

Earth Blues and Astral Visions: Another Side of Jimi Hendrix

“Native sons—adventurers, prophets, writers and musicians.
They were all from the North Country. Each followed their visions
...”

---Bob Dylan, Chronicles Volume One

Jimi Hendrix stated that artists can make their “own mythology”--an inner world of countervailing forces, heroes and anti-heroes. Self-proclaimed music messenger, deliverer of a new consciousness, Hendrix struggled to carry out his vision within a mass-music industry and for fans demanding the sensual freak-out performer of “Wild Thing,” playing guitar with his teeth, hip-thrusting a stack of amplifiers—the virtuoso destroying his instrument. Away from the crowds and behind the self-styled flamboyant image, there was the artist deeply absorbed in creating new avenues of expression.

More than a product of his times, Hendrix helped shape the decade of the counterculture at a time when music became this rebellious generation’s central art.

Much has been written about Hendrix's guitar innovations and recording techniques, his concerts and sex life, yet rarely has there been explored his creative and spiritual beliefs so crucial to his music. This glimpse into Hendrix's self-made mythic worlds, possibilities of changing mass consciousness through "the magic of music," sheds some light on a unique musical visionary.

Born in Seattle in November 17, 1942, Jimi Hendrix grew up in a city of mist and rains, back dropped by Elliot Bay and several mountain ranges. Raised by his father after his mother's early death, Hendrix came of age when superhero comics and 1950s B-movies entertained audiences with scenes of alien invasions and flying saucers. Cinematic scenes of Flash Gordon enticed Jim's imagination as he rode a bicycle wearing a helmet and cape. He drew sports and military battle scenes, and in grade school he made watercolor paintings—mostly of mountains and landscapes—that he accompanied with his own poetry, one work entitled Martian Sunrise.

In October 1960, Hendrix, after long periods of neglecting his studies, dropped out of high school to play professionally in a Seattle R&B groups at dancehalls and various events. Though Seattle had a thriving jazz scene, Hendrix gravitated to rhythm and blues and the blues recordings of Muddy Water, Elmore James, and B.B. King. As a youth he recalled first hearing the guitar on a Muddy Waters record, which, as Hendrix chillingly related, "scared me to death." He also liked Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Duane Eddy, and Eddie Cochran. In his study of Seattle jazz, Jackson Street After Hours, Paul Be Barros suggests that "the easy interchange in Seattle between jazz, R&B, rock, and blues—and the relaxed mixing of the races—[may have] had some subliminal influence on Hendrix's open-mindedness toward other experimental forms."

Though taken by family members to the Pentecostal church and attending Sunday school, Hendrix drifted away from established religion.¹ “There are so many different beliefs that something must be phony,” opined Hendrix later in life. Ultimately music served as the main source for spiritual consciousness. Nonetheless, he occasionally mentioned Jesus as a martyred messenger. The night before his death, Hendrix wrote his last song that some sources cite as a poem—“The Story of Life,” about Jesus’ power of resurrection and his own short earthly stay. But ultimately for Hendrix God was a spiritual force that individuals could only embrace through their own search.

Of mixed African and Cherokee heritage (as was Muddy Waters), Hendrix identified with his Native American roots. Upon visits to his paternal grandmother Nora in Vancouver, Hendrix listened to stories of her Cherokee lineage and in youth read the comic book Turok, Son of Stone, telling the story of America’s early people. Later, he read the Book of Hopi and informed British producer John Marshall that “Negroes, they think they have it bad, but Indians have it just as bad if not worse.” Hendrix’s Native-American themes surfaced in such songs as “If 6 was 9,” and “I Don’t Live Today,” which he often dedicated onstage to Native Americans. Another musical tribute emerged in the instrumental “Cherokee Mist,” a never-completed studio recording that captured his ancestor’s tribulations.

Though Hendrix rarely expressed a positive outlook towards Seattle in the media, the Central District neighborhood, where he sometimes lived and attended high school, offered ethnic diversity in a city that still practiced racial discrimination, notably in blacks finding well-paying jobs. Hendrix’s attitude toward his hometown stemmed from

¹ There is no evidence to substantiate sources that claim eight-year old Hendrix was kicked out of church for not being dressed properly.

memories of a broken home, poverty, and his mother's alcohol-related early death in 1958, after which Jimi believed her to be an angel--an image that made its way into several of his songs. Years later, Hendrix's lover Jeanette Jacobs noted: "he didn't have a happy childhood. That really stayed in his head all the time." Yet there were instances when Hendrix expressed fond memories of Seattle, once confiding to music writer Albert Goldman that "there was all kinda of soul there and Chinese, too."²

Twice brought before juvenile court for his riding in stolen cars, Hendrix avoided incarnation by joining the army in 1961, serving as a paratrooper in the 101st Airborne Division. Medically discharged after nearly a year following his enlistment,³ he embraced a musical life on the road. For several long years he struggled to make a living backing various black R&B and rock and roll acts in review-style shows. While on the road, Hendrix sought out blues music and on occasion met many of his favorite guitarists such as B.B. King and Albert King.

