



Last Night at the Viper Room: River Phoenix and the Hollywood He Left Behind

Gavin Edwards

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In *Last Night at the Viper Room*, acclaimed author and journalist Gavin Edwards vividly recounts the life and tragic death of acclaimed actor River Phoenix—a teen idol on the fast track to Hollywood royalty who died of a drug overdose in front of West Hollywood’s storied club, the Viper Room, at the age of 23.

Last Night at the Viper Room explores the young star’s life, including his childhood in Venezuela growing up under the aegis of the cultish Children of God. Putting him at the center of a new generation of leading men emerging in the early 1990s— including Johnny Depp, Keanu Reeves, Brad Pitt, Nicolas Cage, and Leonardo DiCaprio—Gavin Edwards traces the Academy Award nominee’s meteoric rise, couches him in an examination of the 1990s, and illuminates his lasting legacy on Hollywood and popular culture itself.

Last Night at the Viper Room: River Phoenix and the Hollywood He Left Behind **Details**

Date : Published October 22nd 2013 by It Books

ISBN : 9780062273154

Author : Gavin Edwards

Format : Hardcover 273 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Biography, Biography Memoir, Autobiography, Memoir, Culture, Pop Culture, Film, Music, Audiobook, History, Media Tie In, Movies

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Book of Secrets says

I enjoyed listening to this biography of River Phoenix. I was in the mood for something different, and LAST NIGHT AT THE VIPER ROOM fit the bill perfectly. This book was released just a few days shy of the 20th anniversary of his death. A night out at a club. Drugs. A bad decision. A promising young actor dead at age 23.

This was more than just a recap of what happened on October 31, 1993. It spans River's life from his unconventional childhood in South America (his hippie parents were members of a cult) to his rise to stardom and beyond. Learning about what went on during River's childhood was surprising. I can see how his experiences shaped the troubled young man he became. The book also talks a lot about "Young Hollywood" at the time, which included Johnny Depp, Leonardo DiCaprio, Keanu Reeves, and Winona Ryder. Hearing about what the other actors were doing helped put River's career in perspective.

The audiobook was performed by Luke Daniels, and overall I was pleased with his narration. He had a strong, interesting voice and good pacing. When quoting people he would change his voice, and most of his impressions were spot on (at least for the people I'm familiar with).

LAST NIGHT AT THE VIPER ROOM is a well-written story of a life cut short. It didn't glamorize drug abuse at all – it told it like it was. Sad. The author also poses "what if" questions and the possible answers which were very interesting to think about. This book might appeal to film buffs and fans of Gen X biographies.

Lori says

This book just leaves me sad...and a bit angry. I don't think anyone can deny that River Phoenix was incredibly talented. He seemed to be a gentle soul but troubled.

This is definitely a cautionary tale about the risks of making your child the breadwinner for the family. I came away angry with his parents. I get that they were hippies, I get that they were very earth conscious and new age-y but for crying out loud...get a job, support your children, don't let your laziness, your beliefs leave them unprepared for the world that they will eventually have to inhabit.

I found it so incredibly sad to read that because of the choices his parents made River was unprepared to even understand humour in joke form.

I liked that the book gave snippets of what other actors of his generation were doing at any given time in Phoenix's life. It gave context to and a contrast with what he was experiencing.

Tom says

(nb: I received an Advance Review Copy of this book from the publisher via Edelweiss)

I remember watching the news on October 31, 1993. I didn't usually watch the evening news—I was always either working or at happy hour—but this was a Sunday, so I was probably doing laundry and nursing a hangover.

I remember watching the news on October 31, 1993 only because the anchor reported that both River Phoenix and Federico Fellini had died. It seemed oddly fitting that two such bookending film personae died the same day.

Fellini was 73, and he'd enjoyed a long, celebrated career, winning five Oscars and creating a style so unique, it spawned its own adjective: Felliniesque.

River Phoenix, though. My God, I thought, he was only 23. He had obvious talent, although most of his films didn't show it, and he could have been one of the greats, if only...

Gavin Edwards's "Last Night at The Viper Room" fills in the "if only" in one of the best biographies I've read this year.

