

JIMI HENDRIX IN BLACK AND WHITE

He was an anomaly among white musicians and didn't resonate for many black musicians. Here's a modern look at the life and times of a man widely regarded as rock's greatest guitarist—including his complicated relationship with race, his ever-expanding place in music history, and where he might have been headed had he made it out of his 20s.

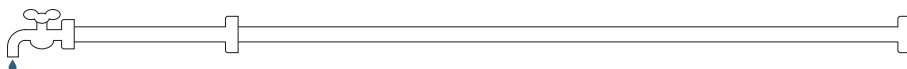
THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER

On a muggy Monday morning in August 1969, at the end of the three-day Woodstock Rock Festival in Bethel, New York, the weary crowd of about 200,000 was slowly making its way out when the headliner, Jimi Hendrix, finally hit the stage. “You can leave if y’all want to,” he said playfully. “We’re just jamming.” A few songs in, during an extended version of “Voodoo Child,” the other instruments tapered off, leaving only Hendrix’s white Fender Stratocaster ringing out over the countryside as he launched into a soulful deconstruction of “The Star-spangled Banner,” the melody interspersed with deafening feedback and distortion.

That rendition of the national anthem became the defining moment of the defining event of the 1960s counterculture movement. A little over a year later, Jimi Hendrix was dead.

PURPLE HAZE

For decades, most music writers put Hendrix alongside the Who, the Rolling Stones, Cream, and other legendary rock bands of the era. He was less likely to show up on lists that included James Brown, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Parliament-Funkadelic, and other R&B and funk acts. But in the 2010s, as U.S. racial tensions regained an intensity not seen since the late 1960s, music historians—many of them people of color—reexamined Hendrix in relation to the tumultuous times he lived in. “Jimi’s image has often been hijacked by the mainstream to paint a picture of an artist that was a pied piper for the LSD-induced flower children of the 60’s,” writes Corey Washington in the 2019 book *Jimi Hendrix - Black Legacy (A Dream Deferred)*. It turns out that race played a larger role in Hendrix’s life than most biographers have acknowledged, including his official Biography.com entry, which barely mentions his race at all and glosses over the effect being black had on his life. Case in point, under the heading “Military Service,” it reads: “In 1961, Hendrix followed in his father’s footsteps by enlisting in the United States Army.”



Five real potato chip flavors: Pastrami on Rye, Seaweed, Salted Egg, Peach Cobbler, and Cajun Squirrel.

What that bio doesn't mention is *why* Hendrix joined the army: At 19, he was arrested for being a passenger in a stolen car. The judge gave him a choice—join the army, or go to prison. That's why Hendrix enlisted, not to “follow in his father's footsteps.” According to Hendrix biographer Charles R. Cross, “What happened to Jimi would have never happened to a white male in that era. Jimi was run out of Seattle for being black.”

LITTLE WING

Born in 1942 to a 17-year-old alcoholic mother and an overbearing father, James Marshall Hendrix grew up in Seattle's impoverished Central District, which, due to segregation, was home to more than 90 percent of the city's African American population. His lineage included both enslaved people and slave owners, and his grandmother was one-quarter Cherokee Indian. While his neighborhood was primarily African American, Hendrix attended Garfield High School, one of the country's few integrated high schools. There, the school's music programs weren't divided by race—any student could play whatever they wanted. For the rest of Hendrix's life, he never understood why music had to be so divisive.

After his parents divorced, Hendrix wanted a guitar, but his father (who'd once whipped his son for being left-handed) couldn't afford one. So the lanky, soft-spoken teenager carried around a broomstick that he *pretended* was a guitar, while wearing a Flash Gordon cape. In the midst of a very unstable childhood, those were his two escapes: science fiction and the blues. When Hendrix was 15, his mother died. (She never heard her son play.) He got his first electric guitar a year later and took right to it, figuring out Elvis Presley's “Hound Dog” by ear.

