

Rolling Stone



The Legend of Jimi Hendrix

In 1966, he arrived in London an unknown. A week later, he was a superstar

By CHARLES R. CROSS

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Jimi Hendrix took his first footsteps on British soil on Saturday, September 24th, 1966, arriving at Heathrow at nine in the morning. As he walked off the plane, he carried a small bag that contained a change of clothes, his pink plastic hair curlers and a jar of Valderma cream for the acne that still marred his twenty-three-year-old face. These few items, along with his precious guitar, were all he owned.

Escorting Jimi was Chas Chandler, formerly the bassist for the Animals, who was launching himself as a manager. Chandler had come upon Jimi in a Greenwich Village club and spilled a milkshake on himself, convinced that Jimi was his ticket to riches. Jimi was penniless at the time, having spent the previous three years as a backup musician on the chitlin circuit. Though Jimi had been born in Seattle, and didn't even begin to play guitar until he was fifteen, by the time Chandler met him he had already toured the nation with countless R&B combos, including Little Richard and the Isley Brothers. In Greenwich Village, fueled by both LSD and Bob Dylan's Blonde on Blonde, Jimi was attempting to re-create himself as a solo act. He was playing to twenty teenagers when Chandler arrived, yet Jimi still only agreed to follow him to England if he promised to introduce him to Eric Clapton.

Once in England, Chandler immediately set out to turn Jimi into a star. On the way from the airport, they stopped by the house of bandleader Zoot Money. Jimi attempted to play his Stratocaster through Money's stereo, and when that failed, he grabbed an acoustic guitar and began to wail. Andy Summers, who a dozen years later would help form the Police, lived in the basement and heard the commotion. When he came upstairs to join the informal party and found himself mesmerized by how Jimi's huge hands seemed at one with the instrument's neck, he became the first of Britain's guitar players to be awed by Jimi's phenomenal skill.

Also rooming in the house was twenty-year-old Kathy Etchingham, who would soon also be smitten by Jimi. She worked as a part-time DJ and had dated Brian Jones, Keith Moon and a few other rock stars. Money's wife tried to wake her to tell her about the new sensation in the living room. She said, "Wake up, Kathy. You've got to come and see this guy Chas has brought back. He looks like the Wild Man of Borneo." The tag would later end up as one of Jimi's nicknames in the tabloids, a consequence of his unkempt physical appearance and his race, both of which were so unusual on London's music scene that he might as well have been a new anthropological discovery. The name was racist, of course, and the description would never have been used for a white musician. Still, Jimi enjoyed the nickname, as it sounded mysterious and foreign, qualities he hoped to cultivate.

Etchingham was too tired to take a peek at the so-called wild man, but later that evening she went for a drink at a club and discovered Jimi onstage. As he started to play blues tunes, the club

went silent and the crowd watched in a sort of shared rapture. "He was just amazing," Etchingam recalled. "People had never seen anything like it." Eric Burdon of the Animals was one of the many musicians at the club that night. "It was haunting how good he was," Burdon said. "You just stopped and watched."

Walking out of the club, Jimi -- unaware that British cars drove on the left side of the street -- stepped in front of a taxi. "I managed to grab him and pull him back, and the taxi just brushed him," Etchingam said. Later, Jimi asked her to come to bed with him. She found him charming and handsome, and consented. They would stay together for the next two years, and Etchingam would be one of Jimi's longest-term girlfriends. She knew everyone on the scene, and she became his entree into Swinging London and friendships with the Who, the Rolling Stones and many other bands.

Jimi had been in England less than twenty-four hours and he'd already wowed a key segment of London's music scene, bedded his first English "bird" and narrowly avoided death. He had spent twenty-three years of his life struggling in an America where black musicians were outcasts within rock music. In one single day in London, his entire life had permanently been recast.

Chas Chandler's partner was Michael Jeffrey, the Animals' manager and a former British intelligence officer who did little to defuse sinister rumors that he had killed people as a spy. They placed a "musicians wanted" ad in *Melody Maker*, which drew in a twenty-year-old guitar player named Noel Redding. He had never before played bass, but Jimi liked Redding's frizzy hair, which reminded him of Dylan, and he was hired.

Even after Redding was hired, Chandler phoned Brian Auger, who led the blues-based jazz band the Brian Auger Trinity, and proposed a radical idea. "I've got this really amazing guitar player from America," Chandler told him. "I think it would be perfect if he fronted your band." Auger declined. As a fallback, Chandler asked if Jimi could at least jam with the Trinity at a show that evening. To this, Auger agreed.

(Footnote – Jimi ultimately played about 20 dates with Brian Auger's Trinity)

The Trinity's guitarist, Vic Briggs, was setting up his gear when Jimi came onstage. Briggs was using one of the first Marshall amplifiers, an experimental model that had four six-inch speakers -- smaller than the later Marshall stacks but still capable of tremendous power. When Jimi plugged his guitar into the amp, he turned the amplifier volume knobs to their maximum, much to Briggs' amazement. "I had never had the controls up past five," Briggs said. Seeing Briggs' look of horror, Jimi said, "Don't worry, man, I turned it down on the guitar." He shouted out four chords and began.

The sound was a wall of feedback and distortion, which itself was enough to turn every head in the club; the moment also marked the beginning of Jimi's love affair with Marshall amplifiers. "Everyone's jaw dropped to the floor," Auger said. "The difference between him and a lot of the English guitar players like Clapton, Jeff Beck and Alvin Lee was that you could still tell what the influences were in Clapton's and Beck's playing. There were a lot of B.B. King, Albert King and Freddie King followers around in England. But Jimi wasn't following anyone -- he was playing something new."

Just a week after Jimi landed in England, Cream were playing a show at the Polytechnic in central London. Chandler bumped into Clapton a few days before and told him he'd like to introduce Jimi sometime. Meeting Clapton, of course, was the one promise Chandler had made to Jimi before they left New York. Clapton mentioned the Polytechnic gig and suggested Chandler bring his protege. In all likelihood, Clapton meant he would be glad simply to meet Jimi, but Jimi nonetheless arrived with his guitar. Chandler, Jimi and their girlfriends stood in the audience during the first half of the show, and Chandler called up to the stage and summoned Clapton over to ask if Jimi might jam. The request was so preposterous that no one in Cream -- Clapton, Jack

Bruce or Ginger Baker -- knew quite what to say: No one had ever asked to jam with them before; most would have been too intimidated by their reputation as the best band in Britain. Bruce finally said, "Sure, he can plug into my bass amp."

Jimi plugged his guitar into a spare channel and immediately began Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor." "I'd grown up around Eric, and I knew what a fan he was of Albert King, who had a slow version of that song," recalled press agent Tony Garland, who was at the show. "When Jimi started his take, though, it was about three times as fast as Albert King's version, and you could see Eric's jaw drop -- he didn't know what was going to come next." Remembering the show later, Clapton said, "I thought, 'My God, this is like Buddy Guy on acid.' "

When Bruce told his version of the fabled event, he focused on Clapton's reaction and alluded to graffiti in London that proclaimed, "Clapton is God." "It must have been difficult for Eric to handle," Bruce said, "because [Eric] was 'God,' and this unknown person comes along and burns." Jeff Beck was in the audience that night, and he, too, took warning from Jimi's performance. "Even if it was crap -- and it wasn't -- it got to the press," Beck later said. Jimi had been in London for eight days and he had already met God, and burned him.

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