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JIMI HENDRIX AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF POPULAR MUSIC

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Aaron Lefkovitz
The City Colleges of Chicago
Chicago, IL, USA

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CHAPTER 1

Jimi Hendrix—Gypsy Eyes, Voodoo Child, and Countercultural Symbol

Abstract Focusing on Jimi Hendrix's relationships with the transnational politics of race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, visual culture, and popular music, this chapter notes ways Hendrix, living during the tumultuous 1960s countercultural era of upheaval, occupies a singular place in the histories of popular music. Highlighting Hendrix's early years in Seattle and ascent to becoming one of rock music's pre-eminent musicians, this chapter highlights Hendrix's links to racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes proliferating in US and transnational visual cultures and locates Hendrix in legacies of black-face minstrelsy, US and international "freak show" traditions, and black popular music's global roots. Connecting Hendrix to other black-transnational male icons as a world-historical artist-activist, this chapter emphasizes ways Hendrix, as a prominent recording artist, musical pioneer, and politicized and historical figure, relates to categories of racial, gender, sexual, class, and national difference.

Keywords Gypsy • Voodoo • Counterculture • Rhythm and Blues

Transversing US, UK, and transnational racial hierarchies, with strong desires to demarcate, surveil, enforce, and police-fixed racial borders, as a partly colored, racially interstitial being and extra-terrestrial racial, gender, sexual, and popular musical other, political, cultural, and transnational

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border crosser Jimi Hendrix (1942–1970), rock guitarist, singer, and songwriter, highlights dominant political-cultural categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, nation, visual culture, and popular music in his mid-twentieth-century transnational biography. Hendrix's "freakish" appearance and performances, centrality to racial visual-cultural stereotypes, legacies of threatening and non-threatening black-transnational masculinities, the 1960s counterculture, US mythologies of popular musical exceptionalism, and transgression of hegemonic US cultural Cold War practices privilege an entertainer, symbol, and political-cultural figure who mastered the electric guitar, composed tender rock songs, and occupied an out-of-place yet "in-between" position in US and transnational popular cultures.

A musical pioneer and experimenter, taking rock music to radical and unique places, Hendrix fused jazz, blues, and soul with British avant-garde rock to dramatically redefine the electric guitar's expressive potential and sonic palette. Though his career as a featured artist lasted only four years, Hendrix altered popular music's trajectory and became one of the 1960s countercultural era's most influential musicians. Hendrix composed a classic repertoire of rock songs, from ferocious compositions to delicate, complex ballads. An exotic, racialized "freak" whose appeal linked white hippies and black revolutionaries by masking black anger with the colorful costumes of London's Carnaby Street, Hendrix came to epitomize this area and its iconic heritage as the birthplace of 1960s "swinging London," the home of mods, skinheads, punks, new romantics, and twenty-first-century street styles, and the epicenter of culture and lifestyle in London's West End.

A US Army paratrooper during the military's nascent desegregation period,[1] unable to conform to militaristic rigidity, Hendrix had an unorthodox style and predilection for playing at a high volume. Self-taught, Hendrix absorbed the recorded legacy of Southern-blues practitioners. Joining R&B[2] bands and touring revues, the experience and stagecraft Hendrix gained during this formative period was a major factor in his development. Hendrix spent years on the road with Little Richard (1932–), the flamboyant R&B singer, songwriter, and pianist whose mid-1950s hit songs were defining moments in rock and roll's maturation,[3] the Isley Brothers, an R&B and rock band that began recording in the late 1950s and continued to have hit records in the 1960s and 1970s, and King Curtis (1934–1971), a saxophone virtuoso known for R&B, rock and roll, blues, funk, soul, and soul jazz. A bandleader, band member, and session musician, Curtis was also a musi-

cal director and record producer. Adept at tenor, alto, and soprano saxophone, Curtis was best known for his distinctive riffs and solos, heard on such songs as "Yakety Yak" (1958).

