

**Dionysian Symbolism in the Music and Performance Practice of Jimi Hendrix**

**Christian Botta**

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## Dionysian Symbolism in the Music and Performance Practice of Jimi Hendrix

### Introduction

Jimi Hendrix is considered by many to be the most innovative and influential electric guitarist in history. As a performer and musician, his resume is so complete that there is a tendency to sit back and marvel at it: virtuoso player, sonic innovator, hit songwriter, wild stage performer, outrageous dresser, sex symbol, and even sensitive guy. But there is also a tendency, possibly because of his overwhelming image, to fail to dig deeper into the music, as Rob Van der Blik has pointed out.<sup>1</sup> In this study, we will look at Hendrix's music, his performance practice, and its relationship to the mythology that has grown up around him.

Excellent analytical work has been done in the field of popular musical studies, but coverage of Hendrix has been limited. This is possibly because analysis of his music is somewhat difficult, as it combines elements of rock, psychedelia, blues, R&B, and soul. In Albin Zak's penetrating and extensive article on Hendrix's cover of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower," for example, Hendrix shares the focus of analytical attention with Dylan, and only one song is discussed.<sup>2</sup> Nicole Biamonte's invaluable study of rock harmony includes several references to Hendrix, yet only one original song is briefly analyzed, "Voodoo Child (Slight Return)."<sup>3</sup> Somewhat revealingly, in terms of Hendrix's stature, he makes numerous cameos in Walter Everett's *The Beatles as*

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Van der Blik, "The Hendrix chord: blues, flexible pitch relationships, and self-standing harmony," *Popular Music*, Vol. 26/2 (2007), 343.

<sup>2</sup> Albin J. Zak III, "Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix: Juxtaposition and Transformation "All along the Watchtower," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Fall 2004), 599-644.

<sup>3</sup> Nicole Biamonte, "Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music," *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2010), 103.

*Musicians*.<sup>4</sup> Some good work has also been done by Sheila Whiteley and Matthew Brown.<sup>5</sup> In this study, I will attempt to add to this exemplary but small list, if possible.

As stated above, the Jimi Hendrix myth to some degree obfuscates a deeper understanding of his actual music. However, I feel that an examination of the myth is in order, as well. Why does the story of Jimi Hendrix, his virtuosity, his race, his clothes, his childhood, and his untimely death resonate so much for so many people? I propose that there is a very old myth in place already, and through some confluence of timing, personality, and happenstance, Hendrix's legend took on mythical proportions. I believe that on an important level, Hendrix is a Dionysian figure, and through his music, performance, and even elements of his life story, a Dionysian aura comes into play in the expansion of his myth.

One of Hendrix's signature songs was recorded in two completely different versions on his third album, *Electric Ladyland*. Both versions of the song, "Voodoo Chile/Voodoo Child (Slight Return)," have Dionysian imagery in their lyrics, and interestingly, the album opens with a spoken word/instrumental entitled, "And The Gods Made Love." In the opening monologue of *The Bacchae*,<sup>6</sup> Dionysus describes his identity as the son of Zeus and a mortal. "I am Dionysus, son of Zeus. My mother was Semele, daughter of Cadmus; I was delivered from her womb by the fire of a lightning flash." The lyrics to "Voodoo Chile" are strikingly similar:

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Everett, *The Beatles As Musicians: "Revolver" through the "Anthology"* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Sheila Whiteley, "Progressive Rock and Psychedelic Coding in the Work of Jimi Hendrix," *Popular Music*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Jan., 1990), 37-60; Matthew Brown, "'Little Wing': A Study in Musical Cognition." *In Understanding Rock*, Ed. Covach and Boone, 155-69 (New York: Oxford University Press), 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Euripides, *The Bacchae*, trans. Philip Vellacott, in *Euripides: The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 181-228 (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1961, orig. ed. 1954).

**Example 1, Jimi Hendrix, “Voodoo Chile,” (1968), first verse**

Well, the night I was born  
Lord I swear the moon turned a fire red  
My poor mother cried out the gypsy was right  
And I seen her fall down right dead

“Voodoo Child (Slight Return)” closes the album, and continues the theme with Hendrix now a fully grown being with magic/God-like powers:

**Example 2, Jimi Hendrix, “Voodoo Child (Slight Return), verse one**

Well, I’m standing next to a mountain  
Chop it down, with the edge of my hand  
Well, I pick up all the pieces and make an island  
Might even raise a little sand

Both versions of the song are rooted in blues traditions. The lyrical theme of a mystical, pre-ordained birth used in “Voodoo Chile” can be found in Muddy Waters’s “Hootchie Cootchie Man,” while the underlying riff of “Voodoo Child” is based on the music of Waters’s “Rolling Stone.” But Dionysus’s statement shows that the trope of the ‘fire and lightning’ birth goes back much further than the blues.

The idea that Hendrix or other artists of the sixties were influenced by or identified with the Dionysian is hardly new. In fact, there was quite a bit of Dionysian soul-searching going on during the sixties, and afterwards. John Carlevale’s “Dionysus Now: Dionysian Myth-History in the Sixties,” explores these currents in the literature, theatre, and public commentary of the day. He states that, “During the 1960s and immediately after, Dionysus and the Dionysian were frequently pressed into service as a metaphor or conceptualization of perceived crises – and not only within the narrow circle

of professional classicists.”<sup>7</sup> As evidence of this trend, he points out that two high profile productions of Euripides’ *The Bacchae*, the Greek tragedy that most prominently features the god Dionysus, were produced during the late sixties. We will return to *The Bacchae* in our discussion to reflect the Dionysian in aspects of Hendrix’s career and reputation.

No examination of Dionysian currents can be put forward without confronting the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose first book, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* focuses on Dionysus and his philosophical conflict with Apollo.<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche forms an important part of the frame through which we will examine Jimi Hendrix in Dionysian terms, in an effort to shed light on Hendrix and his music, and hopefully, to learn something new about him. In Nietzsche’s first book, he had very specific ideas about what was Dionysian and what was not. He defined both politics and program music, two elements which are relevant to our discussion regarding Hendrix, to be non-Dionysian. Later in his life, when he wrote his own response to the *Birth of Tragedy*, entitled, *Attempt at Self-Criticism*, Nietzsche reconsidered some of his earlier work. He has one especially relevant question, asking, “what would a music have to be like that would no longer be of romantic origin, like German music – but *Dionysian*?”<sup>9</sup> I will attempt to show that despite some elements of politics and program music in Hendrix, some of his songs and much of his performance practice are Dionysian.

To add perspective to this argument, I will call on the work of two philologists who have focused on Dionysus and Greek religion, Carl Kerényi and Walter F. Otto.

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<sup>7</sup> John Carlevale, “Dionysus Now: Dionysian Myth-History in the Sixties,” *Arion*, Third Series, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Fall, 2005), 77.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, 1872, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann, 1-144 (New York: The Modern Library, 1992, orig. ed. 1966).

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Attempt at Self-Criticism*, 1886, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 25.

Kerenyi is the author of numerous books including *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*.<sup>10</sup> He bases some of his work on that of Otto, author of *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*.<sup>11</sup> Kerenyi's work adds an historical dimension to this study, while Otto provides an interpretation which is concerned more with the origins of the Dionysian myth and much less with its connection to tragedy than Nietzsche.

The crux of our investigation will focus on the following three areas – Hendrix's appearances at the rock festivals at Monterey in 1967 and at Woodstock in 1969, a discussion of the "Hendrix Chord," or 7#9 chord, and an analysis of the song "Machine Gun," from the last album that Hendrix personally approved, *Band of Gypsies*. Chapter One, 'Festivals,' looks at an important part of the worship of Dionysus as it relates to Hendrix. Dionysus was worshipped at festivals in ancient Greece, where tragedy was also performed and reached its zenith. Hendrix was a dynamic, extroverted performer who excelled at playing in front of large crowds. His performances at the large rock festivals of the 1960s were iconic, myth-making events that added directly to his legend. These performances included Hendrix's burning his guitar at Monterey, an action that resembles *sparagmos*, the tearing apart of man or beast in the Dionysian myth, and his playing of the "Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock, which helped to establish a lasting impression of his image, despite the fact that he played at the very end of the festival before a dwindling crowd.

Chapter Two, 'The Hendrix Chord,' is a discussion of an essential element in Hendrix's compositional style that helped him to create a highly individual and

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<sup>10</sup> Carl Kerenyi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>11</sup> Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, trans. Robert B. Palmer (Indiana University Press, 1965).

immediately recognizable sound. Hendrix used the sharp nine or 7#9 chord, in many of his songs. This has been acknowledged by musicians to the degree that the chord has come to be known as the “Hendrix Chord.”<sup>12</sup> This is one of the few theoretical areas of Hendrix’s music that has been examined in depth, yet there is still room for another viewpoint. In the discussion below, we will look at the chord from theoretical perspectives, but we will also try to understand what the chord means on an emotional level. In relation to the Dionysian, the sound of the chord, which has an aggressive, volatile emotional content, symbolizes the wrath that Dionysus displays towards wayward followers and the madness that he incites in them. Another aspect of the 7#9 that we will discuss is the chord’s relationship to the blues. This has ramifications for Dionysus, as well, because he is a “suffering” god.<sup>13</sup>

Chapter Three contains an analysis of one of Hendrix’s signature songs, “Machine Gun.” “Explicitly anti-war,”<sup>14</sup> it is a genuine artifact of the sixties, recorded live and seemingly frozen in time. It includes improvisations that can never replicated, and does not exist in any comparable studio form. A version from an earlier set in the band’s two-night, four-set stand pales in comparison, sounding under-rehearsed and uninspired. Because the concerts were being recorded, however, it was important for Hendrix to get it right. During the final performance, he stood almost completely still and executed the tune with incredible concentration. The promoter Bill Graham recalled chiding Hendrix before the last concert for showboating during one of the earlier sets. “What followed, with respect to Carlos and Eric and all those others,” Graham said, “was the most

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<sup>12</sup> Van der Blik, 343.

<sup>13</sup> Otto, 103.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, *Crosstown Traffic: Jimi Hendrix and the Post-War Rock ‘n’ Roll Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), 54.

brilliant, emotional display of virtuoso electric guitar playing I have ever heard. I don't expect ever to hear such sustained brilliance in an hour and fifteen minutes. He just stood there, did nothing, just played and played and played."<sup>15</sup> There are others who feel that this song is among Hendrix's greatest performances.

"Machine Gun" is over twelve minutes long with a spooky, exotic sound and includes a remarkable display of feedback and sound effects. Because of the song's use of simulated battle sounds, I will examine it in terms of passages from *The Birth of Tragedy* that discuss program music, a style popularized in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that Nietzsche and his inspiration, Arthur Schopenhauer, disdained. I will also discuss the song in terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*, applying some of his recommendations for creating drama and art in general to account for the dramatic quality of the piece, and for the Dionysian implications of that piece for tragedy.

As Bill Graham was witness to during the Band of Gypsies last set at the Fillmore, Hendrix was seemingly able to 'turn it on' at will. Many have commented on his awe-inspiring guitar skills, and this brings up an issue that requires a leap of faith for the reader. When thinking of the Dionysian, one must remember that we are thinking of religion. An element of the supernatural is at play. It can also be thought of as magic. Walter Otto explains that "there is, to be sure, a mental attitude which we are completely justified in calling 'magical.' It draws all of its power from subjectivity and is aware that it can affect men and things in astonishing ways by a mysterious concentration of the total faculties of the heart and soul."<sup>16</sup> There will be times in the analysis of Hendrix's

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<sup>15</sup> Harry Shapiro, and Caesar Glebbeek, *Jimi Hendrix: Electric Gypsy* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1995, orig. ed. 1990), 407.

<sup>16</sup> Otto, 35.

guitar playing that an idea of the magical is invoked. This is because his peers genuinely thought of him in this way. Pete Townshend, the leader of The Who and a highly innovative and exciting guitarist in his own right, was one of Hendrix's biggest fans, and in effect, a follower. Here he speaks about his experience seeing Hendrix play, which he did many times:

Seeing him in the flesh it became clear that he was more than a great musician. He was a shaman, and it looked as if glittering colored light emanated from the ends of his long, elegant fingers as he played. When I went to see Jimi play, I didn't do acid, smoke grass, or drink, so I can accurately report that he worked miracles with the right-handed Fender Stratocaster that he played upside down.<sup>17</sup>

As one can see from reading the above, Hendrix's marvelous playing was his main draw, and it inspired a kind of religious awe in many spectators, including his peers. His use of feedback, which we will discuss below, and his many other sonic and physical tricks, such as playing the guitar with his teeth, were never fully mastered by any single musician who came after him. For this reason and because of accounts such as Townshend's, at times I will ascribe a certain 'magical' element to Hendrix's performance which has Dionysian implications.

For various reasons, we will forego an obvious avenue of discussion within the realm of the Dionysian as it pertains to Hendrix, namely his personal drug use. This topic is far too complex and would be better served in another forum, although the issue of the destructive attraction between musicians and drugs, whether it regards psychology, creativity, sociological implications, or any other issue, certainly merits research. So, despite some easy Dionysian points that might be made, we will leave the probing of the

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<sup>17</sup> Pete Townshend, *Who I Am* (New York: Harper, 2012), 108.

facts that Hendrix did on occasion drink tequila for breakfast<sup>18</sup> and was arrested for drunkenly destroying a hotel room in Sweden to the rock journalists.<sup>19</sup>

Before we move on to the main issues of this paper, a few brief lines are in order to give some background on Hendrix's life. There are several good biographies available on Hendrix, notably the ones by Charles R. Cross<sup>20</sup> and Harry Shapiro and Caesar Glebbeek, which have been a great help in the writing of this essay. But surprisingly, there is still room for something more exhaustive and perhaps more lucid.

Jimi Hendrix was born James Marshall Hendrix in Seattle, Washington on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942. His parents split up when he was still in his teens, and around this time he also started playing the guitar. After being arrested for riding in a stolen car, he joined the army in 1961 to avoid jail time.<sup>21</sup> Upon leaving the army he spent several years as a sideman on the Chitlin Circuit in the U.S., and eventually found his way to New York City, where in 1966 he was discovered by Chas Chandler (1938-1996), the former bassist for the British group The Animals, playing in small clubs, and desperate for a break. Chandler took Hendrix to London and helped him form the Jimi Hendrix Experience with Mitch Mitchell (1947-2008) on drums and Noel Redding (1945-2003) on bass. Chandler produced the group's early singles and first album *Are You Experienced?* (1967) before anyone in the U.S. had seen Hendrix perform solo outside of a small club or venue. After stunning the British underground rock scene, The Jimi Hendrix Experience was invited to play at the Monterey Pop festival. The Experience's

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<sup>18</sup> Sheila Weller, "Jimi Hendrix: I Don't Want to be a Clown Anymore," *Rolling Stone*, November 16, 1969, in *Hendrix on Hendrix*, ed. Steven Roby (Chicago Review Press, 2012), 230.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Roby, 85.

