

Jimi Plays Philadelphia (12 April 1969)

by Frank Moriarty

As was the case in cities across America, the burgeoning hippie movement that could be found in Philadelphia in the late 1960s took root in coffeehouses during the middle of that decade. Always something of a conservative city -and very much identified by its close-knit neighborhoods- Philadelphia wasn't exactly a fertile ground for the emergence of the counter-culture. But a public park to the south and west of City Hall became Philadelphia's hip focal point as kids from across the area joined together to share in the joys of the rapidly evolving rock and roll scene.

Rittenhouse Square served as this de facto meeting ground, and narrow Samson Street just to the north became the commercial and cultural center for Philadelphia's hip kids. As the music shifted further and further from acoustic music to electric, coffeehouses like The Second Fret, the Artist's Hut, and the Gilded Cage yielded to venues more suitable to high-volume rock. The owner of The Second Fret, Manny Rubin, saw the changes coming and opened a new club called The Trauma. Philadelphia bands like Mandrake Memorial, Woody's Truck Stop (featuring young guitarist Todd Rundgren), and Elizabeth performed in the club located in the heart of the Samson Street hippie district. But soon after the opening of The Trauma, the rock and roll focus of the city turned to a tire warehouse several blocks north. There, several brothers in the Spivak family - experienced in the bar business in the city- took the empty space and converted it into the Electric Factory.

The Electric Factory, located at 2201 Arch Street, opened in February of 1968 with the Chambers Brothers headlining. Most shows in the club's early days were booked on weekends, but the quality of available talent was high. The third week after the club was opened the headline act was the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Hendrix and the Experience performed two shows each night on February 21 and 22, supported by Rundgren and Woody's Truck Stop. According to Larry Magid, the talent booker at the Electric Factory, Jimi played on a dark stage with fluorescent flowers painted on his face, and his hands - "All you could see was his face, and his hands moving across the guitar. It was amazing."

This was to be the first of four appearances by Jimi in Philadelphia. By the time Hendrix, Redding, and Mitchell returned to Philadelphia to play the Arena on March 31, 1968 with Soft Machine and Woody's Truck Stop, the Electric Factory was regularly booking shows on week nights as well. The Trauma had gone out of business, unable to compete with the Spivak brothers and Larry Magid. The coffeehouses had died out even earlier. But, as evidenced by the Experience's performance at the higher-capacity Arena, prime rock and roll acts were already drawing crowds too large for the confines of the Electric Factory.

The Spectrum

Coinciding with the rise of the Electric Factory was the construction of a huge new entertainment facility in South Philadelphia. To be known as the Spectrum, the 17,000-seat, oval-shaped building was intended to be a multi-purpose arena capable of hosting events as varied as its name implied. It would be the home hockey rink of the National Hockey League Flyers, the home basketball court of the Philadelphia 76ers, as well as the site of major entertainment events.

Opening to much hoopla in September of 1967, the Spectrum went from being the pride of the

city to a source of embarrassment on March 1, 1968. During a fierce late-winter storm, huge gusts of wind battered the facility and tore the roof right off the building. The inside of the Spectrum was exposed to the elements, and months worth of events had to be postponed. Hasty repairs and reinforcements were mandated, and the Spectrum reclaimed its state-of-the-art status in time to host its first major rock concert in December of 1968: the Philadelphia stop of Cream's final tour.

Despite the growing popularity of the new forms of rock and roll, all was not well in the Philadelphia scene. Urban legend has it that John Cardinal Kroll, boss of the Philadelphia Catholic church, would pass by the Electric Factory on the way to his suburban mansion. Growing incensed at the freakish appearance of club patrons and the blatant use of such vices as marijuana, Kroll complained to his good friend, Frank Rizzo. Rizzo was commissioner of Philadelphia's police, a force with a growing reputation for violence and a tendency to ignore civil rights. Allegedly at Kroll's behest, Rizzo targeted the Electric Factory for heightened police attention. Rizzo made it clear that he thought the only product coming out of the Electric Factory was juvenile delinquency. Rizzo was determined to shut it down.

