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## "Are You Experienced'? The Life, Music, and Legacy of Jimi Hendrix

Samuel K. Lavine  
*Gettysburg College*

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# "Are You Experienced"? The Life, Music, and Legacy of Jimi Hendrix

## Abstract

Jimi Hendrix is a household name for any fan of 60s rock music. His unique, effects-driven approach to music simultaneously revolutionized the genres of Rock and Blues. From his use of amplifier feedback, Wah Pedal, and hammer-on fingering in solos to his lyrics an outlet with which he processed his childhood, his music musicianship helped define a decade of music. He found success in England as a Black creator while African Americans continued their fight for Civil Rights back in America. England's acceptance of Blacks and love of American Blues allowed him to hone his craft in London before leaving his mark on the American music scene. As a member of the 27 Club Hendrix was lost too soon, though the legacy of his music left an immediate impression. His unique style inspired the likes of Stevie Ray Vaughn who replicated his style of music. Hendrix's musical legacy has never been in doubt, widely regarded as one of the best guitarists of all time, and ranked number one on Rolling Stone's 100 Best Guitarists of All-Time lists (Rolling Stone, 2019). Many musicians look to replicate his style and sound leading to the creation of signature model guitars and effects pedals from the likes of Fender, Gibson, and Vox. However, the image of Jimi Hendrix the person has suffered after his death. More and more his image is related to the pot-head rocker stereotype. His face often finds itself on the fronts of t-shirts featuring marijuana, some even mistakenly identifying him as Bob Marley. These images do not capture the depth of person Hendrix was, so the question must be answered: does mainstream culture really know Jimi Hendrix? How familiar are we with the Jimi Hendrix Experience?

## Keywords

Jimi Hendrix, Rock Music, 1960s, African American Studies

## Disciplines

Africana Studies | American Popular Culture

## Comments

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**‘Are You Experienced’? The Life, Music, and Legacy of Jimi Hendrix**

Samuel K. Lavine

Gettysburg College

AFS-130 Introduction to African American Studies

Dr. Ty Redden

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## Introduction

Jimi Hendrix is a household name for any fan of 60s rock music. His unique, effects-driven approach to music simultaneously revolutionized the genres of Rock and Blues. From his use of amplifier feedback, Wah Pedal, and hammer-on fingering in solos to his lyrics an outlet with which he processed his childhood, his music musicianship helped define a decade of music.

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Hendrix's musical legacy has never been in doubt, widely regarded as one of the best guitarists of all time, and ranked number one on *Rolling Stone's* 100 Best Guitarists of All-Time lists (Rolling Stone, 2019). Many musicians look to replicate his style and sound leading to the creation of signature model guitars and effects pedals from the likes of Fender, Gibson, and Vox. However, the image of Jimi Hendrix the person has suffered after his death.

More and more his image is related to the pot-head rocker stereotype. His face often finds itself on the fronts of t-shirts featuring marijuana, some even mistakenly identifying him as Bob Marley. These images do not capture the depth of person Hendrix was, so the question must be answered: does mainstream culture really know Jimi Hendrix? How familiar are we with the Jimi Hendrix Experience?

### **Before Music 1942-1962**

Born in Seattle Washington to Al and Lucille Hendrix Johnny Allen Hendrix could not have been born farther away from the swamps and Bayous from which The Blues, the style that defined his musical career was birthed. Hendrix's turbulent upbringing in Seattle is described in Steven Roby and Brad Schreiber's *Becoming Jimi Hendrix* as "The Childhood That Never Was" (Roby & Schreiber, 2010). Both of his parents were absent throughout much of his childhood. When Hendrix was born his father Al was away serving in the United States Army. Al's absence led to Lucille pursuing affairs outside of her marriage. Al and Lucille divorced in December 1951. While Al was awarded primary custody of Jimi and his younger brother Leon the two boys grew up impoverished as Al could not hold a steady job, and struggled with a gambling problem (Lawrence, 2005).