<sup>20</sup> Charles R. Cross, *Roomful of Mirrors* (New York: Hyperion, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

three albums were all successful, with *Axis Bold As Love* (1967) and *Electric Ladyland* (1968) making many new fans. But after touring incessantly, the group broke up in 1969, and Hendrix was left to play Woodstock in August with a rag tag group that nonetheless included an overworked Mitchell on drums and old friend Billy Cox (b. 1941) on bass. To fulfill a contractual obligation, Hendrix formed the Band of Gypsys with Cox and drummer Buddy Miles (1947-2008) and recorded an eponymous live album at the Fillmore East on New Year's Eve, 1969/70. By that time Hendrix was tired and disillusioned from incessant touring and heavy drug use. He continued to play constantly however, and was in and out of recording studios till the very end. He was working on an album with the working title, *Gypsy, Sun and Rainbows* that included all his best post-Experience material up to when he died in London on September 18, 1970 after choking on vomit from an accidental overdose of sleeping pills. The music was eventually released in 1971 as *The Cry of Love*.

Ultimately, there is a heroic nature to Hendrix's story that draws us in, including his rise from an impoverished home, to itinerant sideman, to the toast of London, but his spirit is mainly expressed personally, through his music. Zak describes it eloquently in his description of Hendrix's cover of "All Along the Watchtower." "If the two approaching riders in the song's lyrics represent uncertainty, if the wind and the wildcat represent danger, if the businessmen are the world's agents of betrayal, and if claustrophobic confusion threatens to undermine his will, Hendrix boldly pits his musical power against it all."<sup>22</sup> In the following, we will discuss some of Hendrix's key songs in

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<sup>22</sup> Zak, 630.

an effort to understand how they work and to show that his extraordinary life has Dionysian parallels.

## Chapter One – Hendrix at the Monterey Pop and Woodstock Festivals

In ancient Greece, festivals were held in honor of the god Dionysus, the most important of which was held in Athens and became known as the Great Dionysia. The Greeks themselves used the word ‘Dionysian’ to describe these festivals, “at which they did or experienced the things that were most in keeping with the god celebrated.”<sup>23</sup> These ‘Dionysian things’ included a ritual in which the queen was joined to Dionysus in a symbolic, divine marriage. Another event was a drinking contest, where each round was punctuated by the playing of a salpinx, a trumpet-like instrument also used to summon Dionysus to the festival.<sup>24</sup> One of the most notorious practices, ritual sacrifice, was also part of the festival, and included the killing of a bull by a priest.<sup>25</sup> The festivals were also the occasion for civic functions, and ceremonies were held in the theatre before the plays that included political and military leaders from Athens and their allies, as well, who brought tributes which were put on display, as noted by Simon Goldhill.<sup>26</sup>

Still, what some many consider the most significant aspect of the festivals is what Goldhill calls the “entertainment,” and that is what is most relevant to *our* discussion.<sup>27</sup> Erica Simon writes that the Athenians of the archaic period were ardent spectators, as evidenced by illustrations appearing on vases and other artworks that include pictures of spectators watching the action.<sup>28</sup> She adds that the “element of contest, so characteristic of the Greeks, was a further reason for the constant increase in the number of spectators

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<sup>23</sup> Kerenyi, 134.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 311-312.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>26</sup> Simon Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 107 (1987), 85.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Erica Simon, *The Ancient Theatre*, trans. C.E. Vafopoulou-Richardson (London: Methuen, 1982), 4.

in the theatre.”<sup>29</sup> These festivals provided a model for our rock festivals, and connections can be made between the Great Dionysia, with its classical Greek theatre, and the large rock festivals of the 1960s, with their ‘classic rock.’

Two milestones in Hendrix’s career are his appearances at the Monterey Pop Festival in Northern California on June 18, 1967, and the Woodstock Music Festival in Bethel, New York on August 18, 1969. The period of Hendrix’s greatest fame began at the Monterey Pop Festival, where he started his American career with an image-making performance in which he ended his set by burning and smashing his guitar. Rock festivals were an iconic symbol of the sixties music scene, and Hendrix would play at numerous festivals in his career, including the Isle of Wight in late August of 1970, one of his last appearances before his death in September of that year. In the following I will try to show an important part of the trajectory of Hendrix’s career and how his playing at festivals emphasizes this paper’s conception of Hendrix as a Dionysian figure.

The Monterey Pop Festival originally billed itself as the ‘First International Festival of Music’<sup>30</sup> and it included a diverse line-up of acts, including Otis Redding, Ravi Shankar, The Grateful Dead, The Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, and Simon and Garfunkel. Hendrix had never appeared at any major venue as a featured solo artist in America at that time, and he was invited to participate by Paul McCartney and Andrew Loog Oldham, the Rolling Stones’s manager, who were in charge of choosing the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Shapiro and Glebbeek, 185.

festival's performers.<sup>31</sup> This decision was based on Hendrix's reception in London, where he took the rock aristocracy by storm.

After years as a backup musician, he had migrated to the UK in the fall of 1966 with his manager. He stunned the local rock scene, whose members included The Beatles and The Who, as well as many accomplished guitarists, including Jeff Beck and Eric Clapton. Word of mouth quickly spread and the rock cognoscenti descended on his small concerts to watch this unusual newcomer. In the tabloids, he was portrayed as The Wild Man of Borneo,<sup>32</sup> but the sophisticated musicians of the time knew that they were dealing with an authentic black American musician, someone who belonged to the class of musicians they had been trying to emulate for years. Yes bassist Chris Squire described his first meeting with Hendrix backstage before a gig supporting The Experience at London's Marquee Club:

This is the first black guy I've ever had a conversation with in my life, because I came from a very white middle class upbringing. So of course, Jimi goes, 'a friend of mine in Seattle's got a Rickenbacker bass.' And I thought, 'well that's odd, this guitarist is talking to a bass player.' Because normally that didn't happen in those days. So I walked onstage and as I'm testing my microphone, I'm looking down (at the first few rows of seats) and 'well, there's Steve Winwood, and Pete Townsend, and Keith Richards, and is that George Harrison?' (After Yes's show) I went and sat on the grand piano which was behind Mitch Mitchell's drums and of course I was totally blown away. It was just amazing. And I also see Eric Clapton going (jaw dropping expression), 'Oh my god! – I'm not god anymore!'<sup>33</sup>

It is part of the Dionysiac legend that the god travels from one place to another, bringing great change. In the case of *The Bacchae*, he conquers the city of Thebes, in

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<sup>31</sup> Cross, 184.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Experience Music Project, "Chris Squire of Yes – Meeting Jimi Hendrix" Uploaded July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eo-lBnTc3So>> (accessed February 20, 2013).

punishment for their resistance to his ecstatic bacchanals. Jimi Hendrix made several journeys of his own that resulted in a form of conquest, including his move to London and his appearance at Monterey. Another attribute of Dionysus is “metamorphosis,”<sup>34</sup> and Hendrix’s move to England transformed him from a struggling backup musician and would-be headliner to a bona fide national star with a single, “Hey Joe,” in the charts. By turn, his performance at Monterey would transform him from a star in England and the Continent playing smaller halls and clubs into an international star with a lucrative career in America.

As noted above, there was a strong element of competition at the Great Dionysia. One of the reasons that Hendrix was able to win over the London musicians was that he came from a tradition where competition was an ingrained part of the landscape, the low-level black club or ‘Chitlin Circuit’ in America. During his tenure in Nashville, he was forced to play second fiddle to a local guitar hero, Johnny Jones. By the time he arrived in England, he excelled at displaying his abilities as both a guitarist and a showman under the scrutiny and pressure of a knowledgeable audience. Within only a week of his arrival in London on October 1, 1966, he had joined Cream on stage for a jam at the Polytechnic school, and impressed the band in an unrestrained performance.<sup>35</sup>

There was an element of contest at Monterey, as well, as a competition between Jimi Hendrix and The Who that had been brewing since their first meeting, reached a climax.<sup>36</sup> Neither band wanted to go on last, for fear of being upstaged. They tossed a

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<sup>34</sup> John Carlevale, “The Dionysian Revival in American Fiction of the Sixties,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Winter, 2006), 364.

<sup>35</sup> Cross, 161-62.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-72.

coin and The Who won.<sup>37</sup> The Who and Hendrix would go on to share the stage numerous times, including at Woodstock and the Isle of Wight.

Monterey would be an event where Hendrix arrived from afar to great effect. With a couple of singles in the charts but no concert appearances, The Experience were strangers to the U.S. But the show itself would prove to be both successful and controversial. It would also bring a number of Dionysian elements into play, including but not limited to the coming from afar mentioned above, Hendrix's strange appearance, sexual bravado, near magical ability on the guitar, and perhaps the ultimate symbol – lighting his guitar on fire and smashing it to end the show. All of these elements would both establish his image as a Dionysian musician in one well-paced set lasting less than an hour. The following analysis of the concert investigates an essential performance by Hendrix, one which includes Dionysian symbols and reinforces the myth of what Walter Otto calls, “the God who comes,” where Dionysus goes away and returns, as when Hendrix traveled to the UK and made his triumphant return at Monterey.<sup>38</sup> Eric Burdon, who had been in the Animals with Hendrix's manager Chas Chandler, and who eventually became one of his closer friends, described the festival and Hendrix's appearance there:

It was a religious experience; a harmonic convergence of the hippie era. A time when it all came together, in a better way than I've ever seen since. Sure, Woodstock was *the event*, and the history looks at it as the peak, but Monterey was the crown jewel of concerts. Monterey was Jimi's return back to the States. In Jimi's head, it was his first hometown gig. He was at his best showmanship.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Shapiro and Glebbeek, 189-90.

<sup>38</sup> Otto, 79.

<sup>39</sup> Steven Roby, “Interview with Eric Burdon,” (1995) *Straight Ahead*, in *Hendrix on Hendrix* (Chicago Review Press, 2012), 330.

## Hendrix at the Monterey Pop Festival

The concert begins with a high tempo version of Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor." Played at breakneck speed, this blues is transformed into powerful blues-rock.<sup>40</sup> The song includes a generous amount of feedback, the howling and sometimes uncontrollable sound effect that is produced by an electric guitar played in close proximity to powerful amplifiers. Hendrix's ability to control feedback became legendary, and he exploited this skill throughout this first appearance in the U.S. Hendrix's appearance from the outset is striking. Despite his reputation as a male sex symbol, there is a strong element of androgyny. A review of *Are You Experienced?* published later that year described the Experience as looking like "surrealistic hermaphrodites."<sup>41</sup> Wearing a gold ruffled shirt, a headband, a pink feather boa, and his hair teased up into a bouffant, Hendrix was unlike any performer that the mostly white audience had seen before.

The crowd was up on its feet by the second song, "Foxy Lady," as Hendrix suggestively played the guitar between his legs. The band changed pace for the next song, a cover of Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone." By this time Hendrix has taken off his feather boa and assumed a tender attitude for the perfectly placed 'slow number as the third tune in the set.'

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<sup>40</sup> D.A. Pennebaker, dir., *Jimi Plays Monterey* (The Criterion Collection, 1986). The original film version of the festival, *Monterey Pop*, featured only the final song of The Experience's set, their cover version of The Troggs' "Wild Thing." In that song Hendrix set his guitar on fire, and the song also reaches a frenzied climax of noise, theatrics, and wild drumming that captures an important facet of the group. This later video version of the full Hendrix concert gives a better idea of what made the show so remarkable.

<sup>41</sup> Tom Phillips, "A Genuine Nightmare," *New York Times*, November 12, 1967, 160.

The pace picks up with another high tempo reworking of a blues standard, “Rock Me Baby.” Hendrix plays a short part of a solo with his teeth, an act that suggests the Dionysiac frenzy described in *The Bacchae*. A blond woman in the audience responds with distaste to this animalistic display, illustrating one response to the spectacular nature of Hendrix’s performance style. The next song, “Hey Joe,” is rendered almost exactly like the single, except that Hendrix plays the entire twenty second solo with his teeth. In discussing the use of tools as symbolism in *The Bacchae*, Charles Segal states that, “For the Greeks madness itself is a reduction of man to the status of a wild beast: the madman rejects the implements of culture and reverts to a state of feral nature. The madness/savagery of Agave is thus triply over determined: a mother kills a son, a hunter hunts down a human being as prey, and a user of tools reverts to the use of bare hands.”<sup>42</sup> In this case, Hendrix forgoes the use of a tool, the guitar pick, and his bare left hand, which he usually employs for strumming or picking the guitar, and uses his teeth, which in addition to simulating a state of madness also likens him to a wild beast.

Hendrix follows this with a slow, romantic original, “The Wind Cries Mary,” and the song’s Dylanesque lyrics and R&B chord progression bring the blonde woman mentioned above back from the edge and into a rapturous expression. The energy and tension is built back up in the next song, which is presented out of sequence in the film (under the closing credits). “Purple Haze” is performed much like the other hits, such as “Hey Joe,” or “The Wind Cries Mary,” in a highly competent but faithful rendition; however, the songs lose none of their strangeness or originality, but maintain an

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<sup>42</sup> Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides’ Bacchae* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), 62.

accessibility that comes from their concise arrangements and their having probably been heard before, at least by some in the audience.

A brief monologue precedes the finale in which Hendrix explains that what he is about to do shouldn't be taken as being silly, but something that he just has to do for the crowd – he is going to “sacrifice something that is really near and dear to him.” He encourages the crowd to be careful with their ears as the next piece is a brief feedback rendition of the English and American anthems combined. This foreshadows Hendrix's later, and more famous version of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

The final song is “Wild Thing.” The name of the song alone is a perfect metaphor for Hendrix's performance and image, and also for the orgiastic frenzy that characterized the Dionysian rites. After several verses of the loud, simplistic I – IV – V progression of the song, which includes accented stops at the end of each verse, Hendrix plays a quotation from Frank Sinatra's “Strangers in the Night,” with only his left hand, a gesture that demonstrates both fluidity and virtuosity (ex. 1). The band accelerates, hinting at the chaos that will follow, before landing on another chorus/hook. Hendrix plays the final verse with the guitar behind his back, demonstrating his, ‘magical powers.’ He plays a screeching feedback solo while simulating sex with the six foot tall Marshall amp stacks. In the dark, roadies can be seen holding the amps up; and in fact, beforehand, Hendrix motions to one to get ready – he is fully conscious of the broad theatrical gestures.

**Example 1, Hendrix playing with only one hand.**



The band goes into overdrive with the drums churning heavily as the climax of the song approaches. Hendrix plays a feedback solo with the tremolo bar while the guitar lies between his legs on the stage floor. He retrieves a can of lighter fluid from atop one of the amps, and after squirting the liquid onto the guitar which is still lying on the stage, he kneels down over it, crosses himself, and lights the guitar on fire. After beckoning the flames to grow higher, he picks up the guitar and smashes it in several wildly violent swings. The guitar makes a horrible, shrieking sound, something akin to a dying animal, emphasizing the sacrificial element of the act. Hendrix throws the guitar neck and body separately into the crowd. A girl in the crowd looks disturbed and confused. Others are cheering. Barry Miles explains that, “The love and peace crowd did not really know how to react to the violence of the London bands, but were soon convinced that they were in the presence of something special and gave them a great reception.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Barry Miles, *Hippie* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 212.

