980. (Hopkins says his co-author, the late Danny Sugerman, didn’t contribute much to the text but mainly helped get it sold.)

“Morrison was the most interesting of all the rock stars I met because he was the best conversationalist,” Hopkins says. “Something I always had trouble with at *Rolling Stone* was that I was interviewing people whose avenue of communication was singing or playing an instrument. Why should anyone expect them to have a political opinion worth listening to? Most of them didn’t, but Morrison was interesting on a totally different level.”

Hopkins changes the battery in his hearing aid and sits down to reminisce about everything from the blame he gets for the conspiracy theories surrounding Morrison’s perplexing death in Paris at age 27 to his personal taste for transsexual street hookers. (He’s also dated a *Playboy* playmate.)

We begin in 1966. The soundtrack to that heady 12 months featured The Byrds’ *Fifth Dimension*, Bob Dylan’s *Blonde on Blonde* and The Beatles’ *Revolver*. “1966

was a great year,” Hopkins says. “I guess ’67 was the Summer of Love, but ’66 was when all the great records came out.”

It was that year that Hopkins and a friend opened what was one of the first head shops in the United States. Los Angeles was a headquarters for the prevailing drug culture, so that became the name of their store. “Headquarters was the first head shop in Los Angeles. I didn’t even know what a head shop was,” Hopkins’ store quickly became a community center for the hippie generation. “Kids would hang out in the afternoon so they didn’t have to go home to mom and dad,” he says. “They could be with these hip guys who openly sold rolling papers.”

They also sold buttons with slogans, like “Save Water, Shower With a Friend” and “Even Paranoids Have Real Enemies.” They had Peter Fonda and Bob Dylan posters and underground newspapers. They passed off the old uniforms from the minor league hockey Los Angeles Blades’ brass band as Sergeant Pepper outfits.

Born in New Jersey, Hopkins’ long and strange trip from Quaker roots to Californian bohemian was set in motion by conflict rather than peaceniks. “During World War II, I would read the dispatches of [Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent] Ernie Pyle. He covered Europe and then the Pacific,” he says. “I decided that was what I wanted to do when I grew up: Travel the world, meet interesting people, write about them and get paid for it.”

After college, two years at a newspaper

and a stint in the army in Georgia, Hopkins eventually found work for *The Steve Allen Show*. “I became his ‘vice president in charge of left-fielders,’” Hopkins says. “I was Steve’s ‘kook booker.’ Some of the people were genuinely strange.”

One such eccentric was a pre-fame Frank Zappa, who wanted to teach Allen an instrument he called a “musical bicycle.” “I knew it was a put-on, and Steve had always insisted ‘no put-ons,’ but Frank sounded interesting, so he came along. He played the spokes like a harp. He beat on the seat and blew at the handlebars. He would not admit it was a joke.”

Eventually Hopkins became disillusioned with television, and the head shop ended up suffering financially. (“The big department stores started taking our business,” he grumbles. “If you wanted a poster of Peter Fonda, you could get it at the May Company.”) But he found another opportunity at *Rolling Stone*. “They were soliciting for freelance submissions, so I sent in a review of a Doors concert. They printed it and sent me a check for \$15. I thought, ‘This is terrific.’”

Soon, Hopkins became *Rolling Stone*’s L.A. correspondent. Though he was at first a bit critical of the act, calling Morrison “pretentious,” he liked The Doors’ lyrics and got along with the frontman. “We drank in the same bars and he would invite me to poetry readings and screenings and stuff!”

Hopkins gleaned many personal insights into Morrison during these years, and director Oliver Stone used Hopkins’ interview notes, as well as *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, as the backbone to his 1991 biopic, *The Doors*. The movie’s release resulted in the biography bounding back onto the best-seller list, but Hopkins is conflicted about Stone’s cinematic portrayal.

“The look of the movie was bang-on,” Hopkins says. “It was like being whiplashed into my past. Oliver had everything very accurate visually, which is interesting [considering that] 40 percent of the screenplay turned out to be total fiction. It’s true that Jim was a drunken asshole, but that wasn’t all he was. He read more books and was more articulate than anyone else I’ve ever met in the entertainment world. He had a sense of humor about himself. He didn’t take his stardom seriously.”