Jimi's childhood made him desperately want to leave Seattle. He found refuge at an early age with his brother Leon exploring their passion for the arts. Leon put pencil to paper while Jimi started his nearly life-long affair with the guitar. As Jimi grew older he formed bands with his schoolmates earning his stripes playing a Danelectro Silvertone guitar. During his high school years, both his teachers and his bandmates found it hard to accommodate his free-spirited nature as a student and guitarist. In 1959 Jimi Hendrix dropped out of school, and in line with his ambition to leave Seattle joined the Army (Roby & Schreiber, 2010).

Jimi Hendrix proved to be far from the ideal soldier. After basic training, he joined the famed 101st Airborne Division. He did not demonstrate an aptitude for following orders, reporting for assigned tasks, or passing inspection often opting to spend

time with his Danelectro. Despite his dereliction of duty, he did qualify as an expert marksman (Roby & Schreiber, 2010). Hendrix's time in the Army led him to his mentor in playing The Blues, Billy Cox. The two met by chance one night while Hendrix and his friends were walking back from a movie and Hendrix heard Cox playing a gig at a nearby club. The two got along well, but at times Cox worried about his lack of consistency when on stage, citing his lapses in concentration (Roby & Schreiber, 2010). Hendrix spent the rest of his enlistment playing shows with Cox throughout Tennessee (Hendrix was based in Clarksville, TN), often "ghosting" his company to work with Cox (Roby & Schreiber, 2010). By 1962 Hendrix and Cox's time together came to an end when Hendrix received his honorable discharge from the Army after breaking his ankle during a parachute jump. His time in the army at a close Hendrix set off to pursue a career in music.

### **The Journeyman Guitarist 1962-1966**

Hendrix looked to employ the skills he developed with Cox in Tennessee, and the two played together in the Southern Blues scene from 1962-1964. After two years with Cox he set his sights on New York City, the place where Frank Sinatra famously sang "If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere" and that's precisely what Hendrix wanted. His first move was to become a studio musician playing in backing bands for other artists. He first found success working for Soul Saxophonist Lennie Youngblood and is credited on three of his records that were released in early 1964. From there he worked with the Isley Brothers on five of their songs, recording in both NYC and his hometown of Seattle (Moskowitz, 2010).

Hendrix did not want to be relegated to the role of a session musician, but New York did not live up to his expectation. Harlem, some 40 years removed from its Renaissance was now

scorned by drug activity, and Hendrix struggled to find work as a solo artist (Moskowitz, 2010). Undeterred he continued his professional work as a session musician by day and in late 1964 he landed a spot with the legendary Little Richard. Hendrix spent the next year (1964-1965) playing with Little Richard's band while participating in jam sessions at clubs around NYC to hone his own craft (Moskowitz, 2010). In 1965 Jimi took his last session with Curtis Knight and the Squires shortly after which his solo career took flight.

Thanks to social connections Jimi Hendrix landed his first steady gig joining a band called The Blue Flames performing at Cafe Wha? in Greenwich Village. Hendrix received better exposure at Cafe Wha than anywhere else in his career thus far. His unique style of playing and onstage persona drew people to see him (Moskowitz, 2010). One such onlooker was Animal's bassist Bryan "Chas" Chandler who attended one of Hendrix's shows at the recommendation of his friend Linda Keith. Chandler was so taken by Hendrix that he became his manager, and eventually convinced Hendrix to make the move that defined his career to London England (Moskowitz, 2010).

### **The Jimi Hendrix Experience 1966-1970**

With \$40, a dream, and the promise of meeting Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix traveled to London (Moskowitz, 2010; Roby & Schreiber, 2010). He took the London music scene by storm his manic guitar playing floored the likes of Eric Clapton and Pete Townshend. Townshend remembers attending one of Hendrix's shows and holding hands with Clapton by the end of his set as both of the guitarists realized that Jimi Hendrix played the guitar in a way no one else could. Despite Hendrix's totally unique style, he could not perform totally alone on stage. He needed a band. With this in mind, Hendrix set out to recruit musicians from around London. Bryan Chandler, Hendrix's now manager found Jimi his bassist Noel Redding first. Shortly following his signing Hendrix played a gig with drummer John "Mitch" Mitchell and quickly hired him afterward. Hendrix stood alone as the trio's sole guitarist and the band known today as The Jimi Hendrix Experience was born (Moskowitz, 2010).

