The Curse of the 27 Club

An Exclusive Club

Being a twenty-seven year old rock musician is apparently hazardous to your health. The sheer volume of musicians who have died at this age is staggering. Many believe it is just a coincidence. However, there are those who believe a conspiracy is afoot. Let's take a look at some of the most iconic musicians to have the dubious honor of being inductees in the 27 Club.

Jimi Hendrix

Johnny Allen Hendrix (later legally changed to James Marshall Hendrix) was born November 27, 1942. Undoubtedly the god of the guitar universe, Jimi Hendrix' name is synonymous with amazing riffs. Sadly, his name is also attached to another, less fortunate enterprise: the 27 Club.

On September 18, 1970, Jimi was riding high on the wings of success. He had recorded four wildly successful albums, three with the Jimi Hendrix Experience and one with Band of Gypsys, which was a live recording. He played at Woodstock, where his searing rendition of the National Anthem whipped the crowd into a frenzy of unequalled proportion. He was serious about his girlfriend, Monika Danneman, and was enjoying the London nightlife and being back in the studio, recording his fifth album.

In the evening of that fateful night, Jimi and Monika were at a party in the tony Notting Hill section of London. Jimi drank red wine until 3:00 am at which time he and Monica returned to their hotel, the Samarkand, where Monika rented a flat. Unbeknownst to Monika, Jimi had taken nine of her Vesparax sleeping pills. The prescription medication, which Monika had obtained in Belgium, gave instructions to take only half a tablet. Vesparax is an extremely strong sedative, and one which Jimi was unfamiliar with and had never taken.

Sometime between 3:00 am and 4:00 am (according to the medical examiner) Jimi passed out, vomited as a result of the wine and the massive dose of Vesparax in his system, and asphyxiated on his own regurgitation. The magical fingers of the guitar god were forever silenced.

Janis Joplin

This wild woman from Port Arthur, Texas was born January 19, 1943. Her soulful, gritty voice positively oozed the blues. Janis's style of uninhibited sexual innuendo and flamboyant stage presence had launched her into the stratosphere. It seemed her star would never fade, yet destiny had different plans for her. Plans that would induct her into an infamous club.

After recording 5 albums with Big Brother and the Holding Company and the Kozmic Blues Band, Janis had formed yet another group, this one known as Full Tilt Boogie Band. She and Full Tilt were in the process of recording her sixth studio album, Pearl, in LA. Janis was living at the Landmark Hotel and her flashy, psychedelic Porsche Cabriolet was easily spotted in the hotel parking lot.

On October 4, 1970 Janis failed to arrive at Sunset Sound Studio. Paul Rothchild, the albums producer, grew concerned and decided to go to the Landmark to check on her. Spotting the Porsche in the parking lot, he continued up to her room. Paul found her dead on the floor beside her bed. Her cause of death: an overdose of heroin. She was 27 years, 258 days old and an unwilling inductee of the club.

Jim Morrison

James Douglas Morrison was born December 8, 1943. The Doors used Jim's lyrical poetry and set it to haunting music, to great effect and acclaim. The band was at the pinnacle of their success when Jim and his longtime girlfriend Pamela Courson decided to take a trip to Paris. It would be the end of the road for this hard-rocking, hard-living 27-year-old.

In March 1971, Jim and Pam took an apartment on rue Beautreillis, on the Right Bank. They enjoyed life in Paris, and it was a peaceful time in their often turbulent relationship. On July 3, 1970, Pam found Jim dead in the bathtub of their apartment. A decision to inter Jim without an autopsy would prove to be a controversial one, but cause of death is listed on his death certificate as heart failure attributed to long-term drug abuse. A heroin overdose theory spread, but there was no evidence to prove this theory.

Jim's death and the lack of an autopsy or funeral caused rumors to swirl through the fan community. The most persistent rumor stated that Jim, growing tired of fame and the music industry, had faked his own death so that he could live a peaceful life. Jim was laid to rest in the Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris and his gravesite is a mecca for fans. No one here gets out alive, indeed.

