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## 'Room Full of Mirrors': Six-String Revolutionary

By BEN SISARIO

IN a celebrated essay, Greil Marcus compared 77 rock 'n' roll deaths of the 1970's and ranked them according to an only half-sarcastic calculus of the deceased's musical value and manner of death. The winner was Jimi Hendrix. Actually, in overall score Hendrix tied Ronnie Van Zant of Lynyrd Skynyrd, whose end in a plane crash was more theatrical than Hendrix's inhalation of vomit. But Hendrix got perfect scores in the two measures of musical significance: past and future contributions.

It would be difficult to overstate Hendrix's influence on rock in the 1960's and 70's. The arrival of his volcanic, bottomlessly sensual guitar playing was one of the seismic events of rock in that era. The music that followed his debut in England in 1966 includes Led Zeppelin, the heaviest sounds of Cream and the Who, and the whole of heavy metal; by comparison, everything before him sounds like Herman's Hermits.

Hendrix's place in the age of Jack White is less certain. Nobody plays like him anymore; his last real disciple was probably J Mascis of Dinosaur Jr., whose extended, tantrumlike solos suggested a Hendrix turned nervously inward. And while books on the master continue to pour forth, they feel increasingly specialized. ("Jimi Hendrix: Electric Gypsy," by Harry Shapiro and Caesar Glebbeek, has 234 pages of appendixes, including 22 on his guitars.)

But in a lovingly researched new biography, Charles R. Cross puts a new focus on Hendrix's childhood, revealing a lifelong psychic wound that left him, to his death at 27, seeking the love and stability he never got as a boy -- from his absent, dissolute mother, who died when he was 15, or from his harsh and equally remote father.

If Cross's Hendrix bears a resemblance to Kurt Cobain, it can't be wholly coincidental. Cross, a dogged music journalist from the Pacific Northwest, chronicled Cobain's lost-childhood traumas in the painfully revealing "[Heavier Than Heaven](#)," and he applies the same rigorous and sympathetic reporting techniques here. He conducted some 325 interviews, he says, and reconstructs in pungent detail the poverty -- financial and emotional -- of Hendrix's youth in Seattle. His parents, possibly alcoholic, had six children; four were given up for adoption or placed in foster care. The young Jimi, enduring squalid homes and a chronically empty stomach, dreamed of outer space and strummed air guitar on a broom, leaving a trail of straws.

Like Cobain, Hendrix had a hardscrabble apprenticeship that ended suddenly with gigantic fame. After a stint in the Army (he faked being gay to get out), he worked the chitlin circuit, hopping from one tour bus to the other when his various employers -- Little Richard, Solomon Burke, Otis Redding -- tired of his unrestrained guitar antics. Then on Aug. 3, 1966, Chas Chandler, the bassist of the Animals and a fledgling impresario, saw him play "Hey Joe" at the Cafe Wha? in Greenwich Village. Chandler spilled a milkshake on himself.

Spirited off to England seven weeks later, Hendrix started turning heads at jam sessions within hours of his arrival. Soon he had a band, and in some of the book's most entertaining passages, mobs of the biggest British rock stars of the era line up for humbling. During one early gig attended by John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend, Jimmy Page, Jeff Beck and others, the singer Terry Reid ran into Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones outside the bathroom. Jones told him it was all wet up front. What? "It's wet from all the guitar players crying," Jones said.

Cross is trading in twice-told rock tales here, and his narrative sometimes sags under their weight. What lifts it are his attempts to understand Hendrix's psychology, a challenge considering the purple haze of most of his recorded comments. (A typical one from 1967: "I want to write mythology stories set to music based on a planetary thing.")

As his fame exploded, Hendrix spent his days in musical, sexual and chemical escape: recording all day, jamming all night, accompanied always by an endless supply of drugs and sex. More than one woman tells of coming into his room to find him with five or more lovers already in his bed. Exhaustion became his regular state, and in his last days he desperately went from woman to woman, proposing to one, a Danish model named Kirsten Nefer, days after he met her, and hours after he downed a handful of sleeping pills. "I'm so fed up with playing," he told her. "I'm so sick of burning my guitar."

Hendrix frequently lashed out at people, but Cross, in prose that is often credulous and workmanlike, fails to see the significance of his aggression. Could it be that his not-so-infrequent drunken outbursts were, along with the violence in his guitar, his only means of expressing frustration?

As he did with Cobain, Cross ties Hendrix's emotional malnutrition as a child to his inability to cope with fame as an adult, leading to constant longing and disappointment. A few months before he died, Hendrix the superstar came through Seattle on tour and had a Rosebud moment. Driving past the hospital where his mother had died, he searched in vain for her grave. Then he came to a run-down, vacant house where he had lived as a boy and spent countless hours playing the broomstick. Going up to the window, "he put his hands around his eyes," Cross writes, "pressed his face against the glass, and peered into the shadows, as if he were searching for something he had lost."

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