In his day, River Phoenix was portrayed as "The Vegan James Dean," and there was something Dean-like about him. Back in the late 1980's and early 90's, his story was fairly well-known. His parents were hippies who moved to South America as part of some weird cult, and they named their kids things like River, Liberty, Rain, etc. Also, River was a big environmental activist, plus a vegan and animal rights supporter. He spoke out against drug use, and seemed like a nice—if quirky—kid.

The drinking was first. Then came the drugs: weed, at first, then cocaine, then heroin. Between his breakout in 1986's "Stand By Me" and his OD just seven years later, River Phoenix spiraled hard into substance abuse. His appearance changed. The once strong, handsome young star showed up for auditions with his skin looking almost gray. His clothes were dirty and worn. Some of his last performances were almost unintelligible. His reputation in Hollywood was tarnished; he had trouble finding good films. Finally, he collapsed and died outside The Viper Room.

"Last Night at The Viper Room" charts River's short life, from his birth to nomadic hippie parents all the way to the bitter end.

That's what biographies do, but the wonder of "Last Night at The Viper Room" is that it does more than provide a truckload of facts. Author Gavin Edwards shows remarkable verve and style, taking this book far beyond the dry tedium of many biographies. Edwards wrote extensively for "Details" and "Rolling Stone" magazines, and his style here shows much of the hip, rock & roll journalism pacing one finds in a good, extended magazine piece.

I was drawn-in to "Last Night at The Viper Room," and before I knew it, I'd read it in one sitting. It is an addictive book.

Edwards draws on dozens of sources and personal interviews for this work, and his documentation is fastidious. He portrays Phoenix's life not only in a recitation of facts, but in anecdotal quotes from those who

best knew the actor, those who worked with him, dated him, befriended him, loved him. In all of their stories, they express dismay at what they saw this talented young actor doing to himself.

Make no mistake, this is a very sad book. River Phoenix had a short, tragic life. His family relied upon him to be the breadwinner. His Hollywood stardom was their golden ticket. River wasn't always comfortable as an actor—he mainly just wanted to play his guitar and sing—but the money was too good. In some roles, he found a way to express himself through his art. Other times, he was just going through the motions.

When he died, some people thought River Phoenix would be like James Dean, a handsome young star who died tragically young, but whose fame would live on forever through his work. That didn't happen with River Phoenix. James Dean is still a legend; River Phoenix is an afterthought who died two decades ago.

His life is immortalized, though, in "Last Night at The Viper Room." From birth to death, it's all right here. Even just for the few hours it took me to read this book, Gavin Edwards brought him back, and once again made me wonder what River Phoenix could have been, if only...

Most Highly Recommended

Victoria Nicholson says

The anagram Phoenix 's name makes is mystic tragedy like other Hollywood icons. Its something like "Heroin Viper X" much more tragic than "Mr Mojo Risin" which is happier. The author has skill.

I was inspired to become vegetarian to be kinder to animals and live less harshly on this planet.

However I am not vegan like the subject. I consume eggs and dairy for one reason because it keeps animals more bred and alive. Hens and probably roosters like being hugged now and then. Phoenix had some good quotes and was gifted .He had a good singing voice probably could have contributed a bit to music n certainly to cinema . More importantly he contributed to activism. I dig how he saved rain forest land in South America and what he planned to do with it.He despite being a addict inspired me to be a better person. I tried alcohol, smoking, and drug culture as a teen while also medicated. Its not for me. If I chose to self destruct or live on the edge it would be extreme sports or cuisine.

Erin says

This book made me angry. There were so many people who could have lent a talented but struggling young man a hand, but chose not to do so. There were parents who could have decided to be parents, instead of selfishly using their eldest child for profit. There were friends and co-workers who didn't step up when they saw a young star floundering. While the addict also deserves blame, in this case a tragedy really seemed preventable. The result was the death of River Phoenix, one of the most interesting and promising actors of his generation.

Last Night at the Viper Room compiles widely known anecdotes and events in River's life with interviews, a few lesser-known details and some conjecture. It focuses mainly on River and his family, but also provides Hollywood context. There is commentary on the career and personal choices of other male actors who were coming of age at the same time. There is some discussion of Hollywood politics, on-set happenings and the

cultural shift taking place in entertainment in the early 1990s. There's nothing here that's really new or groundbreaking, but compiled in one story it creates a fairly good sense of the world in which River was living. Taken all together, it's a compelling tale.