The burning and destruction of the guitar, in effect, its sacrifice, has a parallel within the Dionysiac cult. The dismemberment of the sacrificial victim, in this case the guitar, recalls the cosmic tearing apart of Dionysus by the Titans. As the guitar is burned and smashed into pieces which are then thrown into the crowd, it symbolizes *sparagmos*, where an animal or victim is ripped limb from limb and eaten by the Dionysiac revelers. The ritual leads to the god's rebirth.<sup>44</sup> In this case, Jimi Hendrix is reborn as a star in his native country. In discussing the conclusion of *The Bacchae*, Segal writes that "Dionysus now has made good his triumphal entry into Thebes. He has proven himself a rightful inhabitant."<sup>45</sup> This mirrors Hendrix's triumph at Monterey, where he showed that he was worthy of the full attention of a large audience, much more than his previous role as a sideman working mainly smaller venues to an often segregated audience. Hendrix would continue to play "Wild Thing" throughout his career, including with the Band of Gypsys. The song became a signature for him, through his theatrical presentation which matched the title of the song so well, even though its musical structure and style had little to do with his original music.

On the surface and perhaps below it as well, Monterey was a somewhat tamer version of later sixties rock festivals, except for the performances of The Jimi Hendrix Experience and The Who, both of whom destroyed their equipment and provided the loudest, most energetic music. Later festivals in the sixties would include more open drug use and nudity, such as Woodstock, and eventually violence and violent protest respectively, at Altamont (1969), and the Isle of Wight festival (1970). Hendrix headlined

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<sup>44</sup> Segal, 48.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

both Woodstock and the Isle of Wight. Michael Lang, the co-promoter of Woodstock, said “Jimi was important as a cultural icon and musically as one of the premiere musicians of his day. I thought that Jimi would likely be the most exciting act on the show.”<sup>46</sup> Hendrix’s tour manager, Gerry Stickells added that “Apart from the festivals, where they obviously played a major part, they could tour arenas which there weren’t that many acts who could tour arenas at that time.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Woodstock**

Hendrix had released three highly successful albums by the time of the Woodstock Festival, and he was an international star, so it would seem that this prestigious festival appearance would be a clear-cut triumph for him. In fact, he was going through a rough patch. The Experience had broken up after trying to create a follow-up to *Electric Ladyland*, and Hendrix was searching for a new direction and sound. His appearance at Woodstock would however, solidify his mythic status, largely on the basis of his performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Pete Townshend described the effect of myth-making that the festival had for him and others:

It would be some time before we realized that our Woodstock performance, which might easily have never happened, would elevate us into American rock aristocracy, where we would remain year after year, even into the twenty-first century. It wasn’t just The Who; everyone who performed at Woodstock enjoyed mythic status once the film was released. Anyone who had been there on the field enjoyed their own special celebrity. Many who hadn’t been there genuinely felt they had.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Michael Lang, *Jimi Hendrix: Live at Woodstock*, Experience Hendrix DVD, B0005283-09, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Gerry Stickells, *Jimi Hendrix: Live at Woodstock*.

<sup>48</sup> Townshend, 181.

Woodstock did more than make the careers of the musicians who played there, or provide bragging rights for the audience. It and its film version “defined the counterculture of the 1960s.”<sup>49</sup> Accounts of the day were polarizing, as one might imagine. In one article in *The New York Times*, reporter Patrick Lydon fairly gushes about the surprising togetherness of the crowd, without fear of recriminations in writing that “they came high and they only got higher.” He found Hendrix’s performance “disappointing,” but still tied it into his lead via his final conclusion, which expressed surprise at both Hendrix’s song choice and the remarkably peaceful tone of the festival: “One of Hendrix’s last numbers was ‘The Star-Spangled Banner.’ Yes, most everything happened up on the farm.”<sup>50</sup>

The festival provided a moment for author and philosopher Ayn Rand to comment on what was wrong with the counterculture and by turn, what was right with the establishment, in a lecture that she gave in Boston in November 1969, entitled, “Apollo and Dionysus.”<sup>51</sup> Quoting from *The Birth of Tragedy*, letters of pilot Charles Lindberg, and news reports of the day, Rand underlines the dichotomy between Apollo and Dionysus by connecting them to the Apollo XI moon mission and the Woodstock Festival, respectively. She broadly distills the conflict into an “alleged conflict of reason versus emotion,” and warns the audience that they will have to make a choice because, “The whole weight of today’s culture is being used to push you to the side of and into the mud of Woodstock.” She continues that “someday, the world will discover that without

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<sup>49</sup> Donald P. Costello, “From Counterculture to Anticulture,” *The Review of Politics ‘America in Change: Reflections of the 60’s and 70’s’* Vol. 34, No. 4, (Oct., 1972), 187.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Lydon, “A Joyful Confirmation that Good Things *Can* Happen Here.” *New York Times*, August 24, 1969, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Ayn Rand, “Apollo and Dionysus,” (lecture, Ford Hall Forum, Boston, November 1969), <[http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=reg\\_ar\\_apollo](http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=reg_ar_apollo)> (accessed April 11, 2013).

thought, there can be no love,” and remarks that these “scummy young savages” are “docile,” and that “theirs is the mentality ready for a furor.” After calling the hippies “drug addicts,” she concludes that “the obvious truth is that these Dionysian desire worshippers do not really desire anything.”

Rand seemed to have missed the point that the festival was successful in spite of the rain, mud, food shortages and delays. Although there is a dark side to the Dionysian, such as the ritual sacrifice, Woodstock represented the higher intent, “the astonishing peace and joy of the youthful masses that brought happy results,” as Lydon put it, calling it “the greatest hippie demonstration of unity.” The Dionysian notion of unity versus the individual is summed up well in the following by Lydon:

Although it was consistently excellent, the music will not be what participants remember best. It was natural that a huge crowd should arrive in good spirits, laughing, getting together in the music that brought them, but that their good vibrations never broke was extraordinary. As the announcer on stage praised the crowd, and as the bands registered their excitement at playing for such a gathering, the crowd felt an increasing sense of good in itself.<sup>52</sup>

In writing about the film version, *Woodstock*, in 1971, another reviewer noted the distance that the camera supplied. “According to one point of view, the kids may be heroes, their life style the expression of rebellion against mindless, inhumane authority; according to another point of view, the kids may seem vague, immature followers of a parallel, equally conformity-ridden culture.”<sup>53</sup> Perhaps Hendrix’s decision to maintain his status as the final act to go on (he was offered the Saturday midnight slot after the festival was endlessly delayed due to weather conditions and ultimately went on at 8:00am

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<sup>52</sup> Lydon, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Foster Hirsch, “Woodstock by Michael Wadleigh,” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1971), 55.

Monday morning, when estimates put the crowd at 30,000)<sup>54</sup> was a wise one. “The film concludes, appropriately, with Jimi Hendrix’s bizarre version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” – the dark, brooding, gutsy, unorthodox, apocalyptic rendition capsulizes the challenge to traditional Americana which the counter-culture of Woodstock has embodied.”<sup>55</sup>

As the reporter for *The New York Times* mentions above, Hendrix’s set was not up to his normally high standard. He played with a larger ensemble that included percussion and a second guitarist in addition to Mitch Mitchell and Billy Cox, who acted as a replacement for the departed Noel Redding. They debuted unreleased material, such as “Message to Love,” and “Isabela,” and the group had never played live together before. Although tired and subdued, Hendrix played well, including Albert King-styled blues in “Red House,” and excellent lead work in “Fire” and “Voodoo Child (Slight Return).” The only really memorable song however, was his rendition of the national anthem. “Everything seemed to stop,” recalled political activist Roz Payne. “Before that, if someone would have played ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’ we would have booed; after that, it became our song.”<sup>56</sup> Payne’s comment shows how Hendrix succeeded in unifying members of the counterculture by providing them with a version of a song with which they could identify. His transformation of the song from a national symbol into a countercultural emblem demonstrates his power of metamorphosis, another Dionysian trait.

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<sup>54</sup> Cross, 269.

<sup>55</sup> Hirsch, 56.

<sup>56</sup> Cross, 271.

## Chapter Two – The Hendrix Chord

The Dionysian myth is suffused with two paradoxical elements, the god's beneficence on the one hand, which is characterized by divine ecstasy and the unity which results from his rites and festivals, and on the other by a vengeful anger and insane violence. Otto explains a part of this dichotomy when he calls Dionysus "the mad god," and suggests that his madness is predicated by his birth. He was the child of Zeus and a mortal woman, Semele, who was "consumed in the holocaust of the lightning of her heavenly bridegroom." For these reasons, he became a "bringer of joy" who was also "predestined for suffering and death."<sup>57</sup> The madness of Dionysus manifests itself in several ways, among them the ecstasy of drunkenness, the violence of his female followers, the maenads, and through his wrath at those who fail to heed his call.

The most well-known representation of Dionysian madness is in Euripides' *The Bacchae*, in which the reader experiences a palpable fear in the impending punishment that Pentheus, Dionysus's cousin, must endure for having blasphemed against the god. After Pentheus fails to heed Dionysus's repeated warnings that he repent in his rebellion, the maenads tear his body limb from limb in an act of *sparagmos*, the ritual sacrifice that accompanies the Dionysian rites.<sup>58</sup> The rite is in imitation of the mythical dismemberment of Dionysus at the hands of the Titans, ordered by Zeus's jealous wife, Hera. That Pentheus's mother is part of the female Bacchic revelers adds to the disturbing cruelty of the climax to the play. One is immediately struck by the fact that Dionysus is easily as capable of anger and vengeance as he is of engendering freedom or unity.

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<sup>57</sup> Otto, 65.

<sup>58</sup> Euripides, 216.

The anger and madness of Dionysus is symbolized in Hendrix's music by his extensive use of the 7#9 chord, an extended chord with a sound that suggests an angry or aggressive emotional content. Although Jimi Hendrix wrote sensitive and romantic songs, like "The Wind Cries Mary," or "Little Wing," he is generally more known for an aggressive, psychedelic guitar style, which is embodied in the hit songs "Purple Haze," "Foxy Lady," "Stone Free," and "Spanish Castle Magic," among others. All four of these songs, which we will analyze below, rely heavily on the "sharp nine sound,"<sup>59</sup> as Van der Blik calls it.

Hendrix's use of the 7#9, which is sometimes referred to as Mm or major/minor, forms a unique facet of his harmonic and compositional style. The 7#9 chord is composed of a dominant seventh chord, minus the fifth, with an added sharp ninth or flatted third, usually in an upper voice, spelled as an E7#9 chord, [E – G# – D – F<sup>x</sup>]. This sonority is so characteristic of Hendrix's music that for the past several decades, professional and amateur musicians alike refer to it as "The Hendrix Chord." The terminology probably first came into use after the release and widespread popularity of "Purple Haze," (1967) which uses the chord in its most direct form, as an unambiguous tonic in root position.<sup>60</sup>

Interestingly, the Hendrix Chord itself has a built-in element of dichotomy, as it possesses both a major and a minor third. This suggests one possible reason for Hendrix's use of the 7#9 chord. In much of rock, such as the simple, riff-based, "Smoke on the Water," it is difficult to choose between a minor or major tonality. Played against the riff

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<sup>59</sup> Van der Blik, 344.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 343.

or the changes, a minor or a major chord just doesn't fit. This is probably the reason that the power chord or, root-fifth sonority, became so wide-spread. Hendrix's choice to use the 7#9 chord so extensively was therefore twofold. It both solved the problem of having to choose open fifth power chords in place of major or minor, and opened up a new tonal area, the 'sharp nine sound.' This is one of the reasons why Hendrix's music has so much color. Major, minor, 7#9, open fifth sonorities and fourths, as well, can all co-exist within the same sonic tapestry. As Van Der Blik agrees, one of the ultimate purposes of the chord for Hendrix was the creation of "an essentially ambiguous minor-major harmonic system,"<sup>61</sup> one which allowed Hendrix to express the torrent of ideas that flowed from his mind and guitar at that juncture in his life.

Few if any rock or pop musicians have become so closely associated with a sonority that the chord was named after them in popular usage. One has to look to classical music to find such examples, where Wagner's 'Tristan chord' is the most famous. The Tristan chord is generically termed a half-diminished seventh chord, which is readily found in all sorts of music from Bach's time to the present. In *Tristan and Isolde*, however, the chord takes on significance by being transformed into a *leitmotif*, a musical theme which is repeated throughout the work and which helps tell the story of the opera. There are other harmonic implications to the Tristan Chord, and Wagner used it in his later operas, including *Parsifal*.<sup>62</sup>

Van der Blik reports that the Hendrix Chord is used either directly or in some incomplete form "in about one third of his studio recordings."<sup>63</sup> The use of the term

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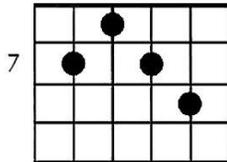
<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>62</sup> Grove Music Online, "'Tristan' Chord," <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>>, (accessed 2 April 2013).

<sup>63</sup> Van der Blik, 343.

‘Hendrix Chord’ implies a specific voicing on the guitar, with the intervals spelled out in a relatively close voicing ie, [E – G# – D – G] (ex. 1). Hendrix also used more widely spaced voicings, and partially incomplete voicings, as Van der Bliet notes, as well.

**Example 1, 7#9 or ‘Hendrix Chord,’ close-voiced on guitar with E as the tonic**



**The Origin of the 7#9 Chord**

It is difficult to say what the exact origin of the 7#9 chord is without an exhaustive study of early jazz. The chord appeared in jazz before Hendrix adopted it – the 1940s version of “All the Things You Are,” a popular song arranged by Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, used the 7#9 chord – and it was and still is used by other rock artists.<sup>64</sup> Possibly the first rock era recording to use the chord was Bill Doggett’s “Hold It,” (1958), played by guitarist Billy Butler.<sup>65</sup> Where Hendrix first heard the chord that would bear his name is difficult to prove. Shapiro & Glebbeek loosely theorize that he simply took the ninth chords of R&B and raised the ninth by a half-step.<sup>66</sup> It is more likely that Hendrix saw someone using the chord on the bandstand in his formative years and filed it away for use in his next practice session. In any case, by the time he recorded “Testify, Parts I & II,” with the Isley Brothers in 1964, Hendrix’s understanding and

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<sup>64</sup> Fender Musical Instruments, “The ‘Hendrix Chord,” <<http://www.fender.com/news/the-hendrix-chord>> (accessed 2 April 2013).

<sup>65</sup> Van der Bliet, 347.

<sup>66</sup> Shapiro and Glebbeek, 144-46.

familiarity with the chord was strong enough that he used it on his first important session.<sup>67</sup> In the following discussion, we will examine the uses of the chord by Hendrix and other musicians, and take a look at possible theoretical explanations of the chord itself.

