

Jimi Hendrix 1942-1970

By MICHAEL LYDON

"I could sit up here all night and say thank you, thank you, thank you, you know . . . I just want to grab you, man, and just umm kiss you, but, dig, I just can't do that . . . so what I want to do, I'm going to sacrifice something right here that I really love . . . don't think I'm silly doing this, 'cause I don't think I'm losing my mind—last night, ooo whew, but, wait, wait, today I think everything is all right, you know, so I'm not losing my mind. This is just for everybody here, this is the only way I can do it, okay? . . . Don't get mad, don't get mad, no."

—Jimi Hendrix, before he burned his guitar at the Monterey Pop Festival, June, 1967.

"ROCK Star Jimi Hendrix Dead at 27"—that's what the papers said. Sad enough and true. Jimi Hendrix is dead,

he was 27, and he was a star, as brightly gorgeous a star as ever graced rock 'n' roll music.

And yet, and yet. Twenty-seven is very young to die, even for a blues singer, and Jimi Hendrix was more than a star. He was a genius black musician, a guitarist, singer, and composer of brilliantly dramatic power. He spoke in gestures as big as he could imagine and create; his willingness for adventure knew no bounds. He was wild, passionate, and abrasive, yet all his work was imbued with his personal gentleness. He was an artist extravagantly generous with his beauty.

My words do not do him justice; his own do. "I want to hear and see everything, I want to hear and see everything." "Stone free, to do as I please." "Excuse me while I kiss the sky." It does not do to read them; they must be heard as he sang them, his voice urgent, ear-

nest and humorous over his quirky rhythms while his awesomely inventive guitar splashed sound in dazzling hues.

It will be years before we know enough to know how fine an artist he was.

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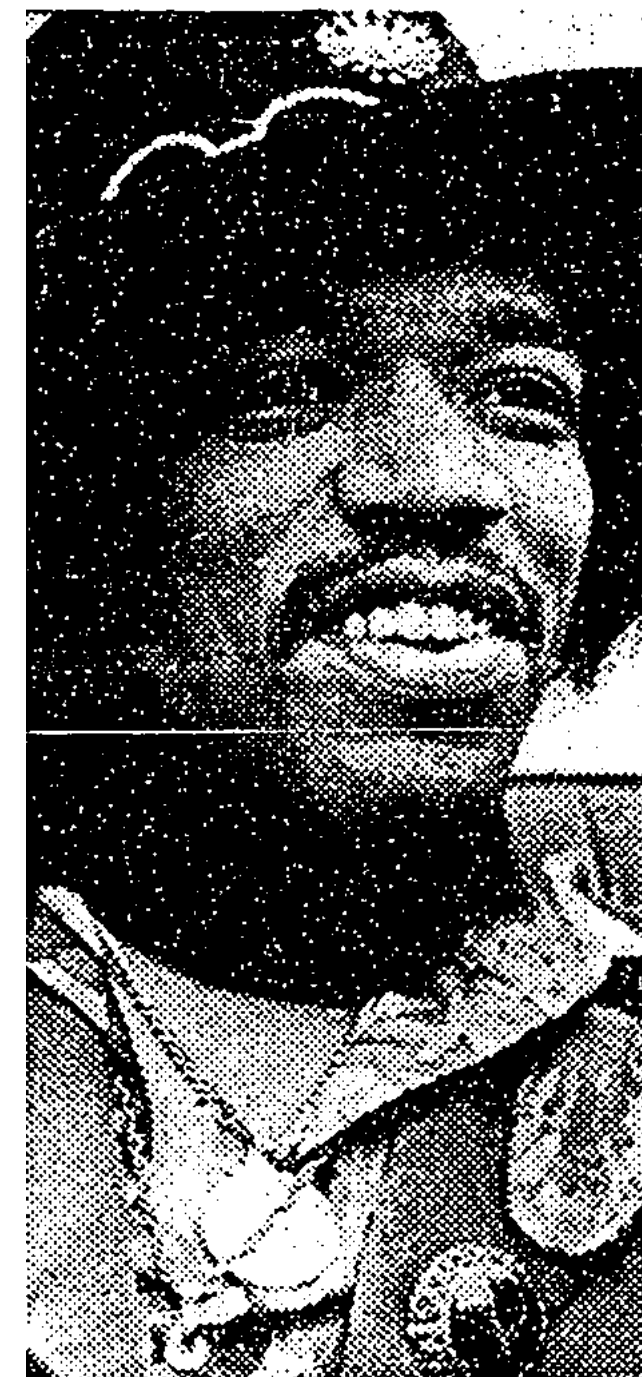
Jimi Hendrix was a blues man, perhaps the greatest of his generation. Like his predecessors in that noble line, Robert Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Otis Redding and all the rest, he was a man, proud and boldly sexual; a musician, a dedicated innovator who immeasurably widened the range of the electric guitar and a dreamer, alternately dazzled and plagued by visions he could not help but pursue.

