

"Jimi Hendrix as Spiritual Guide"  
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### INTRODUCTION

Dennis McFann was one of those older boys that your mother told you to stay away from. He had that long hair. He played the organ in that weird band of his. He was probably into drugs, like the rest of those long-haired hippies. You stay away from that boy.

My mother was right on all counts, but, unbeknownst to her, Dennis Mc Fann was too late to be the first to corrupt me in the ways of life; my age-cohorts had already seen to that. No, he was not the Great Satan my mother assumed, but Dennis did introduce him to me.

Now, keep in mind that my eleven-years-older sister's musical tastes ran contrary to that of our working-poor parents' country music, but at least you could identify a discernable melody, understand most of the words and the band members themselves appeared to have been taught the value of personal hygiene: do-wop boys bands; Motown girls bands. (Pelvis gyrations notwithstanding, Mom even admitted that that Elvis fellow was a looker.)

Not so, the music of my youth, especially the Great Satan: a black man under an Afro, sporting frilly outfits and burning his guitar was not the kind of role model that most Appalachian progenitors had in mind for their budding adolescent offspring. Who was this man that could spirit away the ears, minds and hearts of rural white boys? Who, indeed.

This is the last of three sermons based on the lives and contributions of four African Americans: Billie Holiday, Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, and, my mother's chief adversary for her son's soul, Jimi Hendrix. Recall that I began the series by pointing out the importance of heroes to a religious tradition that has no single central figure – no Abraham, no Jesus, no Muhammad, no Lao Tsu, no Buddha. Not even a Mary Baker Eddy, Jimmy Swagart, Aimee Temple McPherson or Jerry Falwell or Tammy Faye LaValley Baker Messner. Thus, as I said in the first of these three sermons, religious liberals are both blessed and cursed: we're blessed with the freedom to choose our own heroes – women and men who exemplify things of the spirit – but cursed with the unavoidable fragmentation of having no shared, overarching story or character. And so we take from many but "own" none.

Black History Month, even for those who consider it to be nothing more than tokenism, can be opportunity to broaden our personal and *shared* pantheon of

heroes. We can draw from Billie Holiday the strength to keep trying despite heartache, from Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby the courage to overcome, and, today, take from Jimi Hendrix sheer passion

### A FOOATHOLD

Experts have debated for centuries which is more influential, heredity or environment, but what we know for sure is that getting a foothold in the early years in a human being's life is key. When Johnny Allen Hendrix entered the world on November 27, 1942 he began a lifelong struggle just to get a foothold in this world of chaos. Even his name was confusing – his mother named him Johnny Allen, but upon the death of his father's brother, Marshall, his father renamed him James Marshall.

As if a life of poverty and neglect in inner-city Seattle wasn't difficult enough, Hendrix's parents, Al and Lucille, divorced when he was nine. Hendrix was shuttled back and forth between them until 1958, when his mother died. And for the next few years he split his time living with his grandmother and his father.

You might say that music killed Jimi Hendrix, but the opposite is equally true. A five-dollar (acoustic) guitar gave him entry into a small circle of musician friends. He learned from them, but learning guitar was made more challenging by the fact that he was left-handed. His solution? Use a right-handed, electric guitar *turned upside-down*. That's passion.

You know, heroes have heroes, too. For Hendrix, they were Chuck Berry, T-Bone Walker, Little Richard, B.B. King and Elvis. They were wild and creative. They didn't just sing and play, *they performed*.

It's hard to get fired from a crappy teenage band playing their first gig – in the basement of a synagogue – but that's what just happened to Jimi Hendrix. Somewhere between the first and second sets, the other band members decided that his wild stage antics were just too much for them (and the gathered crowd) to take. He got the boot. Enter Hendrix's first formal band, The Velvetones, and an upgraded guitar to replace the one that was stolen backstage. (Some sources suggest that he painted it red and wrote the name of his junior high girlfriend across its face: Betty Jean.)

### THE "SOLDIER"

But while Hendrix the musician was progressing, Hendrix the student was not; he was expelled from Seattle's Garfield High. (He would later say that the expulsion was race-related, but school officials cited poor grades.) Whatever the reason, it set into motion two joyriding arrests and, in 1961, his induction into the army. Hendrix joined the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, in Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, but the

only impressions he left on his officers and fellow enlistees were less than stellar. He disobeyed orders, slept on duty and couldn't come close to hitting the targets on the rifle range.

The reason for Hendrix's honorable discharge is still in dispute. His commanding officers, in their official reports, cited his lack of initiative. Hendrix always said it was due to a broken ankle resulting from a parachute jump. And a third version suggests that he pretended to be in love with another soldier, forcing the army's hand. Whatever the truth at Ft. Campbell, Hendrix did gain a bass-playing friend, Billy Cox, whose military record was akin to Hendrix's.

