

Interview with Corey Washington, Independent Scholar on Jimi Hendrix

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Most people in Augusta, GA, know Corey Washington. He is a popular history teacher, beloved by his students and their parents. He is a patron of music, attending local cultural events and supporting the burgeoning live music scene in the region. He is an independent author and expert on the life and music of Jimi Hendrix. Having seen him at the Augusta Literary Festival on multiple occasions and purchased one of his books on Hendrix for a friend, I decided to reach out to Mr. Washington for an interview on Hendrix, whom scholars describe as an icon of Afrofuturism.

1. **How did you first become interested in Jimi Hendrix?** I always have to mention the name of a disgraced individual Hulk Hogan, who was later exposed as a racist. But he was the one that hipped me to Hendrix because of his ring entrance music: “Voodoo Child.” The song opened with some weird scratching sounds, which I later learned was Jimi’s precursor to a DJ scratching. He was manipulating the wah-wah pedal to get those sounds from his guitar. That drew me in, and I’ve been collecting his music and researching him ever since. That was in 1996. *Follow ups: Washington grew up listening to Disco, House, and Hip-Hop. Born in 1976, Washington identifies a cultural “dead spot” for Hendrix between 1976 and 1990. I asked him why he thought that was. He said no one is sampling Hendrix; James Brown is the man. It would take decades for the crate divers to catch up to Jimi. At the same time, Hendrix was not marketed to the Black community. His music is not on Black radio.*
2. **What was your methodology for researching Hendrix?** At first, I searched Hendrix like everyone else--books, movies, DVDs, CDs, liner notes. But I noticed that there were very few writers of color writing about Hendrix. I also noticed that when European writers wrote about Hendrix, they brought their cultural biases to the table, which meant downplaying his R&B influences, glossing over his funk explorations, and sometimes even erasing his blackness. You would hear quotes like ‘Jimi never saw color, or Jimi didn’t think of himself as black,’ or you would see them ascribe exotic labels to dilute Jimi’s Blackness by over-emphasizing his Native American ancestry. I took all this in and wanted to focus my research on examining Jimi Hendrix from a Black perspective, which means talking to Black people from all walks of life, people that knew Jimi and those that didn’t, in order to get a well-rounded view of how he affected Black music, life, culture, and people. I examined his quotes and actions and put them in the context of a Black man in the 60s, who’s been ushered in as the top of the food chain when it came to a white-dominated field, Rock-n-roll. When you do that, you start to understand how Jimi had to wear that mask and code switch in order to speak to two separate audiences at a time. So just by looking at Jimi Hendrix through a Black lens, you pick up on a lot of information that other Hendrix researchers missed or glossed over. *Follow ups: He tells me white scholars feel the need to separate Hendrix from Black excellence.*
3. **How is your approach to Hendrix different from the approaches of other Hendrix biographers?** I started with a premise that Jimi Hendrix was not well-respected in the Black community. I also came from a position where I thought Hendrix was a sell-out, so

in my research, I wanted to challenge myself and my own failings. My approach to Hendrix is a lot more personal than other Hendrix biographers because my research was constantly evolving and shaping my perceptions about Hendrix. I also became a much needed advocate for Hendrix in the Black community. *Follow ups: Washington indicated that Hendrix had to do what he had to do, like the poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar entitled, "We Wear the Mask." Hendrix code switches. Washington refutes this notion of Hendrix as a sell out or outlier. He advocates for Hendrix's inclusion in the Black cultural canon.*