London proved to be the perfect place for Hendrix to grow as a musician. London proved much more accepting of Black artists and allowed Hendrix a safe haven an ocean away from the turmoil of the Civil Rights battle in the United States. England also had an ongoing love affair with the American style of The Blues. American Blues artist Muddy Waters found a revival of his career in the UK while legendary British rock band The Rolling Stones latched on to The Blues as their primary sound and style of music (T. Redden, personal communication, April 25, 2023).

Jimi Hendrix and 'The Experienced' rode a meteoric rise to the top of Rock music during the mid-1960s. Hendrix wrote iconic songs such as "Purple Haze" "Dolly Dagger" "Machine Gun" and "Foxy Lady" during this time. These same songs came to define his own career but also half a decade's worth of Rock Music. The legendary songs are complimented by an equally



impressive list of legendary shows that the Jimi Hendrix Experience played. They left their mark on the annals of Rock royalty playing shows at the Isle of Wight, The Monterey Pop Festival, and Wood Stock where Hendrix performed his enduring version of “The Star Spangled Banner.” Their prolific success from 1965-1970 cemented the Jimi Hendrix Experience as Rock Royalty, but it was over far too soon.

On September 18, 1970, Jimi Hendrix was pronounced dead at 12:45 p.m. He’d been found unresponsive in his London apartment earlier that day. Hendrix’s death marked him as one of the founding members of the infamous “27 Club” a group of musicians that died at that age. An investigation by London Police and an autopsy report concluded that Hendrix aspirated on his own vomit after overdosing on sleeping pills (Nolasco, 2020). The circumstances around his death remain controversial to this day. Hendrix’s death shook the Rock community, deeply affecting those close to him like Eric Clapton and Pete Townshend who the three all came to mutually admire. Despite his untimely death at 27 Jimi Hendrix only needed eight years to establish himself as the greatest guitarist of all time.

### **The Equipment of Jimi Hendrix**

Jimi Hendrix played a myriad of guitars throughout his career. From the early days of his Danelectro Silvertone and Fender Duo-Sonic to later equipment like the Gibson-built SG Custom, Flying V, and Les Paul Custom there is one guitar in Hendrix’s expansive arsenal that ruled them all (Hopkins, 2017).

Serial number 240981, a 1968 Olympic White Fender Stratocaster named Izabella proved to be the sonic weapon of choice for Jimi Hendrix (Duffy, n.d.). The same guitar he played at Wood Stock defined the sound heard on so many of Hendrix’s records. This Stratocaster is unlike many of its peers. Originally designed in 1954 the Stratocaster was not built with left-handed

players in mind. When Hendrix wanted to play Fender guitars Leo Fender (the founder/owner of Fender) needed to think quickly to allow his instrument to adapt to the needs of a player like Hendrix. Fender's solution was to flip the design of his guitar upside down, giving it the legendary "reverse headstock" design known today. This allowed the strings to be arranged in the standard tuning pattern of EADGBE while still having the low E note on the first string (Duffy, n.d.). The Stratocaster itself delivered a unique tone with a rich, low, twangy neck pickup sound that Hendrix did not stray from often. While the Stratocaster proved integral to Hendrix's sound it was only part of the puzzle.

Jim Marshall's amplifiers served as the output of choice for an impressive cohort of rock guitarists. Hendrix was no exception. He employed 100-watt amplifiers paired with 4x12 speaker cabinets to deliver his genre-defying music. Marshall's shop located in London allowed Hendrix easy access to these tools. It is reported that at one time Hendrix did experiment with amplifiers from London-based builder Orange but could not get the exact tones he desired (*The Gear of Jimi Hendrix*, 2007).

The final piece to Hendrix's sound was a small black pedal known as a Wah-Pedal. Produced by Vox it filtered what signals made it through from the guitar to the amplifier. This created the "Wah" effect that serves as its namesake. Hendrix often used this pedal in his solos, most famously when recording the intro for his 1968 hit "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)." The Wah Pedal paired with Hendrix's already innovative playing style that switched from rhythm to lead style playing (both skills he developed as a session musician) completed the tapestry of his sound.