### DUES

Keep in mind that our heroes pay their dues, too. Jimi Hendrix paid his by playing in a Nashville club house band, then touring as a backup guitarist for black artists who performed on what was called, the Chitlin Circuit. Low pay. Shabby hotels. Overt racism. And so he decided to do what Billie Holiday and a thousand other African American performers did before him: move to Harlem.

Then as now, the good Harlem gigs demand both talent and luck, but Hendrix had enough of both to work his way up to playing for the Isley Brothers, then Sam Cooke, then Little Richard. (He briefly played for Ike and Tina Turner, but was soon fired for his wild onstage behavior. That's *Ike Turner*, folks!) By 1966 Hendrix had begun to get studio jobs, many of them for rising stars in the R&B world. Between the studio work and his own band, Jimi Hendrix was making a name for himself among the music elite.

### ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

There is spiritual wisdom in that old maxim, "Be careful what you wish for; you might just get it." The Hendrix of the album covers, T-shirts and posters was a running account of a poor-but-talented Seattle kid whose wish came true. Hendrix was introduced to people who introduced him to other people, and, soon, he had been picked up by an agent who assembled a rock trio. In London. Under the influence of manager Chas Chandler, the Jimi Hendrix Experience (Hendrix, bassist Noel Redding and drummer Mitch Mitchell – both English, both white) was signed to a recording contract.

On May 12, 1967, the album "Are You Experienced?" was released in the U.K. Three songs, "Hey Joe", "Purple Haze" and "The Wind Cries Mary" all charted. The album made it to Number Two on the U.K. charts. (Number One? "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.")

By March of that year, Hendrix had begun ending live shows by smashing amplifiers and setting his guitar on fire. By June, the trio left England for their first U.S. tour. But with all his reputation for flaky behavior, it took a reference from Paul McCartney to land the band a slot at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival. With strong recommendations from other friends they had met along the way – Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Frank Zappa, and members of The Beatles and The Who – the Jimi Hendrix Experience was catching on. (This despite a brief, ill-fated tour as the opening act for The Monkees.)

The band's second album, "Axis: Bold as Love", was finished just before Christmas, 1967. After losing part of the studio master tape, a second copy was found, but the band needed *an iron* to make it playable.

But humans are not made for constant pressure. Our minds clutter, our priorities grow cloudy and our spirits grow stale. Jimi Hendrix had found this out long before making records – he was no stranger to the sex and drugs components of the "sex, drugs and rock 'n roll" paradigm – but the pressure of writing, readying and recording music was, for him, nearly unbearable. The stage outbursts and trashed hotel rooms multiplied as his record company pushed him for more recordings. Excessive sex, drugs and rock 'n roll were beginning to take their toll on Hendrix. Be careful what you wish for...

By 1968 wanted and got more control of his music as he began recording "Electric Ladyland". He had become acquainted with more and more musicians, and once he had gained full control in the studio, he began courting them to play on the new album: Steve Winwood; Al Kooper; Dave Mason; Johnny Winter; and Buddy Miles. But Hendrix was a perfectionist now that his sound was really his. Most of his previous songs were radio-friendly in terms of length, but now nearly every song included long, often psychedelic instrumental solos. His electric cover of Bob Dylan's, "All Along the Watchtower", was one of the few cuts short enough for mainstream FM airplay, but it was far too cosmic for most rock formats.

### UPS AND DOWNS

Later in 1968, Jimi Hendrix was living in London with a girlfriend, Kathy Etchingham. He worked on "Electric Ladyland", a double-album, in short, intense bursts, then would return to England for undetermined periods. This took a toll on the other two core members of his band, and bassist Noel Redding, tired of Hendrix's increasing hysteria (as well as wanting to move from bass to guitar) ended what was known as The Jimi Hendrix Experience. Their last performance was on June 29, 1969. It was marred by a mob scene and tear gas.

Hendrix was having legal problems. In order to settle a dispute with an agent, he gathered a new band and recorded "Band of Gypsies", his fourth studio album. He barely beat a drug charge in Toronto, convincing a judge that a fan must have slipped the hash and heroine into his luggage. And he continued to hemorrhage money, no matter how much he made.

And then came that Woodstock thing. The Band of Gypsies was pared down for Woodstock: just Hendrix, his old friend Billy Cox on bass, drummer Buddy Miles (and a few songs with another old friend and guitarist, Larry Lee.) They were well-received. And Hendrix's solo guitar version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" would become one of the anthems of the era.

But Hendrix continued to act bizarrely, onstage and off. By 1969 he was dependent on heroine and regularly using LSD. Hendrix formed and reformed his touring band, but that didn't slow down the frenetic pace of live performances. He played some thirty venues until the last leg of the tour, in Honolulu, August 1970.