Then, in 1961, came the kicked-out-of-Seattle fiasco, and Hendrix joined the army. As a paratrooper with the Screaming Eagles 101st Airborne Division in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, Private Hendrix completed 26 jumps and spent his free time listening to T-Bone Walker and Percy Mayfield records while developing his left-handed playing technique. There are conflicting stories about Hendrix's early (but honorable) discharge from the U.S. Army, ranging from a broken ankle to a litany of “behavioral problems” to getting himself labeled a “sexual deviant” so that his superiors would kick him out. Whatever went down, it's safe to say that Hendrix and the military were not a good fit. That would become a recurring theme.

DRIFTING

Hendrix landed in Nashville, living on Jefferson Street in the city's black section, where he and some army buddies started a blues group. Money was tight, but the 20-year-old's skills were getting him noticed, and he was soon picked up by a record producer named Ed Chalpin, the first of many who would try to exploit Hendrix.

“I thought they were screaming for me,” recalled Little Richard. “I look over and they’re screaming for Jimi!”

Chalpin (who specialized in recording covers of top-40 hits) signed him to a three-year recording contract with a \$1 signing bonus and a 1 percent royalty rate. But they never did record an album, and Chalpin sued after his former client became famous. The case outlived Hendrix.

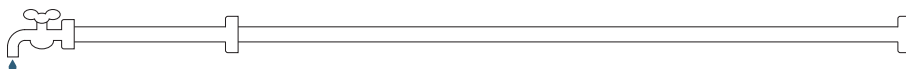
Chalpin did manage to get Hendrix some backup guitar jobs on the “Chitlin’ Circuit”—clubs and other venues friendly to black people in the Jim Crow South. Hendrix fit in at first, wearing button-down suits and keeping his hair trimmed, but he soon started making a name for himself on stage, and not in a good way. “People would scream, and I thought they were screaming for me,” recalled Little Richard years later. “I look over and they’re screaming for Jimi! He’d be playing the guitar with his teeth!”

But it was by watching acts like Little Richard, Curtis Mayfield, and Ike and Tina Turner that Hendrix learned what true stage presence looked like. The work wasn’t steady, though, especially after Little Richard fired him. “I’d get a gig once every twelfth of never,” Hendrix said in 1967. “Sleeping outside them tall tenements was hell. Rats running all across your chest, cockroaches stealing your last candy bar out of your pocket.” Musically stifled and out of money, he cut ties with Chalpin and headed north.

ELECTRIC LADYLAND

In the mid-1960s, New York City had two competing pop music scenes: Greenwich Village, a trendy folk-rock bohemia in lower Manhattan, led by Dave Van Ronk, Phil Ochs, Judy Collins, and others, including, of course, Bob Dylan; and Harlem, home of the Apollo Theater, a mecca for black R&B artists like James Brown, Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, B. B. King, the Isley Brothers, and many more. Hendrix landed in Harlem. And for a while, he was fitting in, shacking up with African American socialite Lithofayne Pridgon (who would inspire his song “Foxy Lady”). Through her, Hendrix learned about Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, and he started an R&B group called the Ghetto Fighters. “He was a very progressive person,” recalled bandmate TaharQa Aleem. “Influenced by the consciousness in Harlem, [he] caught the message and was even more attentive.” But Hendrix’s attention was focused on only one thing: his music.

After taking first place at an Apollo Theater amateur contest in 1964, Hendrix was hired as a backup player for the Isley Brothers (known for “Shout,” “Twist and Shout,” and “This Old Heart of Mine”). They invited him to live with them in New Jersey; that’s where Hendrix acquired his famous white Stratocaster, which he restrung and flipped over to play left-handed. After his stint with the Isley Brothers, Hendrix backed up Curtis Knight and the Squires. Once again, he didn’t really



Poll results: 45% of Americans believe “ghosts and demons are real.”

fit in with either group—he was always trying to do more with his guitar than was allowed. A black folk singer named Richie Havens (who would later open Woodstock) suggested to Hendrix that he check out Greenwich Village.

CROSTOWN TRAFFIC

Word quickly started spreading through the Village about a young black blues guitarist named Jimmy James. He and his band, the Blue Flames, landed a residency at the Cafe Wha? on MacDougal Street. Greenwich Village, it so happened, was a big draw for British Invasion rockers and their managers looking for new talent. Several were reportedly circling Hendrix (including the Rolling Stones' manager, Andrew Loog Oldham), but he ended up signing with the first one to make him an offer: Chas Chandler, who played bass for the Animals...until Chandler quit the Animals to manage Hendrix. So did Mike Jeffrey, the Animals' actual manager, who became Chandler's partner.