Kurt Cobain

Kurt Donald Cobain was born February 20, 1967 in Aberdeen, Washington. Musical from an early age Kurt received his first guitar at 14 and taught himself to play. He played in several bands throughout high school, then formed Nirvana in 1986 with bassist Krist Novocelic and drummer Chad Channing, who was later replaced by the remarkable Dave Grohl.

Nirvana had received critical acclaim from their SubPop venture "Bleach", but it was the release of "Nevermind" in 1991 that rocketed the band into the stratosphere. "In Utero", released in 1993, continued the bands climb to the heavens. But all was not right in Kurt's world.

Kurt was never comfortable with stardom or the spotlight. He suffered from severe gastrointestinal issues that left him sick and in pain most of the time. His heroin use was an attempt at self-medication to help ease the pain. After the birth of his daughter Frances Bean (with Hole frontwoman Courtney Love), Kurt decided to get clean. On March 30, 1994 Cobain checked himself into Exodus Recovery Center in Los Angeles. On April Fools Day, 1994, after a visit with his daughter Frances Bean, Kurt went outside to smoke a cigarette and decided to leave the facility. He flew back to Seattle that night and his whereabouts for the next week are largely unknown. Courtney hired a PI to find him on April 3, but it was an electrician, hired to install a security system, who found Kurt's lifeless body on April 8, 1994 at the couples Seattle home. Kurt left a note, stating his dissatisfaction with the rock and roll life and telling his wife and daughter that he apologized for being weak and that he loved them. He shot himself in the head with a 12-gauge shotgun.

At 27 years, 44 days, Kurt Cobain became the newest member of the 27 Club. His poetry and talent forever silenced, he hopefully rests in peace.

Amy Winehouse

Amy Winehouse burst onto the music scene in 2003, hitting it big with 2006's "Back to Black". Her whiskey soaked vocals and lyrics oozing pain and despair, Winehouse became the first woman to win five Grammy Awards in the same year.

Amy Jade Winehouse was born September 14, 1983. A Londoner by birth, Winehouse's parents are a taxi driver father and a pharmacist mother, both of whom instilled in her a love of jazz music. She began singing as a child and exhibited a remarkable talent for song. Her grandmother decided to send her to the Susi Earnshaw Theatre School at nine years of age, so that she could further develop her talent.

Winehouse was at the height of her success in July 2011. Her struggle with drugs and alcohol were already legendary in the music industry when on July 20, her bodyguard visited her home in Camden, London and reported that she appeared slightly intoxicated. By all reports, she was in high spirits for the next few days, looking forward to some upcoming performances. On July 23, 2011 her bodyguard checked on her at 10 am. She was sleeping. He checked on her again just after 3 pm and she was still laying in the same position as before. He checked her pulse and, finding none, called the paramedics. The pronouncement of death by alcohol poisoning was made at 3:53 pm. She was 27 years, 312 days.

The Club Roster

In all, there are 43 musicians of all different genres of music that are members of the 27 Club. The earliest inductee is composer and pianist Alexandre Levy, who joined the club on January 17, 1892. The most recent addition is Richard Turner, trumpet player for Friendly Fires, who died of cardiac arrest on August 11, 2011.

Some notable members of the club:

Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones, drowned on July 3, 1969.

Roger "Pigpen" McKernan of the Grateful Dead, died of a bleeding ulcer caused by acute alcoholism on March 8, 1973.

D. Boon, lead singer of punk pioneers the Minutemen, killed in a car accident on December 22, 1985.

Mia Zapata, up and coming rock sensation and lead singer of the Gits, murdered on July 7, 1993.

Bryan Ottoson, guitarist for American Head Charge, prescription drug overdose on April 19, 2005.

Eerie coincidence or rock and roll conspiracy, the members of the 27 Club will be more known for the contributions they gave to the music world than for their infamous membership in a club that no one would voluntarily join. One thing is true; with the passing of all these musical greats, heaven must have a hell of a band.