4. **What connections do you make between Hendrix and other musicians that may surprise readers?** I go deep with my connections when it comes to Jimi and P-Funk, Hip-Hop, and Jazz. For instance, Jimi's exploration of space was a bridge between the musings of Sun Ra and George Clinton's *Mothership Connection*. Just as Sun Ra and Clinton spoke about space as a means of escapism, Jimi was talking about U.F.O.s and building machines to breathe underwater. I have a chapter in my book that compares Jimi and Prince, but it goes beyond the usual comparisons and contrasts. I connect Jimi to hip-hop in all of its stages and show how even modern rappers have been influenced by him like Drake, Whiz Khalifa, Andre 3000, and Future. I show how various artists have name dropped Jimi in their songs. Taking all that information shows that Jimi had a lasting impact on hip-hop culture. If the actual connections don't surprise readers, the depth of the connections will. *Follow ups: In "1983," Hendrix is singing about a merman. Future refers to himself as Future Hendrix. Many contemporary Black artists name drop Hendrix. Pimps and hustlers began to dress like Hendrix after his death; look at the fashion in Superfly (1972).*
5. **Can Hendrix's music be categorized? How would you describe his sound, his art?** Any category that you place Hendrix's music in would be inadequate. You would have to break Jimi's music down into several categories and subcategories to even try to do his music justice. His sound at his peak was a fusion sound. At the beginning of his playing career, he had a strong R&B/Blues base but continued to add more flavor in terms of the various styles of rock guitar. When he went to England, he took the British Rock sound and integrated it into his R&B/Blues sound; then he took the emerging technology and created a futuristic sound of feedback, shrieks, and wails that guitar players have been trying to catch up to in the last fifty years. Then you combine his futuristic sound and couple that with lyrics ranging from highly abstract and profound to concrete positive affirmations of liberation and freedom. His sound and lyrics ran the gamut from classical, flamenco, ballads, and soft rock, to funk, heavy metal, fusion, and even an early form of hip-hop. *Follow ups: I asked what is Hendrix doing, technique wise, that is futuristic? Washington said Hendrix's use of feedback is key. He played so loudly and was able to manipulate feedback in a way no one else had or could, as demonstrated through the music's shrieks and wails. He uses the emerging technology: panning, stereo, speeding up/slowing down, new innovations for wah-wah pedal. Hendrix takes the old and adds technology to create something new. (Thus, the fusion is not just a blend of musical genres; it is also the application of older and newer techniques.) Hendrix has abstract and concrete lyrics.*
6. **What makes Hendrix unique among his peers?** Hendrix walked in two different worlds. He was deeply entrenched amongst Rock royalty and was the top concert draw at the peak of his career. And he also was hanging out in Harlem with people from the hood. He had

his ear to several different scenes and you could hear his music gravitating towards the Funk sound that he helped pioneer after his untimely death. Hendrix emerged from the R&B Chitlin' Circuit with an incredible sense of rhythm, timing, and showmanship; then, he fused modern technology and mixed the primal or raw sounds with the most advanced electrical gadgets, pedals, and studio equipment of his time. So he had the best of both worlds. He had the soul and the God-given talent that white British guitar players would die for. He was cut from the same cloth as the bluesmen that the British worshipped like Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, etc. And he had the financial backing and support that the Black players wished they had. Jimi played the biggest festivals, filled out arenas all over the world, and had lots of fame and attention. *Follow ups: Washington says Hendrix is an incredible rhythm guitar player. He has rhythm, timing, and showmanship and applies the new technology. He walks in two different worlds.*

7. **Some include Hendrix in the category of “Afrofuturism.” Included in this category are Sun Ra and the Arkestra, George Clinton and Parliament, Newcleus, Jonzun Crew, Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force, Erykah Badu, Janelle Monae, and others. Do you understand why some would describe Hendrix as Afrofuturistic? Is there something otherworldly about Hendrix or his music?** Yes, Hendrix's whole swagger is drenched in Afrofuturism. He had the futuristic sound, gadgets, technology. He was able to paint sound pictures. His lyrics were steeped in Sci-Fi content. He was so good at what he did, people would say he had to be from another world, as opposed to giving him credit as an extremely talented black man. His wardrobe was otherworldly. He had the total Afrofuturistic package. The sounds that he created, they now have advanced computers to try and emulate what he was doing with primitive equipment. That's how much control he had over feedback. Manipulating and controlling electricity and static, some would say that's musical alchemy. *Follow ups: Hendrix wears women's clothing attire but makes those items masculine. (Little Richard wears women's items, but the public does not see him as masculine presenting. Pushing the envelope of gender norms lays groundwork for Prince.) Hendrix exposes the beauty in dissonance; listen to “Purple Haze,” which opens with what is called a “devil's chord.” Listen to “Valleys of Neptune.”*
8. **What do you believe Hendrix's objective(s) were with his music?** Ultimately, Jimi wanted people to be free. His style of playing was free form; he would constantly break out of the structures of his songs. He never played his songs the same way. His lyrics were penetrating the deep recesses of people's minds and activating portions that forced them to use their imagination. If his music was dominant on Black urban radio, I'm convinced that the current condition of young Black youth would be different because his music encourages higher-order thinking skills. Of course, Hendrix's music was trying to bring people together, but his songs like “Machine Gun” and “Star-Spangled Banner” exposed the forces that were determined to exploit people and take advantage of their fears and prejudices. His message in his music was just as big a threat to the warmongers of the Vietnam War as MLK talking out against the war. Jimi Hendrix had the ears of millions of youth. And what Jimi was preaching wasn't in line with what the powers that be were pushing to the masses in the late 60s to early 70s. *Follow ups: Hendrix's free form inspires other musicians to break out of the structure. His music is imaginative and through imagination we can get free. “Straight Ahead” is an example of Hendrix's commentary on the Civil Rights*

Movement. I mention that it is interesting that although Hendrix's music was about rebellion and challenging the establishment, we don't hear him played as part of the soundtrack of Civil Rights. He's associated with Hippies and Anti-Vietnam but not Eyes on the Prize.