I arrived in Hollywood two years after River Phoenix died and spent time with several of the people mentioned in this book. This is a world I know fairly well. I realize that it's too easy to blame Hollywood, too easy to blame friends and family, and that addiction, sexual abuse and fame are complex issues. It's just tragic that this young man, whose life had so much to offer all of us, is now just a cautionary tale. His death could have been avoided. He could have been so much more.

Stacia (the 2010 club) says

It wasn't all in my head!

While they were sleeping, River had died on the Sunset Strip. The world had changed overnight.

A long, time ago, in a galaxy far, far, away (also known as high school), a friend introduced me to a movie titled Dogfight, about a group of young military men who have a contest to see who can bring the ugliest date. No, this was not like Dinner for Schmucks. My friend and I watched that movie several times at her house, and then I never saw it again. Over the years, I've mentioned it to a few people, who hadn't heard of it. I tried checking Netflix and Amazon and other services which stream movies for me and it was nowhere to be found. My husband thinks I'm crazy when I talk about this movie which "doesn't exist."

I was MOTHER EFFING right that this was an actual movie (one which only made less than 400k and wasn't widely released), and I just found out that River Phoenix was in it! Thank you to this book I read for restoring my sanity!

Anyway, random story aside, let's go back to River himself. One of my male friends hates it when males are called beautiful, but every single time I see River, the word pops into my head (along with other, less fortunate words). Let me show you what I mean...

Once, when River was eighteen, somebody asked him if he had had a happy childhood. "Happy?" he replied, as if the idea had never occurred to him. "Well, it was interesting."

"River was the most beautiful child you've ever seen."

He had no social skills.

When you're fifteen, to have to think of yourself as a prophet is unfair.

*River smiled sweetly at his tormentors and told them, "If you want to kick my ass, go ahead. Just explain to me why you're doing it."
After a confused pause, one of the skinheads said, "Ah, you wouldn't be worth it."
"We're all worth it, man," River said with a beatific smile. "We're all worth millions of planets and stars and galaxies and universes."*

This is a tale of more than just young Hollywood. You might be interested in the details of how actors such as Johnny Depp, Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio, the two Coreys (and I laughed at how badly they were portrayed for being aholes), etc. came to be, which are in here, intertwined with River's story.

I was here for River though. The recounting of his heartbreaking childhood and following awkward teen years tugged at my heart. This young man who was so uncomfortable in his own skin, he had a story that the world would have wanted to hear. It is sad to see all the potential in the world shut down in the blink of an eye.

He was a soft-hearted vegan who wanted to change the world. Instead, he is remembered as the person who overdosed on a street outside of a club on the Sunset Strip and died. The details of how he got to that point were subtly blurred in favor of showcasing the person he was instead. I liked that. In fact, I wanted more of the secret River.

Rarely, do biographies manage to come across as anything but cold and observing. Because there were dashes of dark sarcasm and snippets of River's musings, I felt like I was dropped into his life and wanted to stay just a little while longer than I was allowed to.

River was one of my first childhood crushes and he's been one of the few which I've wondered about from time to time. What would he look like today if he were alive? Would he be successful, or would he have walked away from the business which he wasn't sure he even wanted to be a part of? Would he have continued on the path where he followed his love of music? It's sad that we'll never know what was to be.

All in all, it was a beautiful recount of the life of a beautiful young man.

This book provided from the publisher in exchange for an honest review. All quotes taken from the pre-published copy and may be altered or omitted from the final version.

You can also find my review on Booklikes

Erin says

My newest "purse book".

"Last Night at the Viper Room" is a fairly salacious title for what is really a full biography of River Phoenix interspersed with interludes on the other things going on in the Hollywood scene at the time which offer a good perspective on where River fits into his time period (one of the authors big, and fair, questions...would River have been as big as Leonardo DiCaprio?). The author makes the point that River only made four really good movies (*Dogfight*, *Running on Empty*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *Stand by Me*) and of those three only one is considered a real "classic" (and he was a child in that one), so, really, is River primarily famous because of his odd upbringing and his death?

The book was interesting, but was a LOT of River for someone who was only a casual fan. However, for a huge fan of either that particular era of movie making or of River himself it's a must-read.