Hopkins also got caught up in the controversy surrounding Morrison’s death. According to French police, the singer’s girlfriend, Pamela Courson, found him dead in their Paris apartment’s bathtub on July 3, 1971, apparently of a heart attack. Morrison was quickly buried in the French capital’s Pere Lachaise cemetery. Conspiracy theories regarding the exact circumstances have multiplied ever since, and Hopkins says he gets blamed for them.

Why? Well, he originally planned a pair of different endings for the biography, one in which Morrison overdosed and one in which he faked his death and—like his idol, the French poet Rimbaud—wandered off to Africa to gain the freedom of anonymity. He was fed up with being a star.

“I suggested that if the publisher were to print 10,000 copies of the book, 5,000 should have one ending and 5,000 the other. Distribute them and don’t say anything, which I still think (186)



Hopkins, right, in 1972 with The Who drummer Keith Moon

»185 is an interesting concept.” Not surprisingly, the publisher declined, and instead the chapters were combined and the book ended ambiguously. “So now, many people say that book created the controversy over whether Morrison is dead or alive,” Hopkins says.

At the time of Morrison’s death, Hopkins had just wrapped up *Elvis: A Biography*. With that book on the shelves, the writer rejoined *Rolling Stone* in 1972, soon to be sent to cover the British music scene from London. He also spent time in Paris, researching Morrison’s death. The people he spoke with said Morrison had been carried home from a nightclub after suffering a heroin overdose, and that a cold water bath was commonly considered helpful to drug users suffering from a

“HEROIN HAD NOT BEEN [MORRISON’S] DRUG,” HOPKINS INSISTS. “HIS DRUG OF CHOICE, SINCE LONG BEFORE HE DIED, HAD BEEN ALCOHOL.”

surfeit of heroin.

“That had not been his drug,” Hopkins insists. “Jim did do a lot of cocaine, but his drug of choice, since long before he died, had been alcohol. In my *Rolling Stone* interview with him in the early summer after the Miami arrest [for indecent exposure onstage] of March ’69, he said that he had switched to alcohol because it was so much easier to obtain.”

Whatever the case, a doctor found no signs of foul play, and since it was the July Fourth weekend, the American Embassy was closed. Morrison, Hopkins notes, was in the ground in a hurry.

No One Here Gets Out Alive has been translated into 16 languages, sold millions of copies, and has made Hopkins royalties for decades. He doesn’t know the exact sum, however. Millions of dollars? “Hell, no,” he says. “I’ve lived comfortably, and I tried to shovel as much of it up my nose

as I could, living well beyond my means at times.” At various points he also ended up in divorce court, from his third wife, and bankruptcy court. “My feeling now is that I didn’t take to being rich, and my idea was to get poor again as soon as possible, so that I could be happy again.”

While living in Hawaii, Hopkins rediscovered his happiness in the arms of Vanessa, a transsexual hooker who worked the streets of Honolulu’s Chinatown. “I was in love with her, I shared my bed with her, on the nights when she came home,” he says, chuckling at the memory. He remains “fascinated with that lifestyle.”

With light fading, we decamp from the writer’s bolt-hole to stroll Sukhumvit to Nana Plaza, Bangkok’s neon-lit warren of go-go bars and clip joints, which is perhaps the largest single compound of paid-for sexual gratification on the planet. We order beers and survey the spectacle. The licentious Thai capital, Hopkins insists, is inspirational to his work.

When not trawling Bangkok, however, he lives with his fourth wife—who is Thai and 25 years his junior—and her extended family on an idyllic rice farm close to the border with Cambodia. “We have 12 types of fruit, four fish ponds,” Hopkins says. “We raise frogs, chickens, ducks. ... It’s quiet. We have no telephones, no Internet.”

Thailand, with its contrasting extremes, appears to be the right place for this time in Hopkins’ unorthodox life. He’s still active on the literary front, and in the process of researching a pair of books, he says. “One is about ladyboy sex workers, and the other is called *Whore Lovers: The Aficionados and Connoisseurs*.”

He also recently penned the introduction to a compilation of poetry by tough-guy actor Michael Madsen, perhaps best known as the ear-severing Mr. Blonde in *Reservoir Dogs*.

Hopkins carries out much of his “research” at Cascade, a go-go bar that is headquarters for more than 100 transsexual prostitutes, including, he laughs, one chisel-jawed individual whose nickname is “Lights Out,” for her devastating Muay Thai skills, which she employs to silence difficult customers. “All of that strikes me as a hell of a lot more interesting,” he says, “than what my daughter calls a ‘real job.’”