Jimi Hendrix: The Legend Essay, Research Paper

Jimi Hendrix Jimi Hendrix perhaps no other rock-and-roll trailblazer was as original or as

influential in such a short span of time as Jimi Hendrix. Widely acknowledged as one of

the most daring and inventive virtuosos in rock history, Hendrix pioneered the electric

guitar (he played a right- handed Fender Stratocaster– his “Electric Lady”–upside-down

and left- handed) as an electronic sound source capable of feedback, distortion, and a host

of other effects that could be crafted into an articulate and fluid emotional vocabulary.

And though he was on the scene as a solo artist for less than five years, Hendrix is

credited for having a profound effect on everyone from George Clinton and Miles Davis to

guitarists Stevie Ray Vaughan and Vernon Reid. Born Johnny Allen Hendrix on

November 27, 1942, Hendrix’s father, James “Al” Hendrix, later changed his son’s name to

James Marshall. Young Jimi taught himself to play the guitar during his schoolboy days in

Seattle, drawing influence from blues legends like B.B. King and Robert Johnson. He

slung his guitar over his back and left home to enlist in the 101st Division of the Air Force

(the “Screaming Eagles”), where he served as a parachute jumper until an injury led to his

discharge. Hendrix then began working as a session guitarist under the name Jimmy

James, playing behind such marquee acts as Sam Cooke, Ike and Tina Turner, and the

Isley Brothers. After gigging extensively with Little Richard in 1964, Hendrix became

entangled in a contract dispute with the mercurial artist and left to form his own band,

Jimmy James and the Blue Flames. With the exception of an obscure single, “My Diary,”

with Rosa Lee Parks, none of the music Hendrix cut with other artists was made more

remarkable by his presence. After playing Greenwich Village coffeehouses for the better

part of a year (still under the moniker Jimmy James), Hendrix encountered Chas Chandler,

of Animals fame, at a New York City club. Impressed with his playing, Chandler, who was

then looking to switch gears to management, took Hendrix to London in the fall of 1966

and masterminded the creation of the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Backed by Noel Redding

on bass and Mitch Mitchell on drums, the Experience offered Hendrix the wide-open

rock-and-roll format he needed to exercise his dazzling skills as a guitarist, singer, and

songwriter. Chandler unleashed the band on the London pop scene, and in short order,

Hendrix et al. became the talk of the town. Hendrix’s first single, “Hey Joe,” a cover of a

song written by the L.A. band the Leaves, hit the U.K. charts in early 1967, followed in

quick succession by “Purple Haze,” “The Wind Cries Mary,” and the trio’s ferocious debut

album, Are You Experienced?, which featured those tracks and the Hendrix staples “Foxy

Lady” and “Manic Depression.” Hendrix’s popularity Stateside was a bit slower in igniting,

but Are You Experienced? finally broke through in a major way after a defining moment at

the famed Monterey Pop Festival when the notoriously outlandish frontman created a

sensation by coaxing flames from his Strat during the band’s performance. The next year,

Hendrix’s eclectic psychedelia reached a zenith with two albums, Axis: Bold As Love and

Electric Ladyland–the latter ranks as one of the greatest works of the rock era. But the

experience at the top didn’t last long– Hendrix and bassist Redding grew apart, and

muddled by overindulgence in drugs and groupies, Hendrix came to

believe–wrongly–that his management was cheating him. In 1969, the Experience

disbanded. In the summer of 1969, Hendrix played Woodstock with an informal ensemble

called the Electric Sky Church, in a performance highlighted by another career-defining

moment: a startling, renegade rendition of “The Star- Spangled Banner.” Hendrix

subsequently formed the Band of Gypsys, with old Air Force friend Billy Cox on bass and

Buddy Miles (Electric Flag) on drums. The band’s New Year’s Eve concert at the Fillmore

East in New York City provided them with material for their first album, Band of Gypsys

(more material from the show was released on Band of Gypsys 2 in 1986). Hendrix

brought Mitch Mitchell back into the fold in mid-1970 to begin work on a new double

album Jimi had tentatively titled First Rays of the New Rising Sun. Several tracks were

recorded for the project, but the sessions were sandwiched between tour dates, and, sadly,

the album was left unfinished when Hendrix died September 18, 1970. The cause of death

noted on the coroner’s report was inhalation of vomit after barbiturate intoxication. In

1993, the investigation into Hendrix’s death was reopened by Scotland Yard, but when no

new evidence was unearthed, the matter was dropped. In 1971, several of the tracks

intended for First Rays were compiled and released as The Cry of Love, and the ensuing

years have witnessed a flood of releases of Hendrix tributes, books, videos, and albums,

including pre-fame barrel-scrapings of Hendrix takes from his pickup guitarist days.

Posthumous releases took on new life in the CD era. In 1994, MCA released three

Hendrix thematic compilations: one devoted to blues songs recorded between 1966 and

1970 (Jimi Hendrix: Blues), one to his live performance at Woodstock (Jimi Hendrix:

Woodstock), and a third (Voodoo Soup) that represented an attempt to recreate Hendrix’s

unfinished fourth studio album. In April of 1997, yet another attempt was made to

recreate the album Hendrix was working on at the time of his death, but this time the

project was overseen by Hendrix co-producer Eddie Kramer and historian John

McDermott–and it had the Hendrix family stamp of approval. The seventeen-track album,

First Rays of the New Rising Sun, is arguably the best assemblage of Hendrix leftovers so

far. Despite these transgressions against his nearly faultless musical legacy and attempts to

create what could have been, Hendrix’s innovations and soul live on in the playing of every

rock-and-roll guitarist.