Hendrix was engaged as a backing guitarist by Little Richard when, during a 1963 Southern tour, he met blues guitarist Albert King, who taught him the technique of bending notes, reworking music's intentionality, and repositioning popular music as a bridge between cultivated and vernacular cultures. Hendrix toured with singer Solomon Burke (1940–2010), whose early 1960s success in merging the African-American church's gospel style with R&B helped usher in the soul-music era, The Supremes, the pop-soul vocal group whose tremendous popularity with a broad audience made its members among the 1960s' most successful performers and Motown Records'[4] flagship act, the husband-and-wife team of Ike and Tina Turner, considered one of the hottest, most durable, and explosive R&B ensembles, and B.B. King (1925–2015), guitarist and singer who was a principal figure in the blues' development and from whose style leading popular musicians drew inspiration.

Hendrix also backed the Impressions, an African-American group formed in 1958 whose repertoire included doo-wop,[5] gospel, soul, and R&B, and Sam Cooke (1931–1964), singer, songwriter, producer, and entrepreneur. Cooke was a major figure in popular music histories and one of the most influential post-World War II black vocalists, along with Ray Charles (1930–2004), pianist, singer, composer, bandleader, and a leading black-transnational entertainer billed as "the Genius," credited with the early development of soul music, a style based on a melding of gospel, R&B, and jazz.[6] While Charles represented soul at its most raw, Cooke symbolized soul's "sweetness," with "disciples" ranging from Smokey Robinson to James Taylor and Michael Jackson.[7]

Hendrix also performed with the Valentinos, a Cleveland, Ohio-based family R&B group, famous for launching the careers of brothers Bobby and Cecil Womack. The former brother found more fame as a solo artist while the latter found success as a member of the husband-and-wife team of Womack & Womack with Linda Cooke. During their 22-year career, the group was known for such R&B hits as "Lookin' for a Love," covered by the J. Geils Band and later a solo hit for Bobby Womack, and "It's All Over Now," covered by the Rolling Stones.

In Chicago, Hendrix visited the Chess recording studios, a company founded in 1950 and specializing in blues and R&B. Over time, it expanded into soul, gospel, early rock and roll, and occasional jazz and

comedy recordings, released on the Chess, Checker, Argo, and Cadet labels. Founded and run by Leonard and Phil Chess, Jewish immigrant brothers from Poland, the company produced and released many singles and albums central to rock music. Chess has been described as the US's greatest blues label, for whom such musicians as Muddy Waters (1913?–1983), the dynamic blues guitarist and singer who played a major role in creating post-World War II electric blues, recorded. Hendrix had hands-on experience in the political-cultural worlds in which black popular music developed, while greatly admiring the work of "white bluesmen" Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and Yardbirds, a 1960s British group best known for their inventive conversion of R&B into rock. Original members included Eric Clapton, a highly influential rock musician who later became a major singer-songwriter, Keith Relf, Chris Dreja, Jim McCarty, Paul Samwell-Smith, and Anthony ("Top") Topham, with later members including Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page, the British musician, songwriter, and record producer who achieved transnational success as the guitarist and founder of the rock band Led Zeppelin.

In late 1965, Hendrix moved to Greenwich Village, the area that, beginning in the early twentieth century and especially since the early 1950s Beat movement,[8] had been a mecca for creative radicals from all over the US, including artists, poets, jazz musicians, and guitar-playing folk and blues singers. In coffee houses like Cafe Wha? on MacDougal Street and Gerde's Folk City at 11 West 4th Street, such singers as Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and Fred Neil played for a few dollars to small crowds, discovering which songs worked and what to say between them. In Greenwich Village, Hendrix connected with white folk-rock musicians, played blues, rock and roll, Dylan's songs, and won the admiration of the Rolling Stones, Dylan's guitarist, and legendary jazz producer and talent scout John Hammond (1910–1987), promoter, music critic, crusader for racial integration in the music business, and regarded as the most important non-musician in jazz histories, who promoted major popular music figures, from Count Basie and Billie Holiday in the 1930s to Bruce Springsteen during the rock era (and who engaged Hendrix to play lead guitar in Dylan's group). "All Along the Watchtower," Hendrix's only US Top 20 hit, restated Dylan's song, and Dylan adopted Hendrix's interpretation when performing it live on his 1974 tour.[9]