But first Hendrix had to decide if he wanted to leave New York behind. He sat in with his old band, Curtis Knight and the Squires, only to receive the same “tone it down” admonishments as before. Hendrix unplugged his guitar and announced, “That’s the last time I play this sh*t. I’m going to England.”

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED

In September 1966, three days after Hendrix, Chandler, and Jeffrey arrived in London, Chandler approached reigning British guitar god Eric Clapton at a Cream show and told him that Hendrix was a good young player and would love to join Clapton for a blues song. Clapton happily agreed. Midway through the blues standard “Killing Floor,” Clapton stormed off the stage and shouted at Chandler, “You didn’t say he was that f***ing good!”

Over the next nine months in England, Chandler and Jeffrey took control over every aspect of Hendrix’s career. They paired him with two white British musicians—bassist Noel Redding and drummer Mitch Mitchell—and called them the Jimi Hendrix Experience (which is when Jimmy became Jimi). They financed the single “Hey Joe,” a cover song that became Hendrix’s first hit. The next two singles, “The Wind Cries Mary” and “Purple Haze,” made Hendrix a star. Their debut album, *Are You Experienced*, was released in May 1967, just in time for Hendrix to make his triumphant return to America for the Summer of Love. There, he debuted a fully formed stage act that merged the showmanship of the Chitlin’ Circuit, the poetry of Greenwich Village, and the soul of Harlem. Hendrix definitely stood out, but he still wasn’t fitting in.

Did becoming the highest-paid act in rock earn Hendrix the respect he was due? Yes and no. Groove your way over to page 388 to read about Hendrix’s final three years.

Which animal is fastest when it comes to long-distance running? Humans.

JIMI HENDRIX IN BLACK AND WHITE, PART II

It's June 1967 at a concert in California. Jimi Hendrix is ready to take on the world. But can the world take Jimi Hendrix? (Part I is on page 300.)

FIRE

"I'm at the Monterey Pop Festival and all of a sudden these three guys come on stage in all these psycho-jello clothes and stuff, and they just looked incredible," said Micky Dolenz, lead singer of the Monkees. The Who had just finished their set by smashing their instruments, only to be upstaged by Hendrix, who lit his Stratocaster on fire (an idea credited to Hendrix's manager, Chas Chandler). After the concert, Dolenz convinced his TV show's producers to have the Jimi Hendrix Experience open for them on their summer tour "because they were very theatrical and *The Monkees* [were] theatrical." Hendrix wasn't sure, having once described the Monkees' music as "dishwater," but their records *were* outselling the Beatles that year. Chandler signed them on to the tour, but after half a dozen shows, Hendrix gave up trying to play over the throngs of teenage girls who wouldn't stop yelling, "We want the Monkees! We want the Monkees!" He flipped off the crowd and quit the tour.

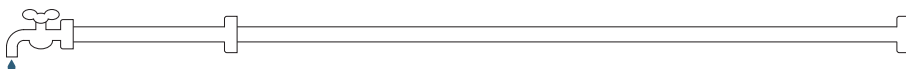
It wasn't just the teenyboppers—a lot of rock music writers didn't know what to make of Hendrix, either. Anthony DeCurtis was one of them, having seen the Experience several times that summer. "I wouldn't say the response was racist," the longtime *Rolling Stone* editor wrote in his 2015 *Medium* article, "Jimi Hendrix: Rocking the Racial Divide," "but it definitely registered on the overwhelmingly white audience that he was black, and that fact sharpened the edge of his presence."

Here was this flamboyantly dressed "negro" (a widely used term back then) with a huge afro. His bandmates were white, as were most of his girlfriends. (In 1967, it was still illegal in 17 Southern states for whites to marry non-whites.) The music press in both England and America described Hendrix in not-so-subtly racist terms—including "the Black Elvis," "Psychedelic Superspade," and "Wild Man of Borneo."