It was in this contentious atmosphere that word came of the Jimi Hendrix Experience's performance scheduled at the Spectrum on Saturday, April 12, 1969. Not that things were any less strained in the Hendrix camp. Rumors of the breakup of the Experience were hot topics in 1969, and the rumors appeared to take on greater substance when Noel Redding announced his side project Fat Mattress. The fact that Fat Mattress was scheduled to be the opening act on the 1969 American tour appeared to be as much a concession to keep Noel in the fold as it was a musical decision.

Creative matters weren't the only difficulties troubling Jimi. His relationship with manager Michael Jeffery was growing strained, the Ed Chalpin/PPX lawsuit over the contract Jimi had signed in his days with Curtis Knight was a nagging problem, and the sheer pressure of rock stardom and its attendant demands were focused directly on Jimi.

Since playing the Royal Albert Hall in London on February 18 and 24, the Experience had not performed live until the night before the Philadelphia show, when the band performed at Dorton Arena in Raleigh, North Carolina. Flying into Philadelphia International Airport on April 12, the Jimi Hendrix Experience were just getting into shape for the 25-date North American tour booked by Jeffery.

The Interview

On Saturday afternoon of the show at the Spectrum Jimi was interviewed in his room at the Holiday Inn at around 4 p.m. by writer John Lombardi. The story was published a week later in the now-defunct Philadelphia alternative newspaper *Distant Drummer* [issue of April 17/23]. Despite being tired, the ever-accommodating Hendrix submitted to yet another interrogation. Jimi revealed a bit about his state of mind regarding this interview when he was asked if he would mind being photographed. "No," Hendrix replied, "the same shit happens every day, so fuck it."

Lombardi, who apparently was far from being an expert on Hendrix's music (as seen by his reference in print to the song "Let Me Stand Inside Your Fire"), started things off on a superficial note by remarking that Jimi's hair appeared shorter than in his publicity photos. "My hair?" Jimi questioned. "I cut it short in protest. There are too many long-haired people running around whose heads aren't anywhere. But I think I'm gonna grow it again."

The interview continued to get off to a rocky start as the sore subject of the "nude" *Electric Ladyland* cover and Jimi's image was brought up. "I don't consider myself a success. I haven't

even started yet," Hendrix told Lombardi. "The scene puts you through a lot of changes...you get involved in images. I didn't have nothing to do with that stupid LP cover they released, and I don't even want to talk about it. It's mostly all bullshit."

Lombardi proceeded to remind Jimi about his stage act, referring to "setting the guitar on fire, going through the motions of intercourse." Not surprisingly at this stage of his career, the question served only to aggravate Jimi. "We did those things mostly because they used to be fun," Jimi noted. "They just came out of us. But the music was still the main thing. Then what happened, the crowd started to want those things more than the music. Those little things that were just added on, like frosting, you know, became the most important. Things got changed around. We don't do that stuff as much anymore."

The next topic broached was the obscenity arrest of singer Jim Morrison following the disastrous performance by The Doors in Miami on March 1, 1969, when Morrison allegedly exposed himself on stage. "Well, if it happened, it is flipped out, but I've only heard reports," Jimi cautioned. "I guess you'd have to ask Morrison about that. I don't want to talk about it. You know, we used to try to defend against some of the publicity, but we don't anymore. They just ignore what you say anyway, and the people who know where you're at know without asking questions. They know from the music. I dig music.

"Listen," Jimi continued, "you want to talk about music? That's what I really know about. I don't want to say nothing about comparisons with other groups because if you do that puts you higher or lower than them, and that's just the same old cycle. Our music is in a very solid state now. Not technically, just in the sense that we can feel around the music and get into things better. We don't have any answers this time, but we'd love to turn everyone on to all we know... We know for instance that Jesus was starting to get it together quite nicely, but that ten commandments thing was a drag. The bogey man isn't going to come get you if you don't tie your shoe. You don't have to be afraid to make love to one of your boyfriend's wives. Brand-name religions like Bhuddism and Zen are just clashes. The Catholic church is spreading and vomiting over the earth. The Church of England is the biggest landowner in England. Your home isn't America, it's the earth, but things are precarious, man. America could start getting together and China or Russia could go and we'd all be even heavier slaves. You know my song, 'I don