In search of more receptive audiences, Hendrix arrived in London in September 1966. His new unit, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, made its

debut the following month in the French town of Évreux, between Paris and the English Channel. On returning to England, The Jimi Hendrix Experience began a string of club engagements attracting pop's "aristocracy," including Pete Townshend (1945–), British singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist, best known as the lead guitarist, backing vocalist, and main songwriter for the rock band The Who. Townshend's career with The Who spans over 50 years, during which time the band grew to be among the 1960s' and 1970s' most popular and influential bands, originating the "rock opera" subgenre. Adapting late 1966 London's musical and clothing fashions, Hendrix could soon match The Who at their high-volume, guitar-smashing game. Hendrix, with his racial, gender, and sexual difference, compounded and magnified The Who's instrumental destruction, onstage aggression, and youthful defiance with his exoticism, transforming Hendrix from a virtuoso guitarist to a world-historical symbol inhabiting various degrees of extra-musical significance. In popular musical, racial, gender, and sexual terms, Hendrix contrasted with The Who in terms of the hyper-sexuality of his performances (feigning oral sex on the guitar) and his own racialized sexuality, making his sexualized performances all the more exotic, provocative, and seemingly confrontational.

The hottest ticket in town, The Jimi Hendrix Experience became the opening act for the British rock trio Cream, whose guitarist Eric Clapton was impressed with Hendrix's playing. As Mitch Mitchell's drumming provided a foundation for the band's debut and first Top Ten single, the understated, resonant "Hey Joe" (1966), Mitchell's jazz-inflected rhythms complemented Hendrix's guitar playing on the group's first album, *Are You Experienced?* (1967), notably on the tracks "Manic Depression" and "Third Stone from the Sun." Hendrix amazed London's club culture with his instrumental virtuosity and extroverted showmanship, even as he was aware of the popular musical and racial roots on which his cutting-edge rock was based. *Are You Experienced?* rivaled the influence of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), the eighth studio album by the British rock band the Beatles.

Featuring the blues of "Red House" and funk of "Fire" and "Foxy Lady," *Are You Experienced?* was a commercial and critical success, spending 27 weeks at the top of the UK album charts and 15 weeks at number one in the US. Lauded by critics for its innovations in musical production, songwriting, and graphic design, *Are You Experienced?* bridged a divide between popular music and legitimate art and provided a musical

expression of the countercultural generation, denoting a type of self-expression and individuality in somber and psychedelic tones, contrasting with some of the more idealistic and rose-colored sounds heard in the US. *Are You Experienced?* was notable for its unusual sound effects, which Hendrix devised with his recording engineer. These included building up multiple tracks on four-track equipment, the manipulation of tape speeds, mixing down of some material played backwards, use of controlled feedback, phase shifting, Fuzz Face and Cry Baby sound-effect pedals, and special effects achieved through the manipulation of the tremolo arm and toggle switch controlling the pickups' selection and combination.

As The Jimi Hendrix Experience enjoyed reverent audiences, Hendrix's second album, *Axis: Bold as Love* (1967), was characterized by more imagistic lyrics, refined song structures, and complex, skillful arrangements, creating soulful rhythm and melody from the multi-tracking of guitar parts. *Axis: Bold as Love* revealed a new lyrical capability, notably in the title track, the jazz-influenced "Up from the Skies," and the frequently covered "Little Wing," a delicate love song featuring unhurried guitar splashes with a gentle perspective, echoing Hendrix's shy and unassuming offstage demeanor. Released in December 1967, the collection put a capstone on an artistic and commercially successful year, as Hendrix increased his popularity in the UK, with the BBC's Radio 1 providing an official outlet for the newly arrived artist's creativity.