Hendrix came to the blues with a profound myth-making imagination, absorbing its themes of voodoo and hoodoo men, gypsy women--of mojo hands and terror-ridden souls pursued by death and the devil. Hendrix's hard life on the black music circuit and rootless wandering--themes central to the blues--made for more than imagined hardships.

After stints in Nashville and Vancouver, Hendrix moved to New York City in late 1963, where his newfound musical hero Bob Dylan had found acclaim in the folk music scene. An admirer of Dylan's lyrics, Hendrix saw in them a word-painting quality, which took inspiration from beat poetry and French symbolists poets Verlaine and Rimbaud.

² Hendrix played four concerts in Seattle. After a concert date in 1968, he spoke at his alma mater Garfield High School, where he received an honorary diploma.

Asked to explain the method or source of his more abstract lyrics, Dylan commented: “The best songs are the songs you write that you didn’t know anything about. They’re an escape.” Hendrix similarly approached his lyrics, stating that they dealt with a “clash between reality and fantasy. You have to have fantasy in order to show different sides of reality. That’s how it can bend.”

Hendrix’s admiration for Dylan did not sit well with many blacks, certainly not those he outraged when boldly requesting the playing of Dylan’s “Blowing in the Wind” at a Harlem dance spot. Witnessing first-hand this change in Hendrix’s musical direction, his one-time Harlem girlfriend, Fayne Prigeon, voiced: “I felt betrayed when he brought a Bob Dylan album home. Not only did the color of his music change, the color of his friends did, too.” But Hendrix, unrelenting bearer of his own freak flag, also discovered that in Harlem his appearance often attracted mocking stares and comments.

Though he initially stayed in Harlem, Hendrix gravitated to Greenwich Village, the longtime birthplace of many bohemian trends and the home of many modern jazzmen, and where he supposedly met Dylan at the Kettle of Fish in 1966. In the mid-sixties Village, Hendrix dressed wildly, grew his hair longer, and absorbed many artistic movements that were converging to revolutionize rock music. Increasingly dissatisfied as a back-up guitarist--with few, if any, opportunities to solo, Hendrix formed a group at the Village’s Café Wha?, where he attracted the attention of many musicians and listeners, including Animals ex-bassist turned music manager Chas Chandler, who arranged for Jimi’s striking out for new career opportunities in England.

³ Hendrix’s recent biographer, Charles R. Cross, in his book Room Full of Mirrors, has found evidence that Hendrix feigned homosexuality to receive his honorable discharge, rather than the musician’s claiming that he broke his ankle during a parachute jump.

Upon arriving in England in 1966, Hendrix formed his trio, through Chandler, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, including bassist Noel Redding and drummer Mitch Mitchell. As a solo artist Hendrix experimented musically and lyrically. Staying with Chandler, Hendrix received much guidance and shared many interests. Hendrix's brilliant studio engineer, Eddie Kramer, pointed out: "Chas Chandler was the unsung hero in the whole career of Jimi Hendrix. He was the man with the patience and fortitude to help him develop his songwriting, who gave him books on science fiction to fire his imagination, and who sat with him day after day in his apartment allowing him to be creative."

Hendrix also continued listening carefully to every newly released Dylan record. As Hendrix biographers Harry Shaprio and Caesar Glebbeek noted, Hendrix built upon "a number of Dylan key metaphors, principally the sea, the road, the rain, and themes of alienation and apocalypse." In the coming years Hendrix would perform Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," and record "Please Let Me Crawl Out of Your Window," "All Along the Watchtower," "Drifter's Escape," and Richard Manuel and Dylan's "Tears of Rage."⁴ Dylan's first hearing Hendrix's 1968 classic cover of "Along the Watch Tower" "overwhelmed" him. "He had such talent," lauded Dylan, "finding things inside a song and vigorously developing them He probably improved upon it by the spaces he was using." So impressed was Dylan by Hendrix's version of "Along the Watch Tower" that he incorporated it into the song when performing on stage years later.