### **The Hendrix Chord and the Blues**

Numerous writers have described the Hendrix Chord as coming from the blues, including Van Der Blik,<sup>68</sup> and John Perry.<sup>69</sup> This is not entirely helpful because the close-voiced version of the 7#9 is rarely if ever heard on the classic blues records of the post-WWII era. A complete listen of *Sonny Boy Williamson – His Best* (Chess CD, 1997), or *Jimmy Reed at Carnegie Hall* (Veejay, 1961), to take a random sampling of key recordings, yields no audible examples of the Hendrix Chord played on guitar in vertical form with close voicing. Simple, chord-based rhythm guitar is often inaudible in the mix on blues records of this era, although there is usually a rhythm or second guitarist listed in the credits. An exception must be made for Jimmy Reed, where a rhythm guitar comping on major or dominant seventh chords is often front and center, for example on “Kind of Lonesome,” from the album mentioned above.

A possibly more accurate concept of how the 7#9 derives from the blues is that it comprises a collection of the important notes that make the blues so unique. This would include the tonic, the minor third, the major third, and the flatted seventh, exactly the notes of the 7#9 chord. I choose these four notes for several reasons. The blues, in its

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<sup>67</sup> Van der Blik, 347.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>69</sup> John Perry, *Electric Ladyland* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 120-121.

most basic harmonic/melodic form, consists of dominant chords, most often arranged in variants of a I – IV – V progression with all three chords including the root, major third, perfect fifth, and flatted seventh. On top of this harmonic layer, pentatonic scales, both major and minor and including mixture, are overlaid to form the melodic content. A flatted fifth or augmented fourth is also frequently present, but it mostly serves its common practice harmonic and melodic functions, that is as the root of an applied dominant, diminished seventh chord, or passing chord, or as a melodic passing note or appoggiatura. Much of the melodic activity includes the bending up of the minor third either a quarter tone to a truly microtonal pitch, or a half-step to the major third.

Perry is on the right track when he says, “E7#9...(is) one of Jimi’s favorite chords, as well it might be, since in essence it’s the whole of the blues scale condensed into a single chord. You can’t express the whole Western, major scale as a chord as it has too many notes... but the blues scale is pentatonic and can easily be voiced as a chord.”<sup>70</sup> He misses the mark though, because he forgets the crucial conflict in the blues between the minor and major third, the essence of the 7#9. He also ignores the relative major pentatonic scale, which is often played against dominant chords, although rarely in a minor blues. Walter Everett casts doubt on the existence of a blues scale altogether, suggesting that, “there may be such a thing as a blues scale (with or without a lowered fifth scale degree), as in Gershwin examples, but this has nothing to do with rock music, which borrows only from a blues that colors a structural major mode with minor-pentatonic melodic borrowings.”<sup>71</sup>

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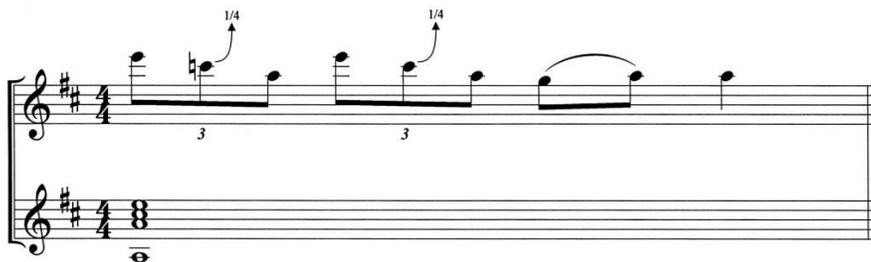
<sup>70</sup> Perry, 121.

<sup>71</sup> Walter Everett, “Making Sense of Rock’s Tonal Systems.” *Music Theory Online* 10.4 (2004), <[http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.w\\_everett.html](http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.04.10.4/mto.04.10.4.w_everett.html)> (accessed 21 November, 2011).

Most significant is the phenomenon that in the blues, a minor third degree can be played against a dominant seventh chord without sounding particularly dissonant, which van der Blik notes, as well. David Temperley also points out that the minor third sitting atop major harmony is a blues based phenomenon, but he doesn't make any mention of the Hendrix Chord.<sup>72</sup> This 'comfort' with a dissonant interval is probably due to the ear's expectation that the minor third, which is not often heard as a chord tone, is often bent up a quarter-tone, blurred vocally or instrumentally with vibrato or sliding, or played rapidly in instrumental passages as a passing note, trill, or other type of ornament (ex. 2a-c). So, although melodic motions may often result in a vertical spelling of the 7#9 chord, the harmonic content is rarely the product of a simple vertical sonority. Ultimately, the 7#9 chord is more of a theoretical construct in the way that it relates to the blues.

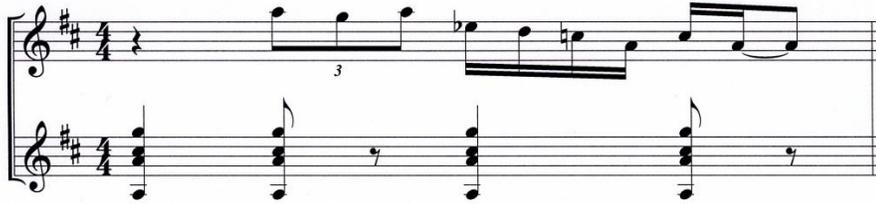
**Examples 2 a – c, show: a) quarter-step upwards bend from the flatted third; b) minor third 'softened' by a flurry of notes; c) trill that blurs dissonance of minor third over dominant harmony. All examples show two guitars – instruments capable of bending pitch.**

**Example 2a**



<sup>72</sup> David Temperley, "The melodic-harmonic 'divorce' in rock," *Popular Music*, Vol. 26/2, (2007), 332.

**Example 2b**



**Example 2c**



**The 7#9 Chord in the Music of Other Composers**

One of the most well-known, early uses of the 7#9 chord is in the recording of “All Blues” on the Miles Davis Quintet’s album, *Kind Of Blue* (1959). The chord serves as a dominant in a twelve-bar blues form in G, with a complete neighbor motion to the same chord built on the flat-6th degree (ex. 3). The voicing of the piano part and its prominence in the spare texture during the head is close enough that it resembles the Hendrix Chord voicing to a reasonable extent.

**Example 3, Miles Davis, “Kind of Blue,” (1959)**

/ G7	/ G7	/ G7	/ G7	/
/ C7	/ C7	/ G7	/ G7	/
/ D7#9	/ Eb7#9	D7#9 / G7	/ G7	//

Pink Floyd, who formed at roughly the same time as The Jimi Hendrix Experience and supported them on tours, also used the chord, on “Corporal Clegg” from *Saucerful of Secrets* (1968), and on their later records, including *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) and *Wish You Were Here* (1975). Rick Wright, the keyboardist of Pink Floyd, claimed that he was exposed to the 7#9 chord he used on “Breath” from *Dark Side* by listening to jazz, and specifically by listening to “Kind of Blue.”<sup>73</sup> The chord was used on *Wish You Were Here*, on “Shine On You Crazy Diamond, Part IV,” a slow, minor blues that serves as a kind of variation during the twenty-five minute “Shine On you Crazy Diamond, (Parts I – IX),” and forms the A section in an overall ABA form. Floyd used the chord in the same way Miles Davis used it in “Kind of Blue,” as a dominant, although they first approach an unembellished major V through VI twice, before finally coming to rest on the D7#9 chord as the final dominant of the twelve-bar form (ex. 4), which is played twice, with a synthesizer solo the first time through and a guitar solo the second. It is tempting to imagine that this D7#9 chord may have come from Hendrix. David Gilmour was a principal writer on the album, and in some aspects of his style, he is influenced by Hendrix, including his choice of guitar, the Fender Stratocaster, and his extensive use of effects such as the fuzzbox. He played the 7#9 chord on “Corporal Clegg” in a similar way to Hendrix, as a tonic with rhythmically accented punches. But it seems more likely that on “Shine On Pt. IV,” the chord’s inclusion was Wright’s suggestion.

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<sup>73</sup> “Interview with Rick Wright: ‘Breath,’” *Classic Albums: The Making of “The Dark Side of the Moon,”* (Eagle Vision/Eagle Rock Entertainment, Ltd. DVD, EV 30042-9r1, 2003).

**Example 4, Pink Floyd, “Shine On You Crazy Diamond, (Part IV),” (1975)**

/ Gm          /Gm          / Gm          / Gm          /  
/Cm          /Cm          / Gm          / Gm          /  
/Eb D      /Eb D      / Gm Cm      / Gm D7#9 //

The use of the D7#9 chord at the end of the twelve-bar form creates a memorable sound that resonates with the listener. But oddly, the chord is used only twice within the entire forty-five minute album. It is curious as to why the chord was chosen for use at all, but the explanation is relatively simple. *Wish You Were Here* is a long album that moves at very slow tempos. It uses a limited number of chords and keys, with most of the material in either G minor, G major, or E minor. Therefore, the details, naturally including the album’s haunting sound production, play an important role. The album develops slowly, with “Shine On, Part I” using only one chord, G minor. “Part II,” employs a I – IV – V progression in G minor, but with a minor V, and “Part III” uses a major V. “Part IV,” builds on this progression of introducing dominant harmony and then varying it, by using a ‘jazz’ V chord, a V7#9. “Shine On, Pt. VI” continues the development, using an augmented chord as the dominant. Although the 7#9 was used as a ‘rock dominant,’<sup>74</sup> in “Breath,” from *Dark Side*,<sup>75</sup> it is now employed as a V7 chord in the jazz/blues idiom. This type of detailed development is part of what helps sustain

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<sup>74</sup> The rock dominant is a chord, usually a major triad, that occurs naturally on the seventh degree of the mixolydian and dorian modes, the two predominant modes in rock, and performs a dominant function. It is often referred to as a bVII chord. See Moore, “The So-Called ‘Flattened Seventh’ in Rock,” 1995.

<sup>75</sup> Shaun O’Donnell, “‘On the Path’: Tracing Tonal Coherence in *Dark Side of the Moon*,” in “*Speak to Me*”: *The Legacy of Pink Floyd’s The Dark Side of the Moon*, ed. Russell Reising, 87-103 (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 89.

interest in “Shine On” for over twenty five minutes that include an interruption of more than fifteen minutes when the middle three songs are played.

Our next example includes an element of transmission, in that the use of the Hendrix Chord is not a part of the original recording. I first learned B.B. King’s biggest hit, “The Thrill Is Gone,” (1969), as a teenager in the late 1970s, from the original album, *Completely Well* (1970). I performed the most basic, accepted version of the song, with the chords [G – F# – Bm – Bm] as the third line for years after that. However, in 2008, I saw another guitarist play the progression (ex. 5) below at a jam session at the Waterhole, a club in Amsterdam. It sounded so ‘right,’ that I felt as if I had been playing the song ‘wrong’ for all those years. Listening closely to B.B. King’s original recorded version, the Gmaj7 harmony is easy to imagine, as the bass is playing G while the Fender Rhoads continues to play the Bm chord from the previous measure. But the V sonority is less clear. In fact, the playing of the leading tone is avoided, leaving an implied minor V. Experimenting with a modal dominant sounds weak, however, and the violins play the leading tone during instrumental sections.

**Example 5, B.B. King, “The Thrill is Gone,” with new progression**

<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>/</b>
<b>/Em7</b>	<b>/Em7</b>	<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>/</b>
<b>/G maj7</b>	<b>/F#7#9</b>	<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>/ Bm</b>	<b>//</b>

As in Miles Davis, the chord serves as a dominant in a twelve-bar blues pattern, but in the minor mode, and instead of an embellishing, complete neighbor motion to bVI, the dominant is *approached* from VI. Pink Floyd's usage of the 7#9 is very similar to this version of B.B. King, in that it occurs in minor and also in that the piece includes a VI chord. In Pink Floyd, the VI is used in the approach to major V chords, however, and the final dominant sonority is the 7#9, used in the turnaround. It is interesting that all three examples employ VI. In "All Blues," bVI is used as an embellishment and in "Shine on You Crazy Diamond, Pt. IV" the VI is there to prepare the 7#9 or simply to intensify the initial motion to V. In the later version of "The Thrill Is Gone," the VI7 chord performs a voice-leading function that allows added harmonic color during the cadence and hook of the song. One explanation for these three examples all employing VI might be the strongly dissonant nature of the 7#9 chord. Dissonances that are prolonged for too long can at times provide more tension or disruption than necessary, and a dissonance that is approached without preparation can be jarring. In the case of "All Blues," even though the movement is to the same chord type, the half-step movement away and back from the chord provides an element of motion and a subsidiary resolution, and therefore adds a kind of stability or at least avoids static dissonance. In "The Thrill is Gone," the approach from Gmaj7, a chord which has all the notes of the tonic Bm and the tonic of the F#7#9 chord, provides a softening effect via more traditional voice-leading. In the Pink Floyd example, VI can't be traced to its localized usage in "Shine On, Part IV," as it is a structural element of the central material of the song and appears in Part III and Part V, for example.

One of the things that makes the way Hendrix uses the 7#9 chord different is the emotional content and impact that is derived from the close voicing on guitar. While in the most basic terms a major chord may seem ‘happy,’ and a minor chord ‘sad,’ a complex group of emotions can be sensed in the sound of the 7#9 in its typical guitar voicing. Just strumming the chord, it is at once mean, hot, cool, or aggressive, but perhaps most markedly, angry. In “All Blues,” the V7#9 chord adds a hint of cool distance and a slightly menacing edge. Cool is also tough and distant – in a word, it can be cold. In “The Thrill is Gone,” the substitution of a V7#9 for the traditional dominant can change the lyric narrative of the song to something slightly more ill at ease. Throughout the four verses, the protagonist expresses resignation, hopes for the future, despair, and the prophesy that, “you’ll be sorry someday.” There is no implication of revenge, but within all the typical recriminations that victims of a broken romance may have, without expressing it in words, the V7#9 lets you know – he’s mad.

A much more lengthy investigation of the use of the 7#9 chord in pop and rock music is merited but a brief listing of several interesting examples is possible here. Other musicians have used the 7#9 in various ways that are more directly related to Hendrix’s use of the chord as tonic, dominant, or sub-dominant harmony. Cream uses the 7#9 chord as V on all the changes of “Strange Brew,” (May, 1967) and substitutes it for IV (for example at :24 and :50) at seemingly random points including the walk-down from V and also sometimes on the IV that is part of the A<sup>1</sup> section of the twelve-bar form. This would seem to be an attempt on their part to move the song away from the blues by adding a more rock edge, as the 7#9 with distortion adds a crunchy dissonance. Pete Townshend uses a tonic 7#9 during the extended ending of “My Generation,” (14:23) during what

could be characterized as an ‘orgy of destruction.’ Led Zeppelin also reached for the 7#9 as the penultimate tonic sonority (26:40) of the over twenty-six minute version of “Dazed and Confused” from their 1973 tour.<sup>76</sup> The use of a 7#9 in both of these cases imparts a dramatic power to the endings of these characteristic, stage ‘epics.’ Earth, Wind, and Fire demonstrate a funk-rock usage of a tonic Hendrix Chord on their hit, “Shining Star,” where long sections of 7#9 harmony on the verses are off-set by chromatic choruses and instrumental sections. Here the chord perfectly anchors the center of the mix, which is dominated by the low notes of the bass and high notes of the horns and vocals.