Still there was his passion to play, no matter what. He was back on the road by the end of the month, starting a European tour. (His biographers agree that Hendrix enjoyed playing in Europe, but also agree that his American finances were in disarray. He owed back taxes, legal fees and huge loans on a shaky studio investment.) During the Denmark show, he walked off after playing just two songs. Fans wanted his hits; he was tired of playing them. The band played one more venue, in Germany, then returned to the States, where they went their separate ways.

Hendrix returned to London, but despite earning millions, he wasn't living in style. He had for years signed legal contracts without reading them. His finances were a mess. He seemed to enjoy playing in a pub or two during that short time before his death, but he seemed incoherent to his European friends.

## ENDINGS

Jimi Hendrix died in a London hotel on September 18, 1970. He had been with German girlfriend, Monika Dannemann the evening before, she, who would later take her own life, was adamant that Hendrix had accidentally overdosed on prescription sleeping pills and wine. The police reports indicated that he asphyxiated on his own vomit.

From a newswire report, October 1, 1970:

*...Rock legend Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970) is mourned at his Seattle funeral and wake...Funeral services began at 1 P.M. at the Dunlop Baptist Church...The*

*Hendrixes had requested a private funeral for friends and family only. The press and fans showed up, but respectfully stayed behind rope barriers. The Seattle police were there in case of trouble with crowd control, but the crowd remained quiet.*

*The Reverend Harold Blackburn officiated the service. A close family friend of the Hendrixes, Patronella Wright, sang spirituals, and Freddie Maye Gautier delivered the eulogy, reading the words to Jimi's song, "Angel"...*

*Jimi was laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery, in Renton, [Washington]...Jimi's mother, Lucille (1925-1958) is buried there, as is his father, James Allen Ross "Al" Hendrix (1919-2002), his grandmother, Zenora Hendrix (1884-1985) and his uncle, Frank Hendrix (1918-1986).*

*After a chorus of, "When the Saints Go Marching In", Jimi's casket was lowered into the grave. His gravestone reads: "Forever in our hearts, James M. "Jimi" Hendrix (1942-1970).*

Online photos and amateur videos give one a feel for the three-column dome under which Hendrix's body rests. One visitor's blog described it as "grandiose yet grim."

But the grim gravesite belies the fact that his work continues to echo worldwide. He's the fifth best-selling music artist of all time. His songs are downloaded and his lyrics are listed in the catalogue of nearly every Internet song lyric site. Guitarists, famous and not-so-famous, continue to copy his sound, and music aficionados continue to credit him for opening wide for African Americans the doors to commercially acceptable rock. (If there was no Hendrix, would there have been a Prince or a Lenny Kravitz?)

### THE LEGEND

So what is it in Hendrix's music that still hooks so many? Is it the melodies? Lyrics? Vocals? The guitar? Is it the diversity of styles? Sheer innovation? Or just the brilliant-but-tragic mystique of a gypsy soul that was too soon gone?

Back to my introduction, it seemed as though I were tasting some sort of forbidden fruit when Dennis McFann placed the needle on a Jimi Hendrix vinyl disc. Something raw in the music evoked something raw in me, as though I was entering some forbidden chamber – a place where darkness could be spun into words and anger could be channeled into rhythm and melody. Teenage rebellion was not only possible when Hendrix laid down the leads for "Fire" or "Machine Gun"; it was *required*. And when the tempo slowed, and the vulnerable, helter-skelter lyrics came tumbling out, there were those images of angels and birds

and sand castles. Maybe it's his palpable passion that keeps him among the world's best-selling recording artists.

My mother was right about Jimi Hendrix. He was – is – the Great Satan. He's the Great Satan *within us all*. He's our shadow put to poetry. He's our hatred laid bare. He's our fear that life may pass us by before our dreams come true. He's our craving for more, even when more is far too much. And he's our loneliness left to fend for itself, no healing salve, no redemptive Hollywood ending.

Jimi Hendrix was much more than a black rebel with an upside down guitar. He was the Great Satan in all of us, come to haunt our easy assumptions about ourselves, one another, God, social protocol and the illusion of the Protestant work ethic – the lie that happiness can be bought or earned. Hendrix was the raw in you and me.

Jimi Hendrix as spiritual guide? You bet. He's the model of passion for passion's sake. Neglected. Poverty-stricken. Lost. Confused. Hurting. Betrayed. Empty. Ill. All that pain and passion became the fuel that, when touched off by the fire of an innate, awesome talent, gave us permission to trust our gifts, even when no one else does. To trust others, even though we've been slashed and burned by life and love.

So, yes, Jimi Hendrix as spiritual guide.

And wherever you are, bless you, Dennis McFann. Bless you for turning me onto the passionate, wounded hippie who could shake our souls awake with his music.