VOODOO CHILD

The reaction to Hendrix from his fellow blues-rock guitarists ranged from admiration to jealousy to outright hostility. Jeff Beck once described his relationship with Hendrix as "difficult."

"Some of their resistance to him was rooted in ego as well as race," journalist John Blake wrote in his 2014 article "How Jimi Hendrix's Race Became His 'Invisible



U.S. president who played the most golf (so far): Woodrow Wilson—about 1,200 rounds in eight years.

Legacy.’” Meanwhile, some rock critics accused Hendrix of “stealing white music” from bands like the Who, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, ignoring the fact that those bands had “borrowed” quite a bit from black American R&B artists. (Chuck Berry sang “Here come ol’ Flat Top” more than a decade before John Lennon took credit for writing it.) That isn’t to say Hendrix was fully original. He did copy Pete Townshend’s amplifier setup, T-Bone Walker’s teeth-playing, and many of Chuck Berry’s stage moves, to name a few. And Hendrix wasn’t the first guitarist to play with feedback, but he took it where no one else had before.

Looking at the response to his “Star-Spangled Banner” performance at Woodstock, Blake wrote, “Hendrix summoned the sounds of falling rockets and bursting bombs from his guitar, yet others heard something more, a black man’s protest. Hendrix played the song at the height of the Vietnam War, where black soldiers were dying in high numbers.” Woodstock wasn’t a one-off; Hendrix played his version of America’s national anthem at more than 60 shows. Each time it got a bit angrier: “Here’s a song that we was all brainwashed with, remember this oldie-but-goodie?”

CASTLES MADE OF SAND

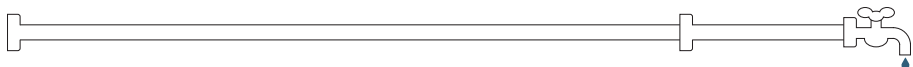
To most white rock fans, Hendrix was just another “hippie freak,” a label he did not embrace, once lamenting, “You have to be a freak in order to be different. And even freaks, they are very prejudiced. You have to have your hair long and talk in a certain way in order to be with them. And in order to be with the others, you have to have your hair short and wear ties. So we’re trying to make a third world happen, you know what I mean?”

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By the time he got to working on his third album, *Electric Ladyland*, Hendrix had begun to retreat inward, preferring writing and recording to performing. But he was becoming such a perfectionist—requiring dozens of takes, and constantly tweaking the controls on the mixing board—that his manager, Chas Chandler, thought Hendrix was losing his spontaneity, and quit. That left the Experience under the sole stewardship of Mike Jeffrey, who never had Hendrix’s best interests in mind. Over the years, Jeffrey has been accused of everything from embezzling from Hendrix to murdering him for insurance money. What is verifiable is that Jeffrey forced the Experience—the highest-paid act in rock—to tour almost constantly, and he kept most of the profits for himself.

MANIC DEPRESSION

What stung Hendrix more than anything was the refusal of black radio stations to play his songs. Still segregated at the time, white stations played rock, and black



According to biologists, domestic cats are responsible for the extinction of at least 33 species of animals.

stations played soul and R&B. (In fact, about the only way a black American was likely to hear Jimi Hendrix on the radio in the late 1960s was as a soldier in Vietnam.) Why wouldn't the stations play his music? According to Elijah C. Watson in the 2017 *OkayPlayer* article "The White Erasure and Black Reclaiming of Jimi Hendrix," black people criticized Hendrix for catering "to predominantly white audiences with white bandmates during a time of Black Power and separatism."

As John Blake wrote, Hendrix desperately wanted to "connect with blacks who had dismissed him as a musical Uncle Tom: a black man playing white man's music." Unwilling to become a civil rights speaker, Hendrix nevertheless did try to associate himself with the movement. A few days after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April 1968, Hendrix played at a tribute show for the slain civil rights leader in New York City with, among others, Buddy Guy and B. B. King. Later that year, following clashes at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Hendrix played at a benefit concert for the Chicago Seven activists who'd been charged with starting the riots. But that same year, he was booed by a mostly black audience in Seattle when he made a "triumphant return" to his hometown high school.