We have seen how the origins of the 7#9 chord can be traced to the blues, although the line is somewhat indirect. Van der Blik theorizes that the 7#9 chord is derived from the blues and can create a “blues feeling,” although he gives no examples of blues songs that include the 7#9.<sup>77</sup> Temperley also notes the blues connection to rock in the use of a minor third over major harmony. We will next take a look at how Hendrix uses the 7#9 chord in his own music.

### **The 7#9 Chord in Hendrix**

Hendrix’s first single was “Hey Joe,” a cover song credited to Billy Roberts. It was released in December of 1966 and reached number six on the charts in England but failed to chart when it was released in the U.S. in May of 1967, possibly due to the fact that Hendrix had never toured in the U.S. The song shows Hendrix’s R&B roots with its clean, bluesy guitar sound and call and response vocal/guitar arrangement. The song

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<sup>76</sup> These two live renditions are found on *The Who: Live at Leeds Deluxe Edition* (MCA, 2001), and *The Soundtrack from the Film, Led Zeppelin: The Song Remains the Same* (Swan Song, 1976), respectively.

<sup>77</sup> Van der Blik, 347.

dovetails neatly with “The Wind Cries Mary” in terms of sound and harmony, with both using relatively clean tones and falling chord progressions. The B-Side of “Hey Joe” was “Stone Free,” which used the 7#9 chord in several ways, as we will see below. Hendrix’s most striking use of the 7#9 came in his next single, “Purple Haze.”

In “Purple Haze,” E7#9 is used as the tonic of the song, with the progression [E7#9 – G – A] serving as the harmony for the verses and hook (ex. 6). “This instance of the chord is the most well-known and emulated example of Hendrix’s use of the sharp ninth sound,” although the notes of the chord are somewhat difficult to make out due to the heavy distortion and lack of clear articulation in the strumming.<sup>78</sup> The song title is taken from a powerful strain of LSD manufactured at the time, and the lyrics clearly outline the loss of control and otherworldly experience that results from an LSD trip. The use of the 7#9 chord emphasizes the frightening aspects of the psychedelic experience.

**Example 6, Jimi Hendrix, “Purple Haze,” (1967), mm. 24 – 25**

Verse  
E7#9

2. Pur-ple haze  
all a - round.

G A

T T T T T T

**Example 7, Jimi Hendrix, “Purple Haze,” first verse**

Purple haze all in my brain  
Lately things they don’t seem the same  
Actin’ funny but I don’t know why  
‘Scuse me while I kiss the sky

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 349.

“Purple Haze” is one of Hendrix’s most Dionysian songs (ex. 7). Otto defines Dionysus as “The god of ecstasy and terror, of wildness and of the most blessed deliverance – the mad god whose appearance sends mankind into madness.”<sup>79</sup> Dionysus is the god of wine, and intoxication can be construed as a kind of madness. In “Purple Haze,” Hendrix compares the LSD experience to a kind of madness, singing that, “you got me blowing, blowing my mind.” In his interpretation of the *Birth of Tragedy* passage, “Either through the influence of the narcotic draught . . . when the glowing life of the Dionysian revelers roars past them,”<sup>80</sup> Carl Kerényi states that “Nietzsche does not mention wine expressly because he wishes to claim all intoxication for Dionysos.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, despite its emphasis on psychedelic drugs as opposed to alcohol, the drug of the preceding generation, the drug culture of the 1960s can be seen as Dionysian, even though Dionysus is the god of wine.

It is important to note, however, that Hendrix does not seem completely positive about the effects of the drug, at least in this song. However, it may be that he feels the “terror” is a necessary part of the experience, in order to achieve a higher state of consciousness. Concerning the Dionysian state of madness, Kerényi writes, paraphrasing Otto, that it was “a kind of visionary attempt to explain a state in which man’s vital powers are enhanced to the utmost, in which consciousness and the unconscious merge as in a breakthrough.”<sup>82</sup> Hendrix’s impassioned delivery of the lyrics, amidst the swirling, chaotic sound gives the impression of someone who is caught in the eye of the storm.

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<sup>79</sup> Otto, 65.

<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche, *BOT*, 36-37.

<sup>81</sup> Kerényi, 136.

<sup>82</sup> Kerényi, 134.

When the busy, unpredictable drumming ceases during the break at the end of each verse, the echoing, hoarse vocals that emerge confirm that there is no escape. Spoken words in the background during instrumental passages have the effect of aural hallucinations, and indeed may remind some of the tripping scene in *Easy Rider* (1969). Played underneath both the verses and guitar solos, the E7#9 chord provides the perfect background for the melodically inventive guitar lines that incorporate blues, modal and eastern elements. The extremely high notes that are played over the coda, pushed well above the range of the guitar by the use of the Octavia, an octave doubling device that was made for Hendrix by Roger Mayer, suggest the intensity of the trip in no uncertain terms.

“Stone Free” is similar to “Purple Haze” in terms of its aggressive tone, forward momentum, and dynamically contrasting texture, where open-textured sections with vocals and spare guitar accompanied only by simple drumming and percussion give way to full band sections with dense guitar saturation. What most definitively separates the two songs from “Hey Joe” is their use of the 7#9. But while “Purple Haze,” uses the 7#9 chord strictly as a tonic, “Stone Free” also uses the chord as IV and as an applied dominant to VII (ex. 8).

**Ex. 8, Jimi Hendrix, “Stone Free,” (1966)**

**Verse:**

/E7#9 /     /E7#9 /     /E7#9 /     /E7#9 /     /  
/A7#9 /     /A7#9     /E7#9 /     /E7#9 /     /

**Pre-Chorus:**

/A7 /A7 /A7 /A7 /A7 /A7 /A7#9 /A7#9 /

**Chorus:**

/D5 /D5 /D5 /D5 /D5 /D5 /C /A /C /A

**Coda:**

//D5 /D5 /D5 /D-F#-G-G#-A//

**Fadeout:**

/F //

The structure of “Stone Free” is unusual, even for a quasi-tonal rock piece. I say quasi-tonal because even though the piece is goal-directed, a concept that Everett applies to the most tonal rock pieces in his system,<sup>83</sup> there is no feeling of the piece ever coming fully to rest. A case can be made that the wanderings from E to A to D and finally to F in the fadeout exemplify the modus operandi of the narrator. The forward harmonic momentum of the song, however, is not damaged by these changes, nor do the changes result in a lack of clear tonality. The verse occurs over an E7#9 chord, which moves up to A7 and back for a I – IV – I verse. The tonic E7#9 chord can be viewed as an applied dominant to the subdominant,<sup>84</sup> but I prefer to hear the IV in this section as an

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<sup>83</sup> Everett, §9.

<sup>84</sup> Van der Blik, 355.

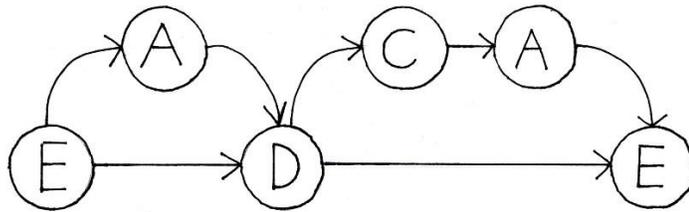
embellishment of the I chord, because of the simple, I – IV – I motion that is self-contained by the verse. The verse is also strongly similar to the same harmonic motion in the first two phrases (eight bars) of a twelve-bar blues progression. Additionally, the duration of the IV chord is too brief to count as a tonicization, and finally, the rhythmic backing doesn't change during the verse but stays in its tense, guitar/drums arrangement, whereas the second time the harmony moves up to IV for the pre-chorus, the texture changes, with the drums opening up to the ride cymbal and adding snare flams, and the guitar playing a blues lick that outlines an embellishing IV of IV (D). Therefore, the first move up to the A7#9 and back to the tonic simply prolongs the tonic.

The pre-chorus starts the second time the harmony moves up to IV. At the end of that section, a hard strummed A7#9 is used as an applied dominant to a D5 chord, which Van der Bliek also notes, initiating the chorus. An added VI – IV tag with a pause in the rhythm completes the chorus, a motion that Temperley classifies as a “plagal stop cadence.”<sup>85</sup> The larger scale motion from verse to chorus is a falling major second, from the E7#9 of the verse to the D5 of the chorus, and back to the tonic, E7#9. So in effect, the E7#9 and the A7#9 both lead to the D of the chorus. This is achieved by the E7#9 moving to D, its dominant, and also by the A7#9's more traditional push to D in an applied dominant motion (ex. 9). The D of the chorus resolves back E, forming an embellished double plagal cadence, as in the example.

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<sup>85</sup> David Temperley, “The Cadential IV in Rock,” *Music Theory Online* 11.17, (2011) <<http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.11.17.1/mto.11.17.1.temperley.html>> (accessed 10 March 2012).

### Example 9, Tonal Plan of “Stone Free”



The plagal motion, IV – I, at end of the tag that leads back to the top of the verse does perform a cadential function, as per Temperley, above. This should clarify what key the piece is in, namely E, yet there are still some loose ends. The long, brilliant guitar solo that leads directly to the final chorus is in A, with the result that the IV chord is used for an unusually large amount of time in a tonal piece. The emphasis on A weakens E as the tonal center. This makes it attractive to consider D as the main tonal center of the piece, as this harmony supports the chorus. It would also solve the problem of the large amount of time spent on A, as A would then be the dominant. It is possible to imagine, however, the final F of the fadeout resolving to the original tonic of E7#9, even though the F seems to arrive from “out of nowhere,” in rather Dionysian fashion. In fact, on the live version of “Stone Free” from the Atlanta Pop Festival in 1970,<sup>86</sup> the song modulates from the coda in D to end on E, before Hendrix begins the Star-Spangled Banner, which is also in E. This eliminates the F of the fadeout, but shows that Hendrix probably thought of “Stone Free” as being in the key of E.

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<sup>86</sup> Jimi Hendrix, *Stages: Atlanta '70*, (Reprise 26732-2), 1991.

“Stone Free” was the first song Hendrix wrote when he moved to London in late 1966.<sup>87</sup> This adds resonance to the lyrics of the song, especially in terms of the emotional content of the Hendrix Chord. The lyrics state that the protagonist is free of entanglements, free to “ride the breeze,” and generally free to move. If Hendrix was elated that he was finally recognized and on the verge of a major adventure, it’s interesting to ask the question, why does the guitar sound so angry? The verse lyrics provide a clue that relates to the unusual E7#9/A7#9 progression of the verse, which functions as a tension generating device that underlines the alienation of the lyrics (ex. 10):

**Example 10, Jimi Hendrix, “Stone Free,” (1966), first verse**

Every day of the week, I’m in a different city  
But if I stay too long, people try to pull me down  
They talk about me like a dog, talk about the clothes I wear  
But they don’t realize, they’re the ones who’s square

Two details that stand out in the arrangement are the thunderous snare and bass drum hits which form the anacrusis to the guitar solo, and the modulation to F with fuzz and tremolo bar on the fade-out that sounds like a thunderclap. There is an element of Dionysian music in the arrangement of these sonic details. The drum was used as accompaniment to the dithyrambs that the Greeks dedicated to Dionysus,<sup>88</sup> and thunder figures prominently in the Dionysian myth. In the *Bacchae*, at the moment when Dionysus unleashes the fury of the Maenads, the character of the Messenger relates the

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<sup>87</sup> Shapiro and Glebbeek, 524.

<sup>88</sup> Chadwick Jenkins, “The Bull of Phalaris, or the Ambiguity of Musical Violence,” Popmatters.com, October 2007, <<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/column/the-bull-of-phalaris-or-the-ambiguity-of-musical-violence/>> (accessed 6 February 2013).

following: “‘Women! I bring you the man who made a mockery of you, and of me, and of the holy rites. Now punish him.’ And in the very moment the voice spoke, a flash of unearthly fire stretched between the sky and the ground.”<sup>89</sup> A guitar that can sound like thunder would be an appropriate instrument for a modern Dionysian musician.

In the song, “Foxy Lady,” from *Are You Experienced?* (1967), the 7#9 chord is utilized in a more spread out voicing (ex. 11). The song is in the key of F#, and the main riff spells out the chord without the major third: [F# – E – A]. Van der Blik notes that, “as in much of Hendrix’s music, harmony, in the sense of explicitly delineated vertical sonorities, is more implied than stated.”<sup>90</sup> The song is clearly not in minor, however, and the A# is used during the chorus, with the progression [F# – E – B], spelling out a “circular double plagal progression.”<sup>91</sup>

**Example 11, Jimi Hendrix “Foxy Lady,” (1967), Main riff voicing**



The chord is spaced over two octaves and a third, with the octave doubled root alternating with the E – A double stop in the upper register. The bass notes on one and three in combination with the upper fourth played on the off beats creates a four-four meter with beats two and four heavily accented. Re-voicing the 7#9 and combining it

<sup>89</sup> Euripides, 215.

<sup>90</sup> Van der Blik, 350.

<sup>91</sup> Biamonte, 99.

with the thrusting rhythmic arrangement creates a heavy bump and grind within the song, therefore implying a strongly sexual tone. Hendrix can be seen acting this out in the *Monterey Pop* footage of the song, utilizing his guitar as a phallic symbol. The motion from the F# bass to the fourth, E – A, its dissonance amplified by fuzz, suggests intercourse by combining with the accented and exaggerated off beats – the essential beat of ‘rock & roll,’ which is a “euphemism for sex.”<sup>92</sup> The general or literal absence of the A# alleviates the anger of the Hendrix Chord without compromising the aggressive, sexually menacing tone of the song and its protagonist. But even though the A# is literally left out of the main riff of the song, it can be placed back in without significantly altering the tune. In Led Zeppelin’s “Dazed and Confused,” mentioned above (17:17), the band plays a quick, two-bar statement of the “Foxy Lady” riff, with Jimmy Page using the fully voiced E7#9 version as the tonic in the key of E, pedaling off of the low E to create the octave riff. I also recall seeing Roy Buchanan play the entire song this way, on *Don Kirshner’s Rock Concert*, in the mid-1970s.

The Jimi Hendrix Experience’s second album, *Axis Bold As Love* (1967), is quite different from their debut, *Are You Experienced?*, although both were released in the same year. *Axis* was put together quickly instead of assembled from a group of singles plus additional tracks recorded over a number of months. The substantially different track listing between the American and British releases of *Are You Experienced?* only serves to highlight *Axis*’s ‘of a piece’ nature. *Axis* also benefits from an intimate, revealing sound, despite the use of heavy distortion and sound effects at many points, and includes two of

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<sup>92</sup> Robert Walser, “Rock and Roll,” *Grove Music Online*, <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>>, (accessed 24 April 2013).