Some say the blues are declining. The evidence is that they are the most vital art form in the world today. Each decade has brought new syntheses, each generation new leaders. Jazz has never

strayed far from its blues roots, and the blues mainstream, after successfully negotiating the move from Southern country to Northern city in the forties, took over electric music in the fifties.

Rock 'n' roll was, as everybody knew at the time, blues with a beat, created by men whose potency had wider scope than sex alone. "I'm a MAN," sang Bo Diddley, "spell it M, A, N," announcing the end of the days of black boyhood, while Chuck Berry in his zoot suit, eyes burning with liberated anger, dared to take on Beethoven. White kids, first country boys like Carl Perkins, then high school teen-agers like Bob Dylan, responded with their own blues. Then gospel singers began to sing the blues and that got called soul music. They even started "reelin' and rockin'" in England.

Jimi Hendrix was heir to



all those traditions. The first music that turned him on was Muddy Waters; he heard the Hit Parade and the Top-40 in his Seattle high school. He was in the Air Force like Johnny Cash, and he toured

with the first gospel rocker, Little Richard, and also with Ike Turner, who long before that had inspired Chuck Berry in St. Louis and even before that had signed B. B. King to his first contract in Memphis.

The black show biz world, however, had an automatic ceiling which Jimi could not accept. His friends, who are still playing the same anonymous honky tonks, advised caution, but Jimi split for New York to break the big time. Greenwich Village with its interracial underground of artists and heads was more congenial than bleak Harlem, where competition was cruel for the smallest gigs. Challenged by the freedom of Bob Dylan's imagery, he began to write his own songs, though at first he didn't dare sing them. When, in 1966, he was invited to England, where experimental black musicians have been given gratifying welcome since Duke Ellington's first visit in 1933, he accepted at once.

In six months he and his Experience (bassist Noel Redding and drummer Keith Moon) had conquered the English pop scene. Monterey

in June, 1967, was his triumphant return home. A psychedelic hootchie-kootchie man, suave in red and orange, he was magnificent, at the very edge of the believable and totally real.

His first American tour that summer (part of it on a bill below the Monkees) was not exactly a failure, but the second the following winter was a complete success. A year after the Monterey Pop Festival, Jimi was the superstar of rock, second only to the inactive Beatles, Rolling Stones, and Dylan. A dazzling stage performer, he also made masterful records: "Are You Experienced," a no-holds-barred debut; "Axis: Bold As Love," a mellow second, and "Electric Ladyland," both bluesy and surreal.

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Stardom is never an easy life, and rock stardom in the late 1960's was as tough as any created by stage or screen. A lot of people wanted pieces of Jimi for their scrapbooks. He was arrested and tried for possession of drugs in Toronto in 1969, but was acquitted. He was at the center of an energy vortex

as powerful as the music he created. The Experience faltered and broke up. Jimi experimented with several groups of musicians to get something new that worked. A few performances (one recorded) as the Band of Gypsies were the result; they were good but not good enough. Last spring The Experience came together again. At times it was brilliant, yet it too was often close to breaking up again. He and the group were resting from a European tour when he died. Friends say he had a troubled and unhappy summer.

The records are left, as well as, luckily, two superb films of him onstage—at Monterey and at Woodstock where, with a surgical and demonic precision, he gave "The Star-Spangled Banner" what it deserves.

I met him twice as a reporter; both times he was open and friendly. I would like to think his death accidental; if it was not, it is not hard to guess the strains he was under. I just wish Jimi Hendrix were alive and making music today.