In September 1969, two weeks after Woodstock, at the behest of his old bandmates from the Ghetto Fighters, Hendrix played at a street fair in Harlem. "I want to show them that music is universal," he told the *New York Times* ahead of the event, "that there is no white rock or black rock." That kind of talk fared better with wide-eyed hippies; the Harlem crowd booed Hendrix and threw bottles and eggs at him as he opened with "Fire." He then dedicated "Voodoo Child" to the Black Panthers, but the crowd didn't really warm up until Hendrix played R&B songs from his days on the Chitlin' Circuit.

No matter what he tried, he still wasn't truly fitting in. "I don't want to be a clown anymore," he complained. "I don't want to be a rock and roll star."

ASTRO MAN

Retreating into his own world in 1970—one that consisted of "astronomical amounts" of LSD—Hendrix began jamming with an eclectic mix of musicians, including jazz trumpet great Miles Davis, who encouraged him to start experimenting with the "sonic possibilities." But the real world kept creeping in. In March, a *Rolling Stone* interviewer said to Hendrix, in an obvious attempt to egg him on: "One thing that's been written of Hendrix over recent months is that he's forming closer ties with black militant groups, possibly the Black Panthers."

"I heard about that, too," laughed Hendrix. "In *Rolling Stone*. Tell me all about it." Hendrix said he was in favor of equal rights "but not the aggression or violence or whatever you want to call it. I'm not for guerrilla warfare." A few months later, in what turned out to be Hendrix's final interview, he reiterated, "Music has been



Why did belt sales crash in 2020? The COVID-19 pandemic. According to an industry expert, "Nobody needs a belt when they're not wearing pants."

getting too heavy, almost to the state of unbearable. I have this one little saying, when things get too heavy just call me helium, the lightest known gas to man.”

Hendrix gave that final interview in London, where he'd gone to escape the American music industry and learn how to read music and play more instruments. There were plans in the works for him and Miles Davis to record an album with Paul McCartney on bass. What would that have sounded like? We'll never know. James Marshall Hendrix died on September 18, 1970, at age 27. The death was ruled accidental: He “aspirated his own vomit and died of asphyxia while intoxicated with barbiturates.” (There are rumors that Mike Jeffrey killed him, but nothing has ever been proven, and Jeffrey died in a plane crash three years later.)

I DON'T LIVE TODAY

Though his fame lasted barely four years, Jimi Hendrix's influence on rock 'n' roll cannot be overstated: For five decades, it's been a rite of passage for every beginning guitar player to awkwardly finger the intro to “Purple Haze.” As John Mayer once put it, “Who I am as a guitarist is defined by my failure to become Jimi Hendrix.” And not just rock but heavy metal, too: “Listening to his version of ‘Star-Spangled Banner,’” said Metallica shredder Kirk Hammett, “I thought, ‘I'm going to get a guitar.’”

Hendrix's influence on black music, though not as well documented, might in fact be stronger than it is on rock and heavy metal. “If you had to build a Mount Rushmore to black music, you have to put his face on it,” said Lamont Robinson, creator of the Official R&B Music Hall of Fame Museum, which inducted Hendrix in 2015. “It would have to go up there with Michael Jackson, Aretha Franklin—he's right there.” He's influenced giants from George Clinton to Andre 3000, from Lenny Kravitz to Frank Ocean, from Kanye West to Pharrell. A 1969 Hendrix jam session with drummer Buddy Miles and Jalal of the Last Poets—which featured the anti-war poem “Machine Gun”—has been called one of the first true rap performances. If you listen to hip-hop, then you've heard Hendrix's music sampled more than you probably realize.

PURPLE RAIN

But no artist since has been compared to Hendrix more than Prince...who never really liked that comparison, often saying, “It's only because we're both black.” (Prince maintained that he was more inspired by Carlos Santana's guitar playing.) But the fact remains that both singer-songwriter-guitar-virtuosos were genre-bending forces of nature that altered the course of popular music. And in 2004, Prince did say this: “I learned from Jimi Hendrix. They all wanted him to do the tricks, and at the end of his career, he just wanted to play. I lived longer than he did, and I can see how those pressures can really play with your head.”

Any whale that beaches itself on the shores of the UK is considered the property of the queen.