Gaining transnational attention, Hendrix's innovative guitar techniques strongly affected other musicians. When the expatriate Hendrix made his triumphant US return with *Are You Experienced?*, he merged UK pop psychedelia, R&B, Dylan, and Cream into a rock and roll amalgam. Few in the rock scene looked or sounded like The Jimi Hendrix Experience and its musical and cultural experimentations and exchanges. As Hendrix flew to California for his scene-stealing appearance at the legendary 1967 Monterey International Pop Music Festival, rendering him a sensation in the US, in his hard-rock band, Hendrix extended his rhythmic virtuosity to include the intimate blues of John Lee Hooker (1917–2001), African-American singer-guitarist and one of the most distinctive electric blues artists; Dylan's lyrical poetry; the Beatles' hallucinatory studio fantasias; and the improvisational skills of John Coltrane (1926–1967), jazz saxophonist, bandleader, composer, and iconic figure.[10] At Monterey, Hendrix's sensational performance was the event's highlight. A musical, visual, racial, gender, and sexual spectacle, Hendrix's performance culminated in a sequence that saw him playing the guitar with his teeth and then burning the instrument with

lighter fuel. Defining Hendrix as an artist and appearing on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine twice, the photograph of Hendrix burning his guitar at Monterey became one of rock and roll's most powerful images and contributed to the caricature of Hendrix as a racialized "freak" whose performative spectacles contributed to his perceived racial, gender, and sexual exoticism.[11]

At the iconic 1969 Woodstock Festival, Hendrix performed one of the twentieth century's most explicit popular musical protests. In his solo performance of the US national anthem, a militaristic composition continuing to stir controversy into the twenty-first century, as National Football League players "take a knee" during its playing to protest continued US white supremacy in the criminal justice system and other spheres, Hendrix bent notes and offered a variety of distortions and embellishments, deconstructing this sacred nationalistic song while the Vietnam War raged and counterculture pervaded US college campuses and culture more broadly, all the while inserting "Taps," a bugle call played at dusk, during flag ceremonies, and at military funerals by the US Armed Forces, with the official military version played by a single bugle or trumpet, in a kind of memorial to the fallen US troops in Southeast Asia.

During Hendrix's US tour, his controversial performances provided him with enough exposure to facilitate his transnational rise. By 1968, Hendrix was involved in group improvisations with New York jazz musicians and expressed an interest in playing with Miles Davis (1926–1991), the African-American jazz trumpeter who, as a bandleader and composer, was one of the major influences on the genre from the late 1940s and whose fusion of jazz and rock showed the influences of Hendrix's funky rhythms and colorful textures.[12] The last official Jimi Hendrix Experience album, *Electric Ladyland*, was released in October 1968. This extravagant double set has been recognized as a major work, featuring a succession of virtuoso performances. *Electric Ladyland* revealed Hendrix's desire to expand the increasingly limiting trio format. Contributions from members of Traffic and Jefferson Airplane, a psychedelic rock band best known for its hallucinogenic titles, harmonies, political lyrics, and an important standard-bearer for the 1960s counterculture, elaborated several selections. As he continued to search for new equipment and effects experimentations, *Electric Ladyland* contains some of Hendrix's most highly developed psychedelic music, featuring profuse soundscapes. Hendrix continually changed his programs to find a more sophisticated, black "electric church music."

Hendrix had an idiosyncratic and compelling vocal style, a form of heightened speech with roots in blues and soul. His revolutionary guitar techniques and innovative use of the recording studio as a compositional tool, forecasting such groups as Pink Floyd and others, had a great impact on rock music. Due to the ways his songs and instrumental numbers are not easily separated from his individualized style, Hendrix's repertoire has been infrequently recorded by other musicians. More superlatives have been given to Hendrix than any other rock guitarist. These include a rock immortal, one of the greatest rockers the world has ever known, rock's most gifted and inventive guitarist, one of music's most influential figures, who brought an unparalleled vision to the art of playing electric guitar, and one of the foremost innovators of popular music.