Hendrix’s most poignant songs, “Little Wing” and “Castles Made of Sand.” Nonetheless, he was still working with the 7#9 chord, and four of the album’s thirteen tracks feature it, including “Spanish Castle Magic,” “Ain’t No Telling,” “If 6 Was 9,” and “Little Miss Lover.” A spacing technique similar to the one used in “Foxy Lady” is employed in “Spanish Castle Magic,” along with a rhythmic arrangement that is slightly more complex (ex. 12). The C# key signature makes the guitar’s open E and B strings available, so that the 7#9 chord can be voiced with the C# on the A string of the guitar, and the 7<sup>th</sup> and #9<sup>th</sup> of the chord occurring on the open B and E strings of the guitar, which creates a ringing, hypnotic sound, especially when coupled with distortion.

Ostensibly about the Spanish Castle, a club in Washington that Hendrix aspired to play in his teens, the song works emotionally more on the level of a drug-oriented fantasy, and as such is in the vein of “Purple Haze.” While Everett calls the song a “psychedelic blues,”<sup>93</sup> I am more inclined to think of it as psychedelic Chuck Berry, due to the prominent use of the open-string fourth in the upper voice.

**Example 12, Jimi Hendrix, “Spanish Castle Magic,” (1967) mm. 1-3**

The 7#9, usually voiced without the major third, is utilized as a canvas for tone painting with distortion. Hendrix plays piano on the song, and although it is difficult to

<sup>93</sup> Everett, §24.

clearly make out whether the piano part's 7#9 chord is complete or not, the part contributes to the overall 'sharp nine sound.' The song follows a similar pattern to "Purple Haze" and "Stone Free," with tense verses and explosive choruses, and as such seems to be tethered to that earlier style. The 7#9 harmony again supports the wild guitar soloing and Bacchic frenzy as in "Purple Haze" as Hendrix exhorts the listener to "Come on, my darling, come on if you want to go," (tripping) and ultimately claims that "it's all in your mind." Hendrix would continue to use the 7#9 to the end of his life, on songs such as "House Burning Down" and "Freedom," but *Axis* shows the beginning of his relentless search for new ideas that would be continued on *Electric Ladyland* and *Band of Gypsys*.

### Chapter Three – Machine Gun

Compared with the songs that we discussed in the chapter on the 7#9 or ‘Hendrix Chord,’ the song “Machine Gun” is not well-known outside of Hendrix’s fans, aficionados of classic rock, or progressive music in general. But among those who are well-acquainted with the song, it is highly revered. Murray calls it “towering,”<sup>94</sup> and “one of Hendrix’s absolute masterpieces.”<sup>95</sup> The song has a dramatic quality and an intensity of emotion that suggest an affinity with tragedy, and that makes it an interesting subject for our discussion of the Dionysian in Hendrix’s music. In the following analysis of the song, we will first look at political influences that may have led to Hendrix’s writing of the song, and general information regarding the formation of the group, Band of Gypsys. We will then look at the song in terms of Nietzsche’s Dionysian philosophy and take a look at how Aristotle’s *Poetics* can be applied to some of the song’s dramatic elements. After a discussion of the Hendrix’s use of feedback and sound sculpting techniques, including technical background information, there will be a detailed analysis of the song.

#### Political Currents

Coming of age as a black male and musician in the 1960s, Jimi Hendrix felt political pressure from two directions – race and Vietnam. As Murray comments, “Jimi was a black star with a white audience.”<sup>96</sup> Or, as Hendrix himself said at a street performance in Harlem, just months after Woodstock, “Sometimes when I come up here, people say ‘he plays white rock for white people. What’s he doing up here?’”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Murray, *Crosstown Traffic*, 54.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, “Street Fighting Man: Jimi the Radical,” *Mojo*, (November 1999), 80.

<sup>97</sup> “Jimi Hendrix Sings at Harlem Benefit,” *New York Times*, September 6, 1969, 18.

Hendrix had been a member of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division from May, 1961 to July, 1962, but he found the experience so difficult that he eventually feigned homosexuality to receive a discharge.<sup>98</sup> He came close to serving in Vietnam, and he maintained a sympathy for the rank and file soldiers. But in a December 1967 interview with British student newspaper, *The Gown*, Hendrix stated that, “I have no views on Vietnam because it doesn’t affect me personally. If something doesn’t directly affect my life, then I’m not interested.”<sup>99</sup> It is possible that Hendrix’s aborted service resulted in an ambivalence or even a guilty feeling regarding the war.

Hendrix showed signs of interest in politics and social issues in his songs as early as “I Don’t Live Today,” a song about the plight of American Indians that was included on *Are You Experienced?* The song could be considered a forerunner to “Machine Gun,” because of both its bleakly emotional, political lyrics and the treatment of the guitar solo section, which includes a complex feedback collage. Commenting on his early period and pointing to “I Don’t Live Today,” as a perfect example of that work, Shapiro and Glebbeek state that, “In many of his early songs, Jimi gave violent expression to a volcano of repressed energy, a bubbling, seething force building up over time with no outlet. The escape valve was the formation of his band, recording his songs, releasing a torrent of molten feelings – depression, frustration, lust, mania, anger and love.”<sup>100</sup>

The songs “Up from the Skies,” and “If 6 Was 9,” both on *Axis: Bold As Love* (December, 1967), are more sociological in nature. In “Up from the Skies,” he discusses problems on Earth from the view of a visiting extra-terrestrial who seems to expect some

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<sup>98</sup> Cross, 93-94.

<sup>99</sup> Liam Mcauley and Roisin Mcauley, “An Experience with Hendrix,” *The Gown* (December, 1967), in *Hendrix On Hendrix*, 72.

<sup>100</sup> Shapiro & Glebbeek, 174-75.

kind of apocalypse and has advice to offer. “If 6 Was 9,” details his attitude as an outsider and was used effectively on the soundtrack for the film, *Easy Rider* (1969). On *Electric Ladyland* (October, 1968), the track “House Burning Down” is critical of rioting. But no statement regarding the Vietnam War would be forthcoming until he began to play his highly political version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” in 1969. The racially charged atmosphere of 1968, however, which included the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, would place Hendrix’s music, band, and lifestyle under a media microscope, and possibly led to his becoming more willing to comment on Vietnam in his lyrics.

The Black Panthers sought to enlist Hendrix to their cause in the form of a “public endorsement,” but Hendrix would never give one.<sup>101</sup> The Panthers went so far as to make overtures to Hendrix backstage at his concerts, including at the Newport Pop Festival in June of 1969.<sup>102</sup> Hendrix gave a lengthy interview to journalist Jacoba Atlas in October, 1968. It was published in two parts, the second entitled, “Jimi Hendrix, Black Power, and Money,” in *Teenset*, in January, 1969. After commenting on his failure to make the R&B charts, black and white race relations, the Black Panthers, and the general apathy of the populace in the U.S., he finished by saying, “I’m doing the best I can. Everybody’s just gonna have to get off their ass. All can say is common sense. We’re gonna use our music as much as we can. We’re gonna start if people will start listening.”<sup>103</sup> It is telling that Hendrix made his comments to *Teenset*, a music fan magazine, where his until-then unheard political views would probably have little impact. But even if Hendrix had been

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<sup>101</sup> Murray, *Crosstown Traffic*, 93.

<sup>102</sup> Shapiro & Glebbeek, 368.

<sup>103</sup> Jacoba Atlas, “Jimi Hendrix, Black Power, and Money,” *Teenset*, (January, 1969) in *Hendrix On Hendrix*, 147-50.

emphatic that he held no opinion on far away military conflicts, the song that would prove to be one of the most important for him during his post-Experience phase, “Machine Gun,” would be about Vietnam, and not civil rights, empowerment, or race riots.

By July 1969, the Jimi Hendrix Experience fell apart due to a combination of road weariness and friction between Hendrix and Noel Redding. Chas Chandler had already left in the middle of the recording of *Electric Ladyland* because of Hendrix’s move away from three-minute, radio friendly tunes. Although Hendrix and Mitch Mitchell would eventually re-unite, Hendrix formed the all-Black, Band of Gypsys that fall, which included Billy Cox on bass, and Buddy Miles on drums and additional vocals. Hendrix knew Billy Cox from his stint in the army and they had played together during Hendrix’s formative time in Nashville in 1962-63. Buddy Miles was a colleague and friend Hendrix knew from when the Experience played shows with Miles’s band, The Electric Flag, and they became close enough that Miles played drums on *Electric Ladyland*’s “Rainy Day, Dream Away” and “Still Raining, Still Dreaming.” The formation of this band would seem like a convenient platform from which Hendrix could address Black issues and a way in which he could prove his “Blackness.” But it ultimately served the purpose of settling an outstanding lawsuit over a contract Hendrix had signed in October, 1965 with record producer Ed Chalpin, by releasing the resulting live album to Capitol Records with royalties granted to Chalpin as part of the deal.

## Elements of Style in Machine Gun

“Machine Gun” is a striking musical departure for Hendrix, but not only because of its stridently political message. The song is somewhat similar to “Voodoo Child,” the extended blues that dominates the first half of *Electric Ladyland*. Both tunes have over a ten-minute length, strong blues influence, and employ a combination of arrangement and improvisation. “Machine Gun,” however, points the way forward toward Hendrix’s future, presaging the more politically active, Curtis Mayfield-inspired lyrics on his first posthumously released album, *The Cry of Love* (1971), and hints at progressive rock or fusion, and away from the bedrock of Delta blues that informed “Voodoo Child” and much of his earlier music. Both “Machine Gun” and “Voodoo Child” bring to mind some of Miles Davis’s late Sixties work, such as “In A Silent Way,” (July, 1969) or “Bitches Brew,” (April, 1970) and in fact Murray comments that “Machine Gun” was “Davis’s favorite Hendrix record.”<sup>104</sup> Barry Bergstein asserts that “Davis was the first jazz musician to amalgamate Hendrix's innovations into his music and... (he) applied many of Hendrix's advances by incorporating wah-wah pedals, over-driven amplification, and expressive use of electronic effects in his own trumpet playing.”<sup>105</sup> That the elder Davis was looking to Hendrix for inspiration and direction attests to his accomplishments and credibility among the musical elite.

Buddy Miles’s strong singing voice, songwriting, and groove-oriented drumming style contributed substantially to the Band of Gypsies’s album and sound. On “Machine Gun,” he provides a solid backbeat, anchoring Hendrix’s creation of a soundscape that

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<sup>104</sup> Murray, *Mojo*, 84.

<sup>105</sup> Barry Bergstein, “Miles Davis and Karlheinz Stockhausen: A Reciprocal Relationship,” *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Winter, 1992), 518.

includes airplanes, bombing, and the screaming of the wounded and dying, helping to provide some of the most dramatic moments of the song. His falsetto backing vocals over a descending motif of [D – C# – B] (7:45), provide both texture and melodic structure in an often busy and dissonant piece. Central to his performance on the song is his semi-sung commentary that forms the turning point of the song. Miles's vocal performance adds an element of rock theatre, a performance style that was unusual for Hendrix, but had become in vogue through the success of *Hair* in 1968, and informed The Who's *Tommy* in 1969. In early 1968, Hendrix told a reporter in San Francisco that he wanted to do a theatrical production someday,<sup>106</sup> and perhaps the arrangement of "Machine Gun" is an early indicator of that direction.

The performance style of Band of Gypsys was different from Hendrix's usual and accepted stage mode, in which he would do outrageous guitar tricks and physically act out the music. But Hendrix was growing tired of that sort of act, and during the fall of 1969, he told a reporter from *Rolling Stone*, "I don't want to be a clown anymore."<sup>107</sup> During the set when "Machine Gun," was recorded, there is much less stage movement than usual. As Billy Cox said, "That particular set when he just stood there was incredible."<sup>108</sup> The theatricality of the music is mostly expressed through the sound and arrangement itself. Buddy Miles's singing the last verse adds an element of commentary and group interaction, and during "Machine Gun," the Joshua Light Show, as seen in bootleg videos and still pictures, shows a lurid fireball of undulating orange and red

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<sup>106</sup> Michael Lydon, "The Black Elvis?" *New York Times*, February 25, 1968, D19.

<sup>107</sup> Sheila Weller, 230.

<sup>108</sup> "Interview with Billy Cox," in Liner notes to *Live at the Fillmore East*, Digital Disc (Experience Hendrix/MCA Records, MCAD-2-11931, 1999).

projected behind the stage on a screen, adding an element of performance art to the production.

### **Hendrix's Soundscapes and 'Imitation' in Machine Gun**

Describing the sound-painting that Hendrix performed at the Fillmore, an unnamed writer in *The New York Times*, reviewing the New Year's Eve concert on the next day said, "He seems as if he were molding a living sculpture of sound, rather than fulfilling the normal role of the entertainer."<sup>109</sup> This eye-witness account suggests that Hendrix was creating a kind of 'sonic spectacle,' and therefore extending his use of stagecraft into the area of sound itself. Hendrix's use of sound and the guitar as a sound generator, beyond its ability to simply play melody and harmony, is crucial to both his individuality as an artist and to his place in music history. Hendrix was not the first rock musician to employ sound effects. Les Paul had used multi-track recording and tape speed effects as early as 1948, and by 1951, guitar distortion, whether by design or necessity, was a part of the sonic landscape via "Rocket 88." Scotty Moore popularized tape echo in 1955 with Elvis Presley, and tremolo and reverb were featured on hits such as "Rumble," by Link Wray (1958). By 1962, a significant part of Hendrix's effects had been already been employed, when Dick Dale combined high volume, reverb, and distortion on the hit "Miserlou" (1962). But it was Hendrix who expanded the vocabulary of electronic sound and mastered it to the point where sound in itself becomes the focus.

