

Jimi Hendrix

Experience

When Jimi Hendrix sent his Fender Stratocaster up in flames at the end of his historic performance at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, it was a brilliant grandstand play by a consummate psychedelic showman well-schooled in the showstopping hijinx of T-Bone Walker and Little Richard. It was also a profound gesture of affection and gratitude.

"I could sit up here all night and say thank you, thank you, thank you... I just wanna grab you, man," Hendrix told the adoring crowd. "But, dig, I just can't do that. So what I wanna do, I'm gonna sacrifice something here I really love... There is nothing more I can do than this." With that, Hendrix led his British sidekicks, bassist Noel Redding and drummer Mitch Mitchell, into a version of "Wild Thing" that literally burned his signature into the pages of rock & roll history.

For Hendrix, making his American concert debut just nine months after the formation in England of the Jimi Hendrix Experience, torching his Strat was an act of ritual sacrifice rooted in his love for the instrument and great faith in its communicative powers. This was a young man who had literally slept with his axe in his Army bunk and, later, on tour buses as an R&B sideman. Shy and self-effacing in conversation, Hendrix had devoted his life to the creation of a new guitar language of explosive, orchestral possibility and raw, soulful eloquence.

The combination of Jimi Hendrix's creative drive with his stunning technique, sonic imagination and painterly exploitation of devices like wah-wah, feedback and distortion transformed rock & roll – and its primary instrument – forever. He recast the music of his forefathers and elders – Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Charlie Christian, Chuck Berry – into electrifying future soul and elegiac cosmic balladry, laying the foundation for later innovations by George Clinton, Miles Davis and Prince. At the same time, Hendrix set a new standard for rock & roll stage outrage with his rubber-limbed playing positions and blatant erotic suggestion.

Sadly, Hendrix died too early to see his musical vision fully

realized. It's hard to believe that in his lifetime Jimi Hendrix officially released only three studio albums, all in little more than a year and a half. But he'd spent a lifetime preparing for them, if not for the sudden, often traumatic success they brought him.

James Marshall Hendrix was born in Seattle on November 27, 1942. He didn't get his first guitar, a second-hand acoustic model which cost five dollars, until he was nearly sixteen. But it proved to be a crucial, stabilizing element in a childhood scarred by his parents' rocky marriage and subsequent divorce, erratic schooling and his mother's death in 1958. In 1959, Hendrix graduated to the electric guitar and joined a local combo called the Rocking Kings. Except for an aborted career as an Army paratrooper, Hendrix spent the next seven years on the road, gigging with a motley succession of club bands and working as an itinerant backup musician for, among others, Sam Cooke, Jackie Wilson, the Impressions, Little Richard and the Isley Brothers.

His first significant studio date as a sideman came on the Isleys' storming '64 two-part single "Testify." Hendrix, then going by the stage name Jimmy James, actually lived with the Isleys for a few months, and the group also bought him his first Fender guitar. "He could play wonderfully without an amp," Ernie Isley told writer Harry Weinger. "With his back to us, the sound and the feeling emanating from him was quite something."

Up through the first half of 1966, Hendrix continued his sideman odyssey, working on the road and in the studio with Little Richard, King Curtis and Curtis Knight. During his tenure with Knight, Hendrix signed a three-year recording contract with producer Ed Chalpin (for a \$1.00 advance), a deal that would come back to haunt him later. But the deal that counted finally came in the summer of '66, when bassist Chas Chandler of the Animals caught Hendrix playing with his own group, Jimmy James and the Flames, at the Cafe Wha? in New York's Greenwich Village. Chandler, on the lookout



for management and production opportunities, was knocked out by Hendrix's fierce sound, outrageous look and gymnastic stage presence.

On September 23rd, 1966, under Chandler's aegis, Hendrix flew to England to pursue stardom in earnest. A flurry of auditions in London yielded bassist Noel Redding (born December 25, 1945) – who had actually turned up to try out for a guitar seat in the Animals – and drummer John "Mitch" Mitchell (born July 9, 1947), a former child actor who had played with Screaming Lord Sutch, the Riot Squad and Georgie Fame. The Jimi Hendrix Experience (the exotic spelling was Chandler's idea) was born.