Hendrix illuminates histories of the electric guitar, an iconic instrument with a profound impact on popular music and culture.[13] The electric guitar became a transnational symbol of freedom, danger, rebellion, and hedonism. Its histories include inventors, iconoclasts, scam artists, prodigies, and mythologizers. With landmark guitars functioning as artistic milestones, some of the twentieth century's most significant political-cultural movements became indebted to the electric guitar. The instrument was an element in the fight for racial equality in the entertainment industry, a reflection of the rise of the teenager as a political-cultural force, and a linchpin of punk's sound and ethos. In addition to Hendrix, electric-guitar histories include those artists bringing some of the earliest electric-guitar forms to the limelight, such as Jack White of The White Stripes, Annie Clark (aka St. Vincent), and Dan Auerbach of The Black Keys. Figures in the electric guitar's development also include Leo Fender (1909–1991), US inventor and manufacturer of electronic musical instruments, whose innovations helped transform the guitar into a dynamic sound machine; Les Paul (1915–2009), jazz and country guitarist and inventor; Keith Richards (1943–), British guitarist, singer, songwriter, and author, best known as a founding member of the Rolling Stones and credited with composing rock's greatest single body of riffs on guitar; Carlos Santana (1947–), Mexican-born guitarist whose popular music combined rock, jazz, blues, and Afro-Cuban rhythms; Eddie Van Halen (1955–), Dutch-American songwriter, producer, best known as the lead guitarist, occasional keyboardist, and co-founder of the US hard-rock band Van Halen, and considered one of the most influential guitarists in rock music histories; and Steve Vai (1960–), a highly individualistic guitarist, composer, singer, songwriter, and producer, touring with the live-only act the

Experience Hendrix tour, and part of a generation of heavy rock and metal virtuosi who came to the fore in the 1980s.

Hendrix influenced musicians of all ages, as countless guitarists imitated his technique, few mastered it, and none matched him as an inspirational player. The electric guitar in Hendrix's hands was transformed into an extension of his body. The sounds Hendrix created were loud, sustained, and full-textured, with much use of expressive timbral nuances, though they had a basic toughness. Along with his concept of "electric church music" (intended to wash people's souls and give them a new direction), Hendrix wished to be remembered as not just another guitar player. A left-hander who took a right-handed Fender Stratocaster and played it upside down, Hendrix's theatrical style included sexual undulations and showman tricks, such as playing the guitar with his teeth and behind his back. Hendrix pioneered the use of the guitar as an electronic sound source. Players before him experimented with feedback and distortion, but Hendrix turned those and other effects into a controlled, fluid vocabulary.

Emblematic of 1960s countercultural ideologies and political aesthetics, Hendrix was simultaneously a member of the "Flower Power" and Black Power movements, in opposition to the Vietnam War and controversially supporting the New York Panther 21, a group of 21 Black Panther members who were arrested and accused of planning coordinated bombing and long-range rifle attacks on two police stations and an education office in New York City. Hendrix's work provides a source of inspiration to successive generations of musicians to whom he remains a touchstone for emotional honesty, technological innovation, and an all-inclusive vision of universal brotherhood.

Audacious and lyrical, Hendrix's fluency on electric guitar was without equal. As his way with words paralleled his music, Hendrix brought new perspectives to each style he performed, from blues to pop and psychedelia. Hendrix displayed a clarity in his musical thinking as his vision moved beyond his trio's confines. Hendrix was one of the 1960s' most significant political-cultural figures, a psychedelic Gypsy and "Voodoo child" who spewed clouds of distortion and marijuana smoke, playing on while subverting the racial, gender, and sexual caricatures that historically constrained black-transnational musicians. While he unleashed noise with uncanny mastery in the hard-rock riffs of "Crosstown Traffic" (1968), Hendrix created such tender ballads as "The Wind Cries Mary" (1967) and "Angel" (1971). Though Hendrix

did not consider himself a good singer, his vocals were nearly as evocative as his guitar playing.