Intermixed with Dylan-inspired lyrics and science fiction themes, the blues remained central to Hendrix's music, especially tales of male prowess. Just as Muddy Waters sang of being a prodigal seventh son or making "love to a woman in five minutes time," Jimi's

⁴ This 1968 home demo, made on a Teac reel to reel tape machine, has been released on the four CD collection West Coast Seattle Boy: The Jimi Hendrix Anthology, 2010.

idealized Voodoo Chile (Slight Return) boasted: “I’m standin’ next to a mountain and chop it down with the edge of my hand.”

In his interviews Hendrix differentiated between blues as a musical form or a particular sound from its common definition as a mood or feeling. In Jazz & Pop, he further emphasized: “You can have your own blues. It doesn’t mean that folk blues is the only type of blues in the world . . . Everybody has some type of blues to offer.” Similarly, Hendrix spoke of soul as the essence of a universal spirituality apart from an African-American musical style or particular racial attribute. As he told an interviewer, “Everybody has soul . . . [a] “Spanish dancer has soul and grace.”

Though Hendrix played several blues covers and composed songs based upon standard forms, he blended his blues guitar influences with experimental far eastern-sounding microtonal bends. The freedom Hendrix sought in life, he too demanded in his music. Immersed in improvisation, notably in long solo sections, Hendrix played as mood and the moment inspired; he kept no onstage set lists. He repeatedly stressed not wanting to play straight blues all night or to be billed as a blues guitarist and defied the market’s insistence on musical categorization, by saying, “It’s like shooting at a flying saucer as it tries to land without a chance to identify themselves.”

Constantly writing new material, Hendrix often feared falling into a musical rut while confronting an entertainment industry demanding mass record sales and a saleable image. Able to explore his music at a time when the new rock market had less stringent artistic control, Hendrix made great strides in a relatively short span of time, writing prolifically, taking down ideas of songs on paper and snippets of others on countless recording tapes.

Into Hendrix's music flowed ethereal imagery, often termed psychedelic. Like jazzman Sun Ra, Hendrix claimed not to have been born on earth, often telling those close to him, especially his female companions with whom he could reveal his most inner feelings, that "he was from somewhere out in space." Hendrix's German girlfriend, Monika Dannemann, recalled Hendrix having visions—that he had shaman-like powers of seeing auras and taking astral mind trips that made their way into his songs. No doubt acid trips and the drug culture impacted upon Hendrix's music, but he also related how visions came to him in a trance-like half-sleep. According to Hendrix, this was the origin of "Purple Haze," which he claimed came from "a straight dream . . . about a purple death ray," that he read about in Philip José Farmer's 1957 science fiction novel, Night of Light.

For years Hendrix carried with him The Book of Urantia, which, as biographer Charles R. Cross, writes, was an "alternative Bible for UFO believers that mixed tales of Jesus with stories of alien visitations." Songs about celestial worlds and mythic lands surfaced in titles like "Third Stone From the Sun"—a song Hendrix claimed to be about aliens who destroyed Earth after finding chickens to be the planet's "smartest" animal life. Extra-terrestrial themes were also explored in posthumously released recordings such as "South Saturn Delta" and "Valley of Neptune."

"Living in the music," a much-touted sixties phrase, described Hendrix's total immersion in his art; yet he could not ignore the racial tumult of his times and informed the media about the 1966 Watts and 1967 Detroit riots, by saying: "I don't like to see houses being burnt. But I don't have too much feeling for either side right now . . . Maybe I'll have more to say later when I get more political." Unwilling to comment on

racial unrest, he musically captured the tenor of the times in songs like “House Burning Down.”

Caught between black America and the white rock music market, Hendrix felt the critical sting of African Americans who did not relate to his music. Unfortunately, this primarily had to do with black radio stations not playing his music. Prior to the break-up of the Experience in 1969, Hendrix’s faced criticism about having two white sidemen. “The black people probably talk about us like dogs . . . until we start to play,” he confessed. “When I see some in the street, they say ‘I see you got those white boys with you . . . I try to explain about all this new music . . . Sometimes they think we’re crazy.’” Hendrix sought to reach out to his potential black audience when he performed at a United Block Association event in Harlem on September 5, 1970. Playing for free before several hundred people, most of who never had heard his music, Hendrix was reportedly approached by a man who called out, ‘Hey, brother, you better come back home.’ Forever asserting his own unique identity, Hendrix is said to have responded, “You gotta do what you do and I got to do now.”

While Hendrix privately supported groups like the Black Panthers for their community-based programs, he did not advocate violence. As an admirer of Martin Luther King and the use of non-violent resistance, Hendrix contributed \$5,000 to King’s memorial fund after the civil rights leader’s assassination in 1968; later he recorded a number entitled “MLK.”