In Redding and Mitchell, Hendrix found the perfect accomplices for his guitar attack. Redding's sturdy, anchoring bass freed Mitchell to fly all over his drum kit. Together, they complemented the rhythmic idiosyncracies of Hendrix's songs and playing style with their own turbulent blend of hardy soul dynamics and breathtaking acid-jazz breakaways. The sound was fluid enough for open-ended jamming yet free of excess instrumental baggage, tight and heavy in the hard-rock clutches. Hendrix later experimented with other lineups and expanded instrumentation, but he always returned to the power trio concept epitomized by the Jimi Hendrix Experience.

The furor Hendrix created upon his arrival on the London pop scene was unprecedented. Here was a young American black man who did not conform to British purist fantasies of sharp-dressing soul beltlers and grizzled old bluesmen, who played rock & roll guitar with a physically aggressive, avant-garde edge. Hendrix quickly became the darling of the music and tabloid presses; the leading lights of British pop – the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, guitarist Eric Clapton – were among his most ardent and vocal fans. In 1989, Clapton admitted that Cream's biggest hit, "Sunshine of Your Love," was actually inspired by a Hendrix show at London's Saville Theater.

"I knew what the guy was capable of from the minute I met him," Clapton said. "It was the complete embodiment of the different aspects of the blues and rock & roll rolled up into one. Jack [Bruce] took a little longer to realize what was happening. And when he did see it that night, after the gig, he went home and came up with that riff. It was strictly a dedication to Jimi." Hendrix returned the compliment by frequently making the song a feature of his own shows.

For Hendrix, Redding and Mitchell, the last months of 1966 and the whole of '67 were a crush of interviews, promotional activities, punishing concert tours and frenzied studio activity. Yet those hectic recording sessions, Hendrix's first as a leader, were arguably his most productive. In fourteen months, Hendrix and the Experience recorded not only the classic singles "Hey Joe," "Purple Haze" and "Burning of the Midnight Lamp" but also their epochal debut *Are You Experienced?*, its more lyrical

successor *Axis: Bold as Love* and a knockout series of live-in-the-studio tracks made for broadcast by BBC Radio (and released in 1989 as *Radio One*).

Collectively, that wealth of material captures Hendrix's genius in its first full flowering, a breathtaking eruption of original song ideas and sound painting schemes. In his dramatic cover of the folk-blues chestnut "Hey Joe," his trademark blues "Red House" and his BBC stomp through "Hoochie Koochie [sic] Man," Hendrix reaffirmed his black roots pride with a celebratory vengeance. He cooked up volcanic freakbeat with the propulsive riffing and headspinning guitar effects of "Stone Free" and "Love or Confusion." And in enduring ballads like "The Wind Cries Mary," "Little Wing" and "Burning of the Midnight Lamp," Hendrix combined poignant lyric introspection, pastoral melodicism and fluid electronic orchestration with a depth of feeling and ambition often overlooked by critics and fans dazzled by the assaultive force of "Purple Haze" and "Foxy Lady."

Ironically, Hendrix himself often felt unequal to the task of getting on to tape everything he heard in his head. "Most of the time I can't get it on the guitar, you know?" he said with characteristic modesty in *Rolling Stone* in early 1970. "Most of the time I'm just laying around daydreaming and hearing all this music... If you go to the guitar and try to play it, it spoils the whole thing... I just can't play the guitar that well, to get all this music together."

The double album *Electric Ladyland*, released in the U.S. in the fall of 1968, was the closest he ever got. The only album released in his lifetime over which Hendrix had complete artistic and conceptual control, *Electric Ladyland* is a sprawling but compelling self-portrait of the young artist as a seeker. He devoted an entire side to a deep-space soul suite, took the blues to Mars in the epic jam "Voodoo Chile," expanded the Experience to include guest musicians like Steve Winwood and Al Kooper and paid homage to Bob Dylan, one of his favorite songwriters, with a howling, locomotive interpretation of "All Along the Watchtower." Also, with the whooshing sound of phasing that he drenched over almost everything on the album, Hendrix tried to recreate the mental (and spiritual) otherworld where his music always first took shape.