Christy says

You would think after all these years I could read this and not get sad. Wrong. How can you not be sad over a life gone way too soon? What did I learned mostly from this book, was, That River had a kind and gentle soul and even with his drug use that did not go away. You can't help but wonder where he would be right now if he was still alive. You can't help but to want that.

Ana O says

*It ends outside a nightclub called the Viper Room, on a Hollywood sidewalk.
It begins twenty-three years earlier, on a peppermint farm.
Between applause and agony, between the farm and the Viper Room, between peppermint and heroin,
there hangs a life: the twenty-three years of River Phoenix.*

Let me start with a confession: I may have an obsession with River Phoenix. I remember watching Stand by Me for the first time several years ago and thinking to myself, 'this might just become one of my favorite movies of all time.' Years have passed and I still love it. By the time I saw Stand By Me, River Phoenix was long gone. That didn't diminish my infatuation with him, however. Having a crush on a dead celebrity... It's not that weird, is it?

I already know the answer so please don't comment on that part. But I digress. As I was saying, River had an intrigue and talent that still captivates people more than 20 years after his death.

He was an incredibly talented actor. But he was so much more than a movie star. He was a musician. An activist. A vegan.

Born to unconventional parents, he and his siblings were brought up as members of the Children of God cult. They lived in poverty and he often sang and performed on street corners for food. His parents encouraged all of their children to get into movies. How awesome is that. Why get a job if you have a child who is able and willing to support you financially. Seriously. Some people shouldn't be allowed to have children. But despite

everything, River and his family was very close. (I'm sure you've heard of his brother Joaquin Phoenix. His sister, Summer Phoenix, is married to Casey Affleck).

How does a child with that kind of upbringing avoid going down the wrong path? Somebody asked him if he had a happy childhood; and he said, well, it was interesting. There are rumors that River was abused as a child by adults in the cult. As the book states, despite being repeatedly molested, he ended up a joyful person anyway, full of love for the world.

His family was constantly moving to different countries, they never had a permanent home. For many years he was the primary breadwinner for his entire immediate family. He was forced to grow up fast and hard. Hollywood only made things worse. Fame always comes with a price. The price turned out to be too high.

River's short life ended on Halloween night in front of Johnny Depp's then 'it' Hollywood club, The Viper Room. There's more to this book than that. It reveals little-known details of his life before he died. A long read, but well worth the time.

"We're all worth it, man," River said with a beatific smile. "We're all worth millions of planets and stars and galaxies and universes."

Sara Cochran says

I graduated high school in 1993. The people, the clothes, the music, the vibe of that time is the first one I truly understood and lived. I found this book very interesting and I particularly liked how the author framed each part of River's life within the context of other actors/musicians etc. It set the scene pretty perfectly, I think. I remember the tragic death of River Phoenix and was enlightened to learn much more about his family and upbringing. I know that many didn't believe him to be a drug addict at the time due to his much publicized vegan lifestyle. I think this is why his death proved so shocking in 1993 to much of the world. Had he grown up now with the social media presence unavoidable, I think we might have just found his death tragic, but not surprising.

Smeg says

I was madly in love with River. He was dreamy, talented & passionate. A little bit of me died with him, I think. So young, so tragic with his little brother at his side, so sad. After reading about his upbringing & the pressure put on him to provide for the family, it is no wonder that gorgeous and promising young man turned to drugs.

Julie Ehlers says

Interesting, sometimes amusing, well written (or well-enough written), and well researched (even if a lot of the research comes from other people's books). Like a lot of people, I was shocked when River Phoenix died of an overdose--he seemed like the last person in Hollywood who would succumb to this fate. The book, on the other hand, makes this fate seem almost inevitable, which is actually one of its strengths. Of course, at the end, this doesn't stop you from desperately wishing you could reach into the book and change just one detail that might have made a difference. An absorbing portrait of a person who was more complicated than most of us knew.

vicky says

"It ends outside a nightclub called the Viper Room, on a Hollywood sidewalk. (...) It begins twenty-three years earlier, on a peppermint farm. (...) Between applause and agony, (...) between peppermint and heroin, there hangs a life: the twenty-three years of River Phoenix."