A self-appointed messenger of peace, Hendrix became violent on occasion when, after drinking heavily, he assaulted a girlfriend or damaged a hotel room. For many unsympathetic critics, Hendrix’s onstage guitar destruction appeared a paradoxical

gesture by a musician who talked of peace. For Indian sitar master Ravi Shankar, Hendrix's destroying his guitar at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival seemed an unnecessary violent act for a musician who brought forth such beauty and passion from his instrument.

Seeing "the first rays of a new rising sun," Hendrix demanded America adopt a new national anthem. Most memorable when captured on film at the 1969 Woodstock Music and Arts Festival, Hendrix's version of "The Star Spangled Banner" was first performed below the Mason Dixon line in Columbia, Maryland. More overt signs of protest surfaced in instrumentals such as "Peace in Mississippi," and his live recorded masterpiece "Machine Gun." His song "Look over Yonder"—no doubt influenced by the blues standard "Look Over Yonder Wall"—warned in its opening lines "here come the blues," in reference to law enforcement "Wearing a blue armored coat."

Like the counterculture that embraced him, Hendrix also spoke out against the establishment and the "white collar conservative" who condemningly "pointed their plastic finger." For a self-appointed musical messenger like Hendrix, politics was in his words, an "ego scene," a false "art of words." Hendrix foresaw unrest in America as stemming from a clash between "the old and the new," and the battle between the races as masterminded by an establishment aspiring to thrive upon its violent opposition. "They make the black and white fight against each other, so they can take over each in the end," explained Hendrix. "They can get the Black Panthers fighting the hippies—who are really the young whites—then we will be right back where we started off years ago."

Meanwhile, some white critics thought Hendrix catered to his white audience through sheer volume and outlandish theatrics. Music critic Mike Christgau, reviewing the 1967

Monterey Pop Festival in Esquire, condemned Hendrix as a no-singing “Uncle Tom,” a “tailored caricature” satisfying concert-goers’ “mythic standards” by “vulgar” theatrics--burning his guitar and throwing the audience its remains. Music critic Albert Grossman admired Hendrix musically but thought he played the entertainer role of “Super Spade.” Hendrix seemed most upset by the media referring to him as “a witch doctor.” But as an international rock star there was no escaping ridicule in the press. At the same time Hendrix could take solace in musicians such as Frank Zappa who, in a 1968 Life article, lauded him as “the most revolutionary figure in today’s pop culture, musically and sociologically.”

Not long after, Hendrix informed the media about bringing about mass change through music’s spiritual power--his “Electric Church.” Called upon, as he believed, to help restore harmony in nature--he openly spoke out about “dumping garbage into the sea and . . . polluting the air”--and among earth’s troubled human community, Hendrix took on a role, much like the early avant-gardes, that placed much burden on his art. “A lot of people in America are looking for a leader in the music field and I’m trying to use my music [responsibly].” Before mass crowds, like that of Woodstock in 1969, which he referred to as “Sky Church,” Hendrix believed his music could usher in a new era.

Hendrix asserted “music is my religion.” This belief was shared by jazz drummer Elvin Jones—one of Mitch Mitchell’s musical heroes--in his stating, “Yourself is the church.” Hendrix’s friend Miles Davis, with whom he spent many hours, questioned the legitimacy of established religion, telling how he believed in spirits of the dead carried inside him. Like Hendrix’s own dream world, Miles commented that his “mind made pictures” of his dreams.

While a guest on The Tonight Show in 1970, Hendrix, in talking with guest host Flip Wilson, expressed his transcendental-like sensibility, one's need to control ego by emphasizing: "That's why you have to have some kind of eye dreams on yourself, regardless of what you are like outwardly. As long as you carry God inside yourself, you are part of him and he is part of you." This outlook, sharing much with Hinduism and Buddhism, illuminates just one aspect of Hendrix's spiritual outlook, one that, as his brilliant studio producer Edie Kramer once stated, was made of "philosophies [that] were often abstruse and not easily grasped."

After his short-lived multi-instrumental group, Gypsy, Sun, and Rainbows, showcased at Woodstock, Hendrix took another artistic path in 1969 when he formed an all-black trio, the Band of Gypsies, with his old army friend Billy Cox and drummer Buddy Miles. At this time, Hendrix's management feared his possibly moving toward militant black nationalism. As Buddy Miles asserted, "The Band of Gypsies was a strong statement from three brothers." Though distancing himself from the black power movement, Hendrix openly expressed an anti-war stance in numbers like "Machine Gun." In January 1970, The Band of Gypsies played their last show at Madison Square Garden's "Winter Festival of Peace" to raise money for the Vietnam Moratorium Committee seeking peace negotiations overseas.