Hendrix's studio craft and virtuosity with conventional and unconventional guitar sounds were widely imitated. His songs inspired tribute albums and have been recorded by a jazz group (*Hendrix Project* [1989]) and the Kronos String Quartet, a group based in San Francisco, in existence, with a rotating membership, for over 40 years, and specializing in contemporary classical music. Hendrix had a profound effect on the psychedelia, funk, outrageous stage shows, and personas of Sly Stone, songwriter, social satirist, and bandleader most famous for his role as frontman for Sly and the Family Stone, a band that played a critical role in soul, funk, rock, and psychedelia's development in the 1960s and 1970s; George Clinton (1941–), singer, songwriter, bandleader, and record producer whose band, Parliament-Funkadelic, developed a form of funk music during the 1970s and early 1980s termed P-Funk; and OutKast, a rap duo formed in 1992 that put Atlanta, Georgia on the hip hop map and redefined the G-Funk (a variation of gangsta rap) and Dirty South (an often profane hip hop form that emerged in the South) styles with their strong melodies, intricate lyrics, and positive messages.

In addition to his virtuosic guitar playing, gifted songwriting, ahead-of-his-time attention to studio production, and electric stage presence, Hendrix was an icon representing his tumultuous era. In the decades since Hendrix's death, pop stars evoked Hendrix's look, style, and countercultural political aesthetics. This includes long-haired, leather-clad Rick James (1948–2004), the US musician and singer who wrote such classic funk hits as "Super Freak" (1981), known for his sexually explicit lyrics, beats, and a wild offstage lifestyle; Prince (1958–2016), singer, songwriter, producer, dancer, and performer on guitar, keyboards, drums, and bass, who was among the most talented US musicians of his generation; Lenny Kravitz (1964–), singer, songwriter, actor, and record producer whose "retro" style incorporates elements of rock, blues, soul, R&B, funk, jazz, reggae, hard rock, psychedelia, pop, folk, and ballads; and Erykah Badu (1971–), an R&B singer whose "neo-soul" vocals drew comparisons with jazz legend Billie Holiday.

A racialized "freak," part of a legacy of black-transnational popular musicians reinforcing and subverting racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes, Hendrix's political-cultural meanings, sexual mystery, and scientific explorations in the field of sound can be addressed from historical, political, and popular musical perspectives. A man who, despite his popular

appeal, has not made it into the pantheon of twentieth-century black-transnational figures, before hip hop became popular with white suburban youths, Hendrix transversed a segregated world to emerge as an icon for white fans. A perfectionist and brilliant composer whose imaginative sound effects were limited only by equipment, Hendrix was an African-American artist under pressure from radical black groups because his audience was predominantly white. Revolutionizing the use of technology in popular music, controversies and mythologies surround Hendrix and his music's racial authenticity. Marketed as a white performer with sex appeal, especially for black women, as Hendrix redefined rock fashion, the lack of concern over his sleeping with white women contrasted with Sammy Davis, Jr. (1925–1990), the African-American singer, dancer, and entertainer who was harassed and threatened for kissing a white woman onstage.

Part of Hendrix's contested racial authenticity politics include the ways his songs were not heard on black radio and that some black people viewed him as a hippie "Uncle Tom," due to his perceived acquiescence to a mostly white-dominated counterculture and refusal to infuse an explicit anti-racism and identifiably black political aesthetic into his repertoire and public statements. During his career, Hendrix was judged by many as a fraud and sellout, his blackness rendering his music as inauthentically rock, while his music rendered his person as inauthentically black. The "Uncle Tom" insult stems from abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). In this anti-slavery, religious-themed novel, Stowe foregrounds the representative character of Uncle Tom, a dutiful, long-suffering servant faithful to his white master. A pro-slavery stooge and scorned figure in US culture, with ramifications into the twenty-first century, the eponymous, desexualized, and pious protagonist of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* influenced racialized roles in film and on television. The "black-on-black" "Uncle Tom" insult denotes African-Americans' subservience to whites, betrayal of other African-Americans, and that the "Uncle Tom" has been complicit in his own racial subjection.[14]

In addition to his relationships with the Black Power movement, Hendrix electrified soul music and made the electric guitar supplant the human voice. Hendrix subverted and destabilized black-transnational racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes and changed the ways black music and racial identities were perceived. Contestations abound over the degree of Hendrix's authentic blackness, multiple racial meanings, fixed and fluid gender identities, hetero-normativity, and sexual mysteries. Adored by whites, Hendrix exerted an ongoing hold on his audience through his