### **A Creative Outlet: The Lyrics of Jimi Hendrix**

Most agree that what sets Hendrix's approach to The Blues and Rock is that he made the instrument the more prominent piece of his music rather than his own singing. While not widely recognized as a premier vocalist his smokey voice proved the perfect medium to deliver his lyrics. The focus of Hendrix's lyrics, when analyzed reveals his use of music as an outlet to process his childhood in Seattle. Two songs demonstrate this. The first is Angel, a piece that expressed the idolization of his mother in which he sings:

“Silver wings silhouetted against the child's sunrise and my angel said unto me today is the day you rise.”

Another song, “Anniversary” tells the story of a long-married couple, their house filled with neglected kids as the father is away because of his alcohol problem. A direct reflection of Hendrix's own experience:

“Ten years they've been married and a thousand kids run around hungry 'casue their mama's a louse daddy's down at the whiskey house.”

The scene depicted in that song calls to Hendrix's childhood defined by familial unrest because of both parents having affairs, and his father's struggle with alcohol and gambling (Roby & Schreiber, 2010).

While Hendrix did sing about his childhood, his music is a product of its time. His song “Machine Gun” is widely regarded as his most outright protest song as he sings against the ending war in Vietnam. In the intro, he uses his guitar to mimic the sounds of a machine gun firing before jumping into the hard-hitting lyrics.

“Happy New Year, first of all I hope we have about a million, or two million more of them

If we can get over this summer; hehehe I'd like to dedicate this one to, uh The draggy scene that's going on All the soldiers that are fighting in Chicago and Milwaukee and New York Oh yes, and all the soldiers fighting in Vietnam I'd like to do a thing called "Machine Gun"

The whole song expresses Hendrix's disdain for violence both back home in the U.S. and in Vietnam (*Jimi Hendrix – Machine Gun - Live at Fillmore East 1/1/70 [First Show]*, n.d.).

While many hold Jimi Hendrix in high regard almost exclusively for his skills on the guitar, equal recognition must be given to his work as a songwriter.

### **The Enduring Experience: The Legacy of Jimi Hendrix**

As stated earlier the musical legacy of Jimi Hendrix has never been in doubt. His music and sound have been immortalized since the time of his passing. In the last 20 years the very same companies that provided the instruments that gave Hendrix his distinct sound produced custom "Signature Model" guitars. Fender released a variety of Hendrix model Stratocasters featuring the iconic mirror shape of Izabella starting as early as 1990 (Brewis, 2018). Gibson too has produced replicas of his SG Custom and Flying V that are available for purchase through the Gibson Custom Shop. Vox too joined the trend when they made a to-spec version of the Wah Pedal employed by Hendrix. Modern recreations aside, there is an ever-ongoing search to track down the original guitars played by Hendrix throughout his career that are now central to the artist's mythos (Brewis, 2018).

The legacy of Jimi the person served as the topic for a number of the books cited in this paper. The cause of Hendrix's death by drugs (specifically a sleeping aid) has been interpreted in the years since his passing as Jimi being just another druggy rocker. However, Hendrix was not the God we see him as. At the time of his death, he'd been struggling with exhaustion, mental health problems, and financial issues. This culminated in the form of Hendrix struggling to sleep

at night, so he asked for a sleep aid. He died when he took too many (Nolasco, 2020). These circumstances have overshadowed who Jimi Hendrix was as a person, and that has inspired many to write books with the aim of setting the record straight.

Hendrix L.L.C. is the company responsible for managing the estate of Jimi Hendrix. Owned by family members and descendants of Jimi Hendrix since 1955 it works with companies to make the official Jimi Hendrix merchandise mentioned above. Aside from mass merchandising deals Hendrix L.L.C has also worked as the driving force behind the posthumous release of Jimi's previously unpublished work allowing for his musical legacy to live on (Moskowitz, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Jimi Hendrix helped define rock music. It is impossible to fully understand the scope of Hendrix's music and who he was as a person at face value. Due to the superficial mass perception of Hendrix his image for a time after his death suffered. Despite this recent publications look to correct that misperception. In doing so they fill in what was previously unknown about Jimi Hendrix the man, and have helped those who care to look and learn discover just who Jimi Hendrix really was.

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