A question which is important to our investigation of Dionysiac elements in Hendrix is whether Hendrix's soundscapes, such as the one that is included in "Machine Gun," constitute program music or pure music. Although the term program music is no

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<sup>109</sup> "Jimi Hendrix Blasts The Old Year Out With 'Space Rock,'" *New York Times*, January 1, 1970, 19.

longer a pejorative, it is important to define the genre of the piece in question for our argument. Some listeners might consider that long and highly creative instrumental sections in what is considered a ‘serious’ piece of rock music, and not a pop song, to be ‘absolute music’ or at least, pure sound. For our current argument, however, that Hendrix’s image, performance style, and music is Dionysian in nature, it is important to make the distinction that, yes, “Machine Gun” has a clear program. It is a song about the suffering of war depicted sonically by the sounds of war generated by a single electric guitar.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, some of Nietzsche’s arguments point away from identifying Hendrix’s “Machine Gun” as a Dionysian song because of its political content and its use of programmatic sound to express its meaning. Nietzsche comments that in situations where the Dionysian has taken hold, political motivations are nullified, and it follows that an interest in politics tends toward individuality and toward the Apollinian.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, Hendrix’s move towards a more politically aware, and in fact activist, approach to his music would constitute a move away from the Dionysian. Concerning Dionysian music, Nietzsche is adamant that program music cannot be Dionysian:

Indeed, even when the tone-poet expresses his composition in images, when for instance he designates a certain symphony as the “pastoral” symphony or a passage in it as the “scene by the brook,” or another as the “merry gathering of rustics,” these two are only symbolical representations born of music – and not the imitated objects of music – representations which can teach us nothing whatsoever concerning the Dionysian content of music, and which indeed have no distinctive value of their own besides other images.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Nietzsche, *BOT*, 124.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

The categorization of program music as non-Dionysian has its roots in Nietzsche's discussions of imitation, where music is considered as being on a higher plane for its ability to get behind the "copy" or "imitation" of a phenomena, to "the thing-in-itself" or the "essence."<sup>112</sup> The "thing-in-itself" is an important idea that Nietzsche borrows through Schopenhauer from Kant. In the simplest terms, the "thing-in-itself" concerns the idea of cognition, and that in our existence we experience phenomena, which present us with appearances. Art is a representation of those appearances. Behind phenomena lie the thing-in-itself, a soul, spirit, or will. Schopenhauer believes that music can imitate the thing-in-itself, presenting a copy of the will. He writes, "all possible efforts, excitements, and manifestations of will, all that goes on in the heart of man and that reason includes in the wide, negative concept of feeling, may be expressed by the infinite number of possible melodies, but always in the universal, in the mere form, without the material, always according to the thing-in-itself, not the phenomenon, the inmost soul, as it were, of the phenomenon, without the body."<sup>113</sup> One of the most esoteric notions in Schopenhauer's philosophy of music is his requirement that a composer must know in his heart what he is expressing, and yet then express it without premeditation. He writes that songs can express the will, although this quality is attributed to the music, not words, explaining that "this is why the same composition is suitable to many verses." Ultimately, however, his rejection of programmatic music is complete, and includes "battle-pieces."<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>113</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, trans. R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1957, orig. ed. 1883), 339.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 341.

This is interesting on a number of levels for Hendrix. Firstly, his knowledge of warfare would be incomplete, having only trained to become a paratrooper, and never having seen battle. He must have experienced the powerlessness that is a major part of the character's experience in the song, having grown up in a broken home under very difficult economic circumstances.<sup>115</sup> But perhaps most important of all, the music is improvised to a large extent, and that would indicate a strong connection to immediate feelings, and a lack of contrivance, which might partially satisfy Schopenhauer's criteria.

Nietzsche's condemnation of programmatic music is also expressed in section 17 during his discussion of the New Attic Dithyramb:

In this New Dithyramb, music is outrageously manipulated so as to be the imitative counterfeit of a phenomenon, for instance, of a battle or a storm at sea; and thus, of course, it has been utterly robbed of its mythopoeic power. For if it seeks to arouse pleasure only by impelling us to seek external analogies between a vital or natural process and certain rhythmical figures and characteristic sounds of music; if our understanding is to content itself with the perception of these analogies; we are reduced to a frame of mind which makes impossible any reception of the mythical; for the myth wants to be experienced vividly as a unique example of a universality and truth that gaze into the infinite. The truly Dionysian music presents itself as such a general mirror of the universal will: the vivid event refracted in this mirror expands at once for our consciousness to the copy of an external truth.<sup>116</sup>

In this passage, it seems that Nietzsche is speaking of a music that is perhaps lighter in nature than "Machine Gun," and although the song does use rhythmic figures such as a gunfire motive to represent phenomena, "Machine Gun" goes much further than that. The frame of mind that the song engenders would seem to be very open; the listener is practically there on the battlefield. "Machine Gun" brings the listener in contact with death, and the universality and truth of war would seem to be as immediately available as

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<sup>115</sup> Cross, 49-51.

<sup>116</sup> Nietzsche, *BOT*, 107.

any music could bring them. The vividness of the sound is also uncontested, as we will see below.

Because we are discussing the use of imitation in music to convey a story, and at the same time weighing the Dionysian content of this music, it is relevant to analyze elements of the song in terms of tragedy. For this purpose I have chosen to look at “Machine Gun” through a brief application of some of the dramatic principles of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. To begin with, Aristotle doesn’t distinguish between types of imitation in his *Poetics*, in terms of a value judgment, as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer do. He simply states that there are different mediums, objects, and modes of imitation.<sup>117</sup> Of course, Aristotle is speaking of several different art forms, with epic poetry or tragedy on the one hand, and music, on the other. The music he speaks of could be music included in a play or music to be performed by itself, but most likely it is the music that accompanied the Greek theatre. In Nietzsche’s argument, he is discussing changes in the music during the New Attic Dithyramb, and follows by analogy with a discussion of the music of his time, namely the *Pastoral Symphony* of Beethoven. That the three genres of music in discussion are radically different is obvious; however, they all have in common that they are considered to be high examples of their type, and are deeply expressive of their chosen emotional content. I can only assume the expressive nature of the ancient Greek music that accompanied parts of the tragedy, but one can imagine by the quality of the dramas themselves that the music made its point well.

It is surprising how readily Hendrix’s depiction of war engages some of the theatrical principals of *The Poetics*. But before we address aspects of drama that are

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<sup>117</sup> Aristotle, 49.

inherent in “Machine Gun” with regards to Aristotle, it is necessary to state that the author doesn’t consider the song to closely resemble a fully theatrical work, or to take any literal cues from Greek Tragedy. There are only resemblances, such as its level of intensity, and its tragic outcome, that lends it to such an examination. It is tempting to try to argue for a view of the song itself as a small dramatic play in the style of a Greek tragedy, with Hendrix playing the single heroic role and Miles supplying the commentary of the chorus. However this view seems untenable or at the least difficult to argue.

The soldier that Hendrix describes or portrays would fall under the type of ‘higher character,’ as befitting a tragic plot.<sup>118</sup> It is permissible to describe the action of the song at this point as tragedy because it fulfills several of Aristotle’s recommendations for this form. It has an unhappy ending and the action inspires pity and fear. He defines the way that these emotions can be produced, stating, “pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.”<sup>119</sup> In this case, the soldier has been brave despite the fact that he is fighting in an unjust war, therefore his death is unmerited. He is a foot soldier, and therefore an everyman, like ourselves, so we feel his misfortune. The soldier certainly feels fear, although he denies it in verse three: “I ain’t afraid of your bullets no more.” The audience probably felt it as well, judging by the tepid reaction and Buddy Miles response to it at the end of the song: “You don’t want to hear that one no more – no bullets, no bombs, no guns.” The audiences’s feeling of pity for a soldier dying alone on the battlefield would be natural.

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 76.

There is a minimum of plot, which to Aristotle is the most important part of what makes a good tragedy.<sup>120</sup> But there is a story, and as such it can be defined simply: A soldier is sent to a distant war in which he has no power, and he must face mechanized weapons against which he has little chance of survival. All of his comrades are killed, and despite his bravery, he is eventually killed, as well. There are no other incidents, either of “surprise” or “reversal” that we can see regarding the action depicted within the song, which are also elements that Aristotle recommends.<sup>121</sup> Regarding the other elements that make up a tragedy, Aristotle includes “spectacular effect,” but rates it as the sixth most important element, after “song.” The presentation of “Machine Gun” certainly includes spectacular effect, due to its extremely high volume, Hendrix’s pyrotechnical guitar playing, and the psychedelic Joshua Light Show. The remaining elements would be of negligible importance here, “diction,” which relates to styles of poetry, and “thought,” which relates to rhetoric.<sup>122</sup> The impassioned delivery of the simple lyrics in “Machine Gun” have little to do with these techniques.

A final element that parallels the tragic design as described in *Poetics* includes plot devices that will raise the level of fear and pity. Aristotle recommends that a simple situation where an enemy fights an enemy would not create an adequate level of fear and pity for a good tragedy. He describes actions between characters that would therefore seem more terrible. These include the situation of brother against brother.<sup>123</sup> The lyrics to “Machine Gun” describe a situation not quite as intense as that, but neither are they speaking about soldiers fighting a just war against an enemy that they despise (ex. 1).

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 70-73.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 61-64.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 79.

**Example 1, Jimi Hendrix, “Machine Gun,” (1970), first verse**

Machine gun, tearin’ my body all apart (2x)  
Evil man make me kill you. Evil man make you kill me.  
Evil man make me kill you. Even though we’re only families apart.

Hendrix could be talking about a civil war, of which the Vietnam War was a modern type. Or, he could be talking about the fact that the Black American soldiers or even working class white soldiers that were sent into battle were closer ‘under the skin’ to their enemies than they were to the military brass who directed them. Murray comments, “Unlike many of his bourgeois white contemporaries, Hendrix the ex-paratrooper refused to take the easy option of slandering the troops in ‘Nam as sadistic reactionary babykillers: he knew that they were as much sacrificial victims as the Vietnamese against whom they’d been arrayed.”<sup>124</sup> In fact, the true enemy is the machine gun itself, which symbolizes the war machine.

While “Machine Gun” can certainly be considered program music, inasmuch as the term applies to an electronic piece composed more than a century after the term first appeared, it can still be argued that there are elements of the song which are Dionysian, as well. The piece can be connected to Hendrix’s historic performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the Woodstock Festival in 1969, an event that Ayn Rand designated as symbolic of Dionysian cultural forces, as noted above. Hendrix’s version of the National Anthem is essentially performed solo, with the melody intercut with programmatic sound effects generated by his guitar and amplifiers alone. The sounds of battle – screams, gunfire, bombs being dropped, planes flying low to attack, helicopters,

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<sup>124</sup> Murray, *Mojo*, 83.

and general chaos – intertwine with the original melody to form a commentary on the political and moral downfall of the Vietnam War. Although Hendrix’s version of “The Star-Spangled Banner” was yet another political statement, and therefore not Dionysian according to Nietzsche, it became emblematic of the Woodstock Festival, which was certainly a Dionysian event, as described above. “Machine Gun” took the terrifying sound effects and wordless political statement of Hendrix’s “Star-Spangled Banner” and turned it into an atmospheric drama with lyrics that described the situation of those fighting on the ground, away from the political forces that compelled them. Ultimately, the song’s strong dramatic and even tragic elements connect it to the Dionysian festivals, which would seem to outweigh any disqualifying elements of program music or political activism.

### **History and Technical Aspects of Feedback**

On a musical and technical level, the most original aspect of the “Machine Gun” performance is Hendrix’s uncanny ability to control the sound of the electric guitar at extremely high volume, where the effect of feedback becomes an essential part of his sound. Feedback is generated when a guitar signal is fed to the amplifier, and through high volume and close proximity to the speakers, the signal then returns to the guitar as sound (moving air) via the speakers and causes the strings to vibrate again. The sound of feedback can be quite musical, mimicking the sustain of stringed and wind instruments, or the human voice, for example. It can also impart an abrasive, howling or shrill sound, which is useful in expressing the aggression of some rock music.

Pete Townsend with The Who and Jeff Beck with The Yardbirds are most often credited with pioneering the use of feedback on their mid-1960s hits. “Anyway,

Anyhow, Anywhere,” by The Who (1965), has a collage of noise in place of a traditional guitar solo or bridge (1:05). The break includes fuzz and sustain, both manipulated at times by rapidly switching the guitar’s pickup selector from a pickup that is off to one that is on, creating a kind of ‘morse code’ effect. There is a squeal of feedback towards the end, but this is more of the unwanted kind of noise usually edited out of performances. In this case, however, it adds to the feeling of a full-throttle, exciting live performance, where the energy has taken the music to the breaking point. While there is no truly controlled feedback, the overall effect conveys the chaos and energy that the protagonist is feeling inside, and it is an original innovation for the time.

“Shapes of Things” by The Yardbirds (1966), includes a more evolved and sophisticated use of feedback. Subtle harmony feedback (reinforcing the tonic) accompanies the I – VII progression in the verses. The Indian-inspired lead break with heavy fuzztone (1:35), is accompanied by a counter-melody in the second guitar, played with feedback. The counter-melody sounds a tonic/supertonic melodic fragment (1:42), which is then transposed up to the flatted-seventh/tonic (1:50). The feedback returns to the tonic before the close of the solo (1:57). The searching, existential quality of the lyrics (ex. 2) is reflected in the Eastern-tinged first lead guitar and the exotic sounds of both the lead and second guitar, with its timbre that resembles a wood flute.

**Example 2, Samwell-Smith, Relf, & McCarty, “Shapes of Things” (1966) first verse/chorus**

Shapes of things before my eyes  
Just teach me to despise  
Will time make man more wise  
Here within my lonely frame  
My eyes just hurt my brain  
But will it seem the same  
Come tomorrow will I be older  
Come tomorrow maybe a soldier  
Come tomorrow may I be bolder  
Than today?

These two songs contain exciting guitar work, both in their innovation and in the way sound enhances the emotional impact of the songs. But they are somewhat simple as compared to Hendrix's work, even as early as "I Don't Live Today" or "EXP," from *Axis Bold As Love* (1967). In "EXP," Hendrix used his guitar to simulate the sound of a spaceship taking off, fire alarms, motorcycles revving, and sirens in an impressive display that lasted for close to a minute. Therefore, as the uniquely gifted practitioner of this essential form of electronic guitar music, Hendrix assumes a kind of god-like, supernatural, or magic power. This relates to the power of Dionysus, who is able to drive the maenads into madness, without their drinking a large amount of wine.<sup>125</sup>

Before continuing on to the rest of our discussion of "Machine Gun," an explanation of Hendrix's guitar technique in general terms and specifically regarding his ability to control feedback is in order. Hendrix used a special combination of equipment and also relied on an unorthodox playing technique to achieve his sound effects. His instrument of choice, the Fender Stratocaster, is equipped with a highly flexible tremolo unit as part of the bridge, where the strings are attached to the guitar's body. This unit allows the pitch of all six strings to be lowered substantially and raised slightly, as well. The tremolo unit also has a set of springs, which counter-balance the tension of the strings. Hendrix occasionally pulled at these springs through an opening in the back of the guitar to effect the sound, and he can be seen reaching behind the guitar to do this in the video for "Machine Gun," as well as tapping on the body and neck of the guitar to initiate feedback. An important consideration in the left-handed Hendrix's choice of the Stratocaster is the fact that he played a right-handed model. This put the guitar's volume

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<sup>125</sup> "Dionysus," *The Oxford Companion to Wine, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, ed. Jancis Robinson, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, orig. ed. 1994), 232.

and tone controls and tremolo arm on the upper part of the body of the guitar, where he could more easily manipulate them.<sup>126</sup> No other popular guitar model is offered in this configuration, and although Fender at times markets an upside down “Hendrix model” to right-handers, its usage is negligible.

Another important facet of the Hendrix sound is his use of very light strings, tuned down a half step to make it easier for him to sing. The light strings in combination with the lowered tension achieved by tuning down a half-step causes the guitar to have a very soft action, perfect for bending strings and holding unusual chord formations. Stevie Ray Vaughan, who was greatly influenced by Hendrix, made a strong case for the use of very heavy strings during the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>127</sup> The use of heavy strings became much more prevalent thereafter, and they were subsequently adopted by the grunge movement, and the revival and expansion of punk that followed. By now it seems long forgotten that Eric Clapton, Hendrix, and Jimmy Page all used very light strings.