Taking notice of Hendrix's new musical direction, Miles Davis commented, "[W]hen he started playing with Buddy and Billy in the Band of Gypsies, I think he brought out what he was doing all the way out." "Jimi came from the blues, like me," explained Miles. "We understood each other right away because of that. Jimi was a great blues

guitarist.” Miles quickly befriended Hendrix and in tribute entitled one of his compositions of the landmark album, Bitches Brew, “Miles Runs the Voodoo Down.”

Interested in the sounds of modern jazz (Miles claimed Hendrix liked Coltrane’s “sheets of sound”), Hendrix liked the music of bassist/composer Charles Mingus, and he jammed with several young jazzmen--guitarists John McLaughlin, Larry Coryell, organist Larry Young, drummer Tony Williams, and bassist Dave Holland. Hendrix formed a bond of mutual admiration with jazz multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk, with whom he performed at Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Club in London. Though Kirk and Hendrix wanted to record together, their collaboration never materialized. Kirk recalled that Hendrix “never got to record what he wanted to record. He was a fantastic cat.” Like Miles, Kirk considered Hendrix “a stone blues player.” According to music manager Alan Douglas, “Jimi loved [Rahsaan’s] madness and his inventiveness and magic.”⁵

In numerous interviews Hendrix informed readers about his various musical projects. As early as 1967 he intended “to write mythology stories set to music based upon a planetary thing and my imagination in general.” Similar to his making paintings in his youth and accompanying them with poetry, Hendrix hoped to create more ambitious music projects—symphonic-like ensemble works including strings, harps, and a bass-drum rhythm section--that drew upon fictional worlds. Another project, composed in sections or “pieces,” was to be based upon a cartoon character, “a cat who’s funny, who goes through all these strange scenes.” Hendrix even envisioned the conceiving of a “color machine,” in which an engineer would construct the making of electric sounds.

Hendrix was also to make a recording with Miles Davis and drummer Tony Williams, but the musicians' demand for a \$50,000 recording fee ended the project. After the Isle of Wight concert in 1970, Hendrix planned a recording of all-new material with brilliant jazz pianist/arranger Gil Evans, with the participation of Miles Davis. This instrumental guitar-and-orchestra work was to be recorded at Carnegie Hall. Years later, Evans commented: "I bought all his records and I realized what a good songwriter he was I'm always going back to Jimi's music and finding new possibilities and every time I listen to his tunes, I hear something new. That's the mark of great composer."

After nearly four years on the international music scene, Hendrix would not live long enough to pursue his ambitious projects. Premonitions of an early death haunted him. Hendrix once told his former bandleader Curtis Knight that even as a teenager, "I was much more interested in the next world than this one—because I didn't like very much the way this one is." In "6 was 9," Hendrix sang, "I'm the one that's gonna die/when it's time for me to die/so let me live life the way I want to," and in "Voodoo Chile (Slight Return)," he assured his listener, "If I don't see you no more in this world, I'll meet you in the next one, only don't be late." While Hendrix visited Morocco in 1969, a tarot card reader predicted his future by drawing the death card. A year later he informed a reporter in Denmark, "I'm not sure I will live to be twenty-eight."

Hendrix wryly commented on the possibility of an early death: "It's funny the way people love the dead. You have to die before they think you're worth anything." Even as a child, Hendrix spoke about reincarnation and the afterlife. "I think he believed in the afterlife, recalled his father, "because sometimes he'd talk about being somewhere he'd

never been before, but he'd feel like he had been there." Because of his belief in reincarnation, Jimi saw death as the soul's release from an old skin. "Your body is unimportant as one fish in the sea compared with your soul," he asserted. "I believe you live again until you have got all the evil and hatred out of the soul."

Hendrix's death from an overdose in London on September 18, 1970, shocked the rock music world. A musician who once saw Hendrix perform at Detroit's Cobo Hall expressed to this writer that "Hendrix had a conduit to another world." Whatever one believes in regard to what or who inspired Hendrix's music, it is important that he believed in mystical connections and his powers in making new myths. To become familiar with a great artist's work is one thing; to "know their mind" is quite another, and some might rightfully claim that the music speaks for itself. But as a serious artist, Hendrix did have things to say about his music in a private world that let few people get close to him. As his road manager, Jerry Stickells, posited: "I don't think he did have close friends. To everybody, he had a different side."
