



Lessons in Estate Planning:  
**Jim Morrison**

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**G**iven their wealth and connections, one might assume that all celebrities have iron-clad, comprehensive estate plans. However, many celebrities make basic estate planning mistakes which cause their family dramas and legal disputes to play out in the headlines. By examining these blunders, we can learn much about protecting ourselves, our families, and our assets. In this article, we explore the lessons presented by the estate of singer-songwriter Jim Morrison.

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Jim Morrison of The Doors passed away in 1971 from congestive heart failure (though the exact cause is still unknown). He left behind a one-page will that outlined how he wanted his estate distributed. In short, his entire estate was to go to his common-law wife, Pamela Courson. If, however, Courson did not survive him by three months, the entirety of the estate was to pass to his siblings.

This approach suggests that Morrison had two goals: (1) to protect his significant other, with whom he had no formal or legal marriage, and (2) to disinherit his parents, with whom he had a strained relationship. Unfortunately, Morrison's will failed to protect his interests.

Morrison's wish to protect Courson was immediately frustrated upon his death when the estate became embroiled in litigation. First, several women sued, claiming that Morrison had fathered their children and that they were entitled to a share of the estate. Second, Morrison's bandmates sued the estate for repayment of cash advances they claimed had been paid to Morrison during his lifetime. Although Courson received a small stipend from the probate court during this time, it didn't support her lifestyle or cover Morrison's funeral expenses. It wasn't until three years later, in 1974, that the court determined that Courson was Morrison's rightful heir. Unfortunately, that same year Courson passed away without a will and never received the benefit of Morrison's conveyance.

Morrison's second goal was frustrated after Courson's death. Because Courson died without a will, the court applied state rules of intestacy to distribute her assets. Under these laws, her estate, which now included a 25% interest in The Doors, the copyrights in Morrison's songs, and rights to Morrison's image, was granted to Courson's parents. It wasn't long before Morrison's parents sued for a share of the estate. After nine long years of litigation, they reached a settlement in which both families shared the estate.

## LESSON ONE:

### **You need a will.**

If you would like to divide your property in a nuanced way and on your own terms, you will need a will. When someone dies without a will, state intestacy laws are applied, acting as a default estate plan. While state laws differ, intestacy laws tend to favor traditional family structures, dividing assets among the deceased's closest legal relatives. This can be problematic for non-traditional families or individuals who wish to disinherit a family member. Morrison lacked a conventional marriage. The only way he could ensure that Courson would receive his property was to direct it to her in a will. Similarly, Morrison wished to disinherit his parents. He did so by naming his siblings as secondary successors. Had he not done this, his parents would have been first in line after Courson to collect under the California laws of intestacy.



## LESSON TWO:

### **It is never too soon to consider estate planning.**

Morrison created a will when he was only 25 years old. A typical 25-year-old might claim that they are too young to consider estate planning or that the value of their estate is negligible. But there are real reasons for artists to consider estate planning early.

First, it is not uncommon for an artist's popularity to explode following their passing. Morrison's work, for example, was discovered and rediscovered by subsequent generations of fans. His estate is currently worth nearly eight times its value at the time of his death. Second, new streams of revenue emerge as technology advances, and no artist can anticipate what might be ahead. Morrison, for example, had no way of knowing that celebrity images would emerge as a valuable asset. Third, copyright laws change over time. For Morrison, changes to the law extended the duration of the copyrights in his work for decades, allowing for further valuable dispositions by his estate. While none of these things can be anticipated, they are all realities that suggest that it is wise to begin estate planning sooner rather than later.

## LESSON THREE:

### **Have your will drafted by an experienced attorney.**

Morrison's will was simplistic. It consisted of one single page with four clauses. Although better than nothing, simplistic wills often overlook important issues. For example, Morrison's will only considered the first transfer of assets. It was silent regarding subsequent transfers, like who should inherit the assets after Courson. Moreover, it didn't adequately address outcomes like what would happen if Courson survived long enough to be granted assets but not long enough to receive them.

An attorney could have helped Morrison utilize some basic estate planning tools that might have avoided the abovementioned problems. For example, Morrison could have left his property in trust and named Courson as a beneficiary and his siblings as alternates. Had he done so, his wishes would have been upheld. Doing so also would have limited claims for invalidity, which was the grounds upon which the Morrisons contested the transfer to Courson.

## LESSON FOUR:

### **Get specific about creative decision-making**

Morrison's will was silent when it came to creative decision-making. He had many journals, poems, and papers but never specified what he wanted to happen with them. Had he appointed a literary executor to care for his work and archive, he would have had much more control over his legacy. Did he want his face on t-shirts and mugs? Did he want all his journals published, or would he have preferred they be destroyed? Did he want his songs used in advertising? An estate plan is an appropriate place to consider these things. Artists who make estate plans can leave a letter of intent or begin to explain to a trusted literary executor how they want decisions made.

## LESSON FIVE:

### **Avoiding probate has its benefits**

Probate is a time-consuming court process concerned with paying off debts and directing assets to heirs. Because wills that go through probate are more likely to be challenged, this process often takes longer than expected. In addition to the time cost of probate, there is a financial cost that might include administrative and attorney fees. Both Morrison and Courson's wills passed through probate, and both suffered from lengthy litigation that tied up the funds for years. Had they used non-probate tools like trusts or joint bank accounts, transfers would have been immediate and avoided probate and the strife that ensued. [Also notable is that wills that pass through probate become part of the public record. If Morrison had avoided probate, his will wouldn't be on the internet today.]

Morrison's estate was never enjoyed by those he wanted to benefit. Instead, his legacy fell in the hands of those he didn't know, let alone like. While Morrison's story isn't unique, it offers some simple lessons you can use to ensure that it doesn't happen to you.



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