In a word, Hendrix’s guitar was very easy to play, and even more so because he had large hands. Nonetheless, his tone was never thin, unless this was the result of a musical or textural choice. This is partly because of the strength of the amplification he used, usually a minimum of two one-hundred-watt Marshall amplifiers combined with four four-speaker enclosures.<sup>128</sup> In pictures, three amp stacks are usually visible, plus additional Fender side fill amps. Some were probably used as spares. The amps were complimented by the use of a fuzz pedal, which adds distortion, sustain, and volume, and the wah-wah pedal, a mechanical tone pot that can be manipulated by foot control. In

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<sup>126</sup> Dave Hunter, “Get That Tone: *Are You Experienced* era Hendrix,” <<http://www2.gibson.com/News-Lifestyle/Features/en-us/getthattoneareyouexp.aspx>>, (Accessed April 9, 2013).

<sup>127</sup> Dan Forte, “Stevie Ray Vaughan,” *Guitar Player Magazine* (October 1984), 69, 76.

<sup>128</sup> Hunter.

addition to its ability to imitate vocal-like sounds, when the pedal is left in one position for any length of time, overtones can be emphasized, further controlling feedback and other textural elements of the sound. On “Machine Gun,” he also used a Univibe pedal, which simulates a rotating-speaker effect, up until that point only available in the studio, and the Octavia.<sup>129</sup>

All of these pieces of equipment are available to any guitarist. What sets Hendrix apart to an extent was his ability to keep such a high-powered rig from dissolving into a squall of constant noise. Thus, his muting technique, whereby the left and right hands are constantly engaged in suppressing (acoustic guitarists do this as well) unwanted sounds, was impressive. To this end and as part of his overall playing technique, Hendrix used his thumb for both holding single notes and chord tones, and for extensive muting. Adding to his overall impression of virtuosity bordering on the magical is that fact that he often played with his picking hand held out in a gesture of some sort, causing some in the audience to feel as if the guitar “was playing by itself.”<sup>130</sup>

### **Analysis of Machine Gun**

As “Machine Gun” is Hendrix’s most evolved example of the style of sound sculpture described above, a detailed account of the song should help to illustrate the techniques he used and the emotional effect that they create. The sound and fury that is expressed in the song and the unique, bordering on supernatural way in which it is played will also help to show the Dionysian elements that course through Hendrix’s music. A brief chart detailing some of the various sections of the piece is given below (ex. 3).

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<sup>129</sup> Billy Cox.

<sup>130</sup> Klas Burling, “Interview with Jimi Hendrix,” on Swedish radio show, *Pop ’67 Special* (May 28, 1967), in *Hendrix on Hendrix*, 41.

### **Example 3, Basic outline of “Machine Gun.”**

**( :22) Layered Introduction begins, first ‘gunfire motive’**

**(1:45) Verse 1**

**(2:51) Verse 2**

**(4:00) First Guitar Solo begins with high B**

**(4:57) Helicopter effect with whammy bar**

**(5:53) Highest note, #6 or C#**

**(6:03) Bombing effects begin**

**(7:00) Pickup/tone change**

**(7:45) Verse 3 begins with Buddy Miles background vocals**

**(8:40) Beginning of the most intense feedback section.**

**(9:42) Dialog between guitar and snare drum, ‘gunfire motive’**

**(9:50) Verse 4 – Buddy Miles**

**(10:33)Whammy solo – “floating between life and death”**

**(11:40) Grand Battle**

**End**

Before beginning the song, Hendrix dedicates the piece to soldiers fighting in Chicago, Milwaukee and elsewhere and then, almost as an afterthought but with implied irony, to the soldiers fighting in Vietnam. “Happy New Year, first of all. I hope you have about a million or two million more of ‘em. I’d like to dedicate this one to the draggin’ scene that’s going on, all the soldiers that are fighting in Chicago and Milwaukee, and New York. Oh, yes – and all the soldiers fighting in Vietnam. I’d like to do a thing called, ‘Machine Gun.’” He seems to be suggesting that the audience has forgotten something – that the soldiers are their age and therefore more like them than unlike them.



seventh degrees of the minor pentatonic scale within the central repeating riffs. This is most true of the D that completes the pattern in example one, serving as a melodic rock dominant.

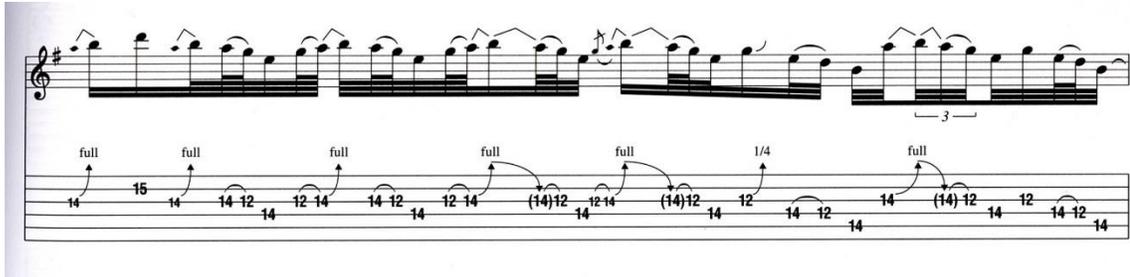
A short instrumental guitar solo precedes the first verse. The vocal is accompanied by the lead guitar, as in a traditional solo acoustic guitar blues, for example Blind Willie Johnson's "God Moves on the Water" (1929). The first line includes the lyrics, "Machine gun – tearing my body all apart." This could be interpreted as representing *sparagmos*, the ripping apart of Dionysus's body by the Titans, which was mentioned in the Festivals portion of this paper, above, relating to the destruction of the guitar. The verses are played with space in between each line for guitar fills, and verses one and two can also be divided into two parts, with longer instrumentals between them.

After the second verse a high B, bent up a whole step from A, begins the first guitar solo (ex. 6). The bass begins to substitute variations on the original riff including an ascending version (4:10), and a more dissonant, angular one (4:20). Hendrix plays a long trill (ex. 7), varying its pitch by up to a major third with the tremolo bar, evoking the sound of a helicopter. Some of the phrases in the guitar solo, for example at 5:35, are in a more typical blues style that includes some major pentatonic inflections. This could imply that the fighting is not all suffering and fear. At times, the soldiers may even relish the heat of battle, when they are killing and winning, or at least, surviving. Another high A, bent up a whole step to B and sustained for several measures, sounds like a screaming, shriek of wailing pain. The highest note of the solo and the song is formed by another whole step bend, from B, two frets from the top of the guitar's range, to C# (5:53).



of emotional anxiety. An ascending tremolo bar glissando, played as Hendrix is moving to a slower rhythmic pattern, mimics the sound of a mortar being fired (7:16), demonstrating Hendrix's fluidity in the sense of being able to switch from a fast single note passage to a realistic sound effect in mid-flight.

**Example 8, "Machine Gun," solo after switching pickups**



The band brings the volume down (7:30), and the bass and guitar play a repeating two bar phrase that includes a sixteenth note figure on the last two beats of the second bar (ex. 9). Buddy Miles starts his descending minor third from the 7<sup>th</sup> degree motif, while Hendrix begins verse three (7:45).

**Example 9, "Machine Gun," second unison bass/guitar riff**



In between the third verse and Buddy Miles's verse (ex. 10), which is more a kind of bridge to the end of the song, Hendrix plays some of the most intense feedback of the song. Airplanes are imitated by the feedback, including the sounds of machine guns mounted on their wings (9:06). The sound of an air raid siren, one of Hendrix's more common and simple effects is quickly interjected (9:10). The sounds are so realistic, and

yet so colorful, one could imagine that they could easily fit into one of today's battle video games. An exchange between the guitar and snare drum (9:42), prepares the way for the fourth verse, which has a completely different melody and rhythmic organization from the previous verses.

**Example 10, "Machine Gun," verse four**

Don't you shoot him down. He's got to leave here.  
Don't you shoot him down. He's got to stay here.  
He ain't going nowhere.  
He's been shot down to the ground  
No way he can stay there!  
No, no, no, no, no.

Buddy Miles starts the final 'verse,' as the dialog between the snare and guitar continues to provide rhythmic bursts of machine gun fire (9:50). Each line is punctuated by the guitar and snare drum playing the 'machine gun' motive. Afterward, Miles plays a cymbal wash, as if the tune is ending. Hendrix continues with a disjointed, wandering solo that is played with heavy whammy bar, and many notes in unusual intonation (10:33). This part seems to symbolize some part between life and death, or the final 'playing back of one's life in the mind' right before dying. Hendrix uses his tremolo bar to produce a kind of groaning, death rattle sound (11:30). Just then the grand battle scene erupts (11:40), with tremendous feedback in combination with the whammy bar and other effects to symbolize the climax of the battle. It is notable that this last blitzkrieg takes place after the protagonist of the song has died. It places him outside of the major forces that constitute his world and at the same time illustrate how small he is in relation to the military action he is a part of. The tune ends abruptly thereafter without a real reentry from the band.

## Summary

We have seen through a discussion and analysis of the background and content of Hendrix's "Machine Gun" how the song and its performance practice embodies Dionysian themes such as suffering, the annihilation of *sparagmos*, and Hendrix's virtuosic performance style, creating an aura that promulgates Hendrix's status as a Dionysian figure. We have also looked at principles in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer that contradict the idea of Hendrix as a Dionysian figure in terms of the song's political motivations and use of programmatic effects. The examination of the song as seen through a frame of Aristotle's *Poetics* sheds some light on the classically dramatic nature of the piece, however, and it would seem somewhat difficult to fully disconnect the song from the Dionysian since tragedy was born of the Dionysian festivals. The song's connection to Woodstock through its similarity in style to Hendrix's performance there of "The Star-Spangled Banner" would also forge a tie to Dionysian practices. This is because as a kind of 'sonic spectacle,' "Machine Gun" is connected to the festival atmosphere.

## Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to delve further into the music of Jimi Hendrix, one of the most dramatic performers and innovative musicians of the rock era. It has also been concerned with examining his music and performance practice to ascertain whether or not they contain a Dionysian component. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that Hendrix was a Dionysian figure and that in many respects, his music supports this hermeneutical finding.

Hendrix's sudden rise to fame, including his traveling great distances to conquer new musical scenes, ties him to the Dionysian myth. His strong showing at the music festivals of the sixties, such as Monterey Pop and Woodstock, connect him to a traditional form of entertainment in ancient Greece, the Great Dionysia. His performance practice, which includes his theatrical stage presentation and creation of a 'sonic sculpture' enabled him to develop a huge following, who would seem to have embodied what Otto calls the "Greek Spirit, born to observe."<sup>131</sup>

Among his many innovations, Hendrix is one of the few who can lay claim to his own namesake chord. This attests to his mythical status. Yet his use of the 'sharp nine sound' also ties into his version of the Dionysiac myth. The 7#9 chord has an angry side, an attitude that intones, 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know.' The very sonic character of much of his music therefore embodies the Dionysian principles of mad ecstasy and ruthless aggression. Hendrix used this sound to illustrate his songs, such as "Purple Haze" and "Spanish Castle Magic," whose words depicted both the ecstatic and the mad elements of the mythical Dionysian rites.

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<sup>131</sup> Otto, 24.

In the song “Machine Gun,” even though there is no ‘sharp nine sound,’ there is still a sense of the Dionysian. The suffering of the song, which is palpable in the lyrics and subject matter, is supported by the blues that forms the structural basis of the song, and by the sound painting that illustrates the magnitude of this suffering. Nietzsche may disagree with the idea of music that is enhanced by images, as when he says that the “Dionysian musician is, without any images, himself pure primordial pain and its primordial re-echoing.”<sup>132</sup> That the song depicts a version of *sparagmos* might satisfy the question of its primordial pain. But then, Nietzsche later became unsure of what Dionysian music really was, as was stated in the introduction to this paper. In either case, it is almost impossible to deny that “Machine Gun” represents a universal, intense pain; whether or not it is explicitly primordial does not matter. Concerning politics, although it is true that Nietzsche specifically equates politics with the Apollonian, it is hard to think of dismissing politics completely from almost any situation. As noted above, the Great Dionysia served a political purpose, as well as religious and artistic. The dramatic analysis of the song as per Aristotle’s *Poetics* illustrates how the story of “Machine Gun” has a timeless quality, and a tragic one. The drama that is inherent in “Machine Gun” brings it closer still to the Great Dionysia, in my estimation.

That Hendrix flourished in a culture that Ayn Rand denounced as ‘Dionysian’ would seem to make him Dionysian, as well. But Hendrix not only flourished in the culture of the sixties, he helped to build it. As noted by Roz Payne regarding the “Star-Spangled Banner,” the counter-culture identified with Hendrix, although Hendrix himself tried to distance himself from simple counter-culture rhetoric. This is evidenced by his

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<sup>132</sup> Nietzsche, *BOT*, 50.

reticence where politics were concerned. Like most artists, he didn't want to be pigeon-holed. Yet this points to one of the inherent contradictions at play in a Rand versus Nietzsche version of the Dionysian. If Woodstock is Dionysian as per Rand, and Hendrix made a political statement there that came to symbolize the event, then according to Nietzsche, Rand must be wrong. Of course, philosophers are born to argue and these are but the loose ends of this discussion, not the heart, in my opinion.

The sad part of course is that the world lost Jimi Hendrix way too soon. One of the aspects of the Hendrix myth that I wanted to address in this paper, and that I rarely hear people speak about, is how sad it is. Somehow in our culture, tremendous achievement seems to be a fair exchange for an early death. But that doesn't make Hendrix's death any less sad. The question always lingers, what would he have been doing now, or in the seventies, or whenever. It's hard to imagine, given the difficult position he got himself into with drugs, hangers-on, and the failure inherent in rock stardom to ever be able to actually grow into adulthood. Hendrix still makes the news, such as recently, when another record was released by Experience Hendrix.<sup>133</sup> One wonders, however if Hendrix's estate is doing him a favor, when only a cursory listen to the re-recorded version of "Stone Free" from *Valleys of Neptune* is so vastly inferior to laconic, spirited, and devilishly competent original.

Unfortunately for Hendrix, the Dionysian may have been something that brought him down, to an extent. The drug culture of the sixties proved to be fatal for him and there were too many kids that still screamed for him to burn his guitar long after he was

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<sup>133</sup> James C. McKinley Jr., "Exhuming the Last of Hendrix's Studio Sessions," *New York Times*, March 7, 2013, C4.

tired of that act. This really bothered him.<sup>134</sup> Hendrix did have another side to his personality, though. As wild as he could be in concert, in the studio, he tended to emphasize “Apollonian precision over Dionysian abandon.”<sup>135</sup> One would hope that had he lived, some kind of balance would have come into his life, and those kids would have grown up and started to listen more.

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<sup>134</sup> Don Speicher, “Experience,” *Great Speckled Bird*, (Sept, 1968), in *Hendrix on Hendrix*, 132-33.

<sup>135</sup> Vivien Schweitzer, “Less Celebrated Beethoven No Less Appealing to Pianist,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2013, C5. A review of a recital by pianist Peter Serkin.

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