9. **Your books *Nobody Cages Me* and *Jimi Hendrix--Black Legacy: (A Dream Deferred)* grapple with Hendrix's legacy. What do you think his legacy is? How is that legacy informed or defined by race?** Jimi's legacy is being one of the most influential musicians in the world, changing the way people play and listen to music. His legacy did not transcend race but rather transcended music and seeped into the very fabric of this country. People carried themselves like Jimi, dressed like him, lived like him. A huge part of his popularity stemmed from his blackness. Because of many complex factors that I bring out in *Black Legacy*, his legacy in the Black community has to be peeled back in layers. Jimi doesn't have the support of major Black institutions, so his impact and influence is spread out among individuals, namely musicians and a wide array of black listeners who are attracted to Jimi for various reasons. Jimi has a strong black base of fans, but you wouldn't know it unless you started asking around. *Follow Ups: Hendrix changes how people play.*
10. **Afrofuturists are interested in the blending of past, present, and future in their art. In what ways do you see this blending or fusion happening in Hendrix's work?** Jimi has always been fascinated with the oldest of black musical traditions. His playing of the blues is a throwback tribute to his musical ancestors. His song "Up from the Skies" expresses the idea that alien technology is really from the past rather than the future since it pre-dates our civilization. In my book, *JHBL*, I interviewed Jimmy Bleu, another Hendrix historian. He mentions that Jimi met at least twice with Sun Ra, one time right before Jimi recorded *Electric Lady* and another time at the Katherine Dunham center. So Jimi was well aware of the teachings of Sun Ra. And also Jimi was very forward thinking, not just with technology and studio techniques, but his session with Lightning Rod of the Last Poets and Buddy Miles was a glimpse into the future, with hip-hop. I have an interview with Cordell Dickerson, who talks about the Battle of Los Angeles and how Jimi was talking about how sounds of certain frequencies could heal people, how sound could be used to stop machines from working and even being used as weapons. We can see some of this today with sonic weapons.
11. **Afrofuturists are also interested in the ways in which art can liberate Black people. How do you think Hendrix's art liberated him and/or Black people?** Jimi's music expanded the vocabulary of the guitar. The former rigid structure of chicken scratch R&B/Soul/Funk guitar was not adventurous enough for Jimi. This freed people up to express themselves more freely with their instruments. People like Ernie Isley, Eddie Hazel, Mike Hampton, and later Prince were given the green light by Hendrix to play with freedom. Jimi's formation of the Band of Gypsies was even more explicit, as he showed how a soulful sound with fatback drumming and heavy bass could be combined with experimental rock/blues guitar. If you listen to the music after the BOGs, you can hear the liberation and freedom in the players. Jimi's lyrics also directly addressed freedom and liberation. Songs like "Freedom," "Straight Ahead," and "The Power of Soul" are his best examples.

12. What's next for you and your reclamation of Hendrix as an icon for Black culture?

I'm still working to get the BOGs inducted into the Rock and the R&B Hall of Fame. I'm working with one of Jimi's friends in NYC, TaharQu Aleem, to commemorate the fiftieth-year anniversary of Jimi's outdoor concert in Harlem. I want the new book to get out into the hands of the public. The feedback that I've gotten has been very positive. Many people are saying that they learned new things about Hendrix. I want to try to do a Netflix styled documentary connecting the dots on Jimi's Black legacy. I just have to find the resources and the right person to partner with.

Afrofuturism Songs of Hendrix (list created by Corey Washington):

- Third Stone from the Sun
- Aye
- EXP A: BAL
- Up From the Skies
- And the Gods Made Love
- Voodoo Chile
- 1983
- House Burning Down
- Voodoo Child (Slight Return)
- Purple Haze
- Stars that Play with Laughing
- Astro Man
- Paligap
- Midnight
- Valleys of Neptune

Corey Washington was born in Jamaica Queens and raised in Brooklyn; his musical sensibilities were shaped in New York City and honed in Augusta, GA, the home of James Brown and Jessye Norman. A history teacher and independent scholar, Washington is the author of two self-published books on Hendrix: *Jimi Hendrix--Black Legacy: (A Dream Deferred)* (2019) and *Nobody Cages Me* (2010). Follow him on Twitter [@jimibl](https://twitter.com/jimibl).