It's been a while since a book captivated, angered and saddened me this much. What a beautiful, radiant soul he was ?

Ceilidh says

Have you ever got a book knowing fully that not only will you probably dislike it but it'll probably infuriate and upset you a bit, but you had to get it anyway because you're curious and weirdly interested in the subject matter? And then when that book made you madder than even you thought it would, you just want to scream but you know that you did it all to yourself?

Yeah, this was me with this book.

Some background.

When I was about 10, my mum made me watch Stand By Me. It's one of her favourite films and it became one of mine. To this day, it's in my top 20 favourite films of all time. It's a perfect film. Like most people who saw it, I became rather interested in River Phoenix, although as I got older the focus changed more to his brother, who remains probably my favourite actor (and teen crush - shut up). They're an interesting family & of course, one with very tragic elements. So of course River Phoenix's very short life was ripe for a biography.

This one, however, is kind of reprehensible.

First, from a stylistic point of view, the author has some issues. His attempt to create a cultural context surrounding Phoenix's brief time in the spotlight falls flat since he seems to have no idea how to organically integrate it into the narrative. A pretty linear biography is interspersed with tidbits on the Viper Room (the club where he died) and general information on other rising stars in the film industry at the time. Basically an actor is named, their projects at the time and then another is mentioned. This is repeated over and over again and feels lazy. If you want to read a non-fiction book where context is organically and substantially given for a time period, read Nixonland.

Second, and the biggest issue with the book, is the general tone of it all. It's one thing to offer a comment on a stranger's life; it's quite another to delve into unqualified pseudo psychiatric analysis that makes Dr Drew look dignified. E! News would offer less callous material. The author is pretty openly judgemental about the Phoenix family's life (which is pretty odd to say the least but if you're going to judge then at least develop the context further. The author's offerings feel rushed and lacking in anything really substantial that hasn't been written before. Wikipedia feels like the main source here aside from anonymous sources.)

I understand the urge to seek answers from a tragedy. It's a natural human instinct. We see it every day in our lives and in the media. Right now it's going on with the death of Philip Seymour Hoffman (an actor I basically worshipped and cried over a lot when I heard the news). Honestly, I get that.

I get why non-addicts try to understand the minds of addicts and I even sympathise somewhat when they struggle to understand because it's a tough situation. Addiction is an illness, one that requires us to not judge and to not sneer. We can't laugh or roll our eyes and claim they should have just never taken drugs or should have just stopped. It doesn't work like that. We can't turn it into a blame game.

We certainly don't spend 200+ pages insinuating that someone's family are to blame for their death.

The author clearly doesn't like Phoenix's family, but to lay the blame at their feet (mostly at those of his parents and brother) is low. National Enquirer low. Then, to rub salt in the wound, the author theorises that Joaquin Phoenix's career success and "weirdness" is the result of his brother dying and his guilt over that. I honestly couldn't believe what I read. It's coded but it's there. If you've ever heard the 911 call Joaquin Phoenix made on the night of his brother's death, you'd know it's one of the most upsetting things ever, and the media released that in the aftermath of River's death.

The total lack of basic decency on display here makes me wonder what the author was thinking when he began to write this insensitive & exploitative mess (actually I know exactly what he was thinking. "Hey, I could churn out something in time for the 20th anniversary of his death! I'm a genius!")

Maybe I'm just especially sensitive right now because of Philip Seymour Hoffman or because I'm a big fan of the people at the centre of it, but this was a waste of my time and I only really have myself to blame. Don't waste your time with this. Go watch Stand By Me and My Own Private Idaho instead.

Megan says

After reading this beautiful book, I sobbed like a baby. I couldn't control how overwhelmed I was by my emotions when it was all over.

And for days after I'd go through my normal routine with this aching empty feeling and every day I would realize that it was because of this book. I felt this awful feeling because I felt like I had lost my best friend after finishing this book. I felt that I had gotten to know River Phoenix so well through this book that his death, twenty years later, had touched me on such a personal level I felt it breaking my heart over and over.

This book is a work of art. It not only delves into River Phoenix's life, but into the lives of others who were starting out at the same time (Leonardo DiCaprio and Keanu Reeves, for example) and the world they were all growing up in. I highly recommend that everyone read it.