"Jimi would suggest things in pictures," said Eddie Kramer, the British engineer who was Hendrix's studio soulmate from *Axis* on, in a 1987 interview. "He would say 'Make that slide thing sound like it's underwater.' I'd try and get something for that effect and he'd say, 'No, more like blue water.'"

With the studio trilogy of *Are You Experienced?*, *Axis: Bold as Love* and *Electric Ladyland*, Hendrix blazed new trails of expression both for the guitar and for the recording studio as an instrument in itself. But the Experience, growing frayed at the edges after over two years of non-stop work, broke up in mid-1969 and Hendrix's next recording step, a projected dou-

ble album entitled *First Rays of the New Rising Sun*, was never completed. Beset by increasing difficulties with his management, entangled financial arrangements (like the Chalpin contract) and the continuing demands by his audience for nightly reprises of his "wild man" act, Hendrix spent most of 1969 and 1970 looking for new collaborators and testing new musical directions.

There were spectacular highpoints – Hendrix's guitar fireworks treatment of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock, a vivid blast of rage and pain for a nation torn asunder by the Vietnam War; the fiery Fillmore East shows by his short-lived Band of Gypsies featuring Billy Cox and drummer Buddy Miles. One of the last songs he recorded in 1970 was

flooded record racks, many of them just cash-ins unworthy of either his name or accomplishments. (Some have been of considerable musical and historical worth: *The Cry of Love* and *Rainbow Bridge*, together comprising much of the planned *New Rays* album; *Radio One*; the recent four-CD *Stages* collection of concert performances.)

Yet Hendrix's legacy and influence continue to flourish in hard rock, jazz, heavy metal and contemporary R&B. The Seventies funk sound popularized by Parliament-Funkadelic, the Ohio Players and his old employers the Isley Brothers was a direct outgrowth of Hendrix's singular marriage of glitzy showmanship and freaky down-home soul. In the Eighties, Minneapolis *wunderkind* Prince took that fusion a few steps further,



The *Jimi Hendrix Experience*: "In Noel Redding and Mitch Mitchell, Hendrix found the perfect accomplices for his guitar attack . . . a turbulent blend of hardy soul dynamics and breathtaking acid-jazz breakaways."

the haunting ballad "Angel," written two years earlier after a dream he had about his mother. Hendrix also exhibited a growing interest in jazz, jamming with guitarist John McLaughlin, organist Larry Young and multi-reed maestro Roland Kirk. He formed a mutual admiration society with Miles Davis and was hatching a big band project with legendary jazz arranger and Davis cohort Gil Evans.

But the escalating costs of constructing his dream studio, Electric Lady in New York, forced Hendrix to undertake a series of grueling tours that lasted through the summer of 1970. The day after the official opening of Electric Lady in August, Hendrix had to leave for a European tour. He never returned.

On September 18th, 1970, Jimi Hendrix was rushed by ambulance from his London hotel to a hospital where he was pronounced dead on arrival. With no evidence to suggest either foul play or suicide, the coroner returned an open verdict and listed the cause of death as "inhalation of vomit due to barbiturate intoxication." Hendrix was twenty-seven years old. His estate was left in financial disarray and posthumous releases

creating his own best-selling variations on Hendrix's flashy sartorial style, guitar fire and steamy sexuality.

Echoes of Hendrix's blues power can be heard in the work of recent innovators like Robert Cray and the late Steve Ray Vaughan while the burgeoning black rock movement spearheaded by Living Colour has taken great inspiration from Hendrix's pivotal achievements in the re-rooting of rock & roll in the black cultural continuum. Hendrix has also endured as a songwriter; his songs have been covered over the years by artists running the gamut from Sting, Rod Stewart and Eric Clapton (with Derek and the Dominos) to the Kronos Quartet and funk hellions the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Twenty-five years ago, not long after the Monterey show, Jimi Hendrix told *Newsweek* about his plans for the future. "In five years, I want to write some plays. And some books. I want to sit on an island – my island – and listen to my beard grow. And then I'll come back and start all over again as a bee – a king bee."

He never really left. And he'll always be a king. – *David Fricke*