

# 'Jimi: All Is By My Side: Hendrix, lost in a purple haze



Andre Benjamin is a Jimi-Hendrix-in-flux in 'Jimi: All Is By My Side' (XLRator Media)



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That whole gypsies-on-acid look, with the velvet and brocade and silk scarves. Those sly, half-mumbled, half-shouted vocals. And the guitar playing. Man, that guitar playing.

'Scuse me, while I miss this guy.

But Hendrix is back, after a fashion, in "Jimi: All Is By My Side," a film by John Ridley which takes an interesting tack for a biopic — it doesn't try to do a complete biography.

Instead, it looks at a crucial 12 months or so in Hendrix' life, circa 1966 — in which he went, with jarring speed, from playing the Café Wha? in the Village to recording his first album in London and readying for his breakthrough performance at Monterey.

The limited scope is a smart choice for two reasons.

The first is that the filmmakers did not get permission to use any of Hendrix' famous tunes.

That would be crippling in a film which purported to tell the whole story — but, for a movie that's only about how Hendrix became Hendrix, it's barely noticed.

The second, is that it spares us a lot of the usual biopic boredom. We don't have to see Hendrix's childhood (although we get a perfect sense of it, just listening to him talk to his father on the phone). Nor do we have to stick around for his demise.

Instead, we meet him while he's already on the cusp of being great — and watch him get greater.

Andre Benjamin, of OutKast, plays Hendrix, and he's one of the film's biggest assets. He perfectly captures the man's alternately gulping/gushing way of talking, as he throws ideas up on the air; the guitarist was always riffing, one way or another.

And physically, he's particularly good — he gets the musician's ferocity on stage, his almost somnambulant quality off (even before the hard drugs).

But the script isn't terrific.

Its fudges some facts (much to the disgust of Hendrix' long-time girlfriend, it shows him beating her; actually, it was another woman he supposedly hit). It goes off on some tangents (the appearance of the radical Michael X clearly means more to Ridley than it ever did to the hippie Hendrix).

And Ridley — directing his first feature — does his own script no favors. His camera can't hide the low-budget compromises made in trying to recreate the '60s Village, or "Swinging London." Dialogue scenes sometimes go on too long, and scenes are abruptly cut together, without much of a sense of flow.

And yet, thanks to Benjamin's performance and the unique quality of the subject itself, the movie's hard to dismiss.

This was the barely known guitarist who casually came on stage to jam with Cream —and blew Eric Clapton away. Who cheekily opened a concert that Paul McCartney and George Harrison were attending, by playing the title track from the brand-new "Sgt. Pepper's" — and winning their admiring applause.

And whose life, even in this flawed fashion, needs to be remembered, if only to show us how high music can take us, and how hard musicians — like all of us — can fall.

Ratings note: The film contains drug and alcohol abuse, strong language and violence.

'Jimi: All Is By My Side' (R) XLRator (118 min.)

Directed by John Ridley. With Andre Benjamin. Now playing in New York.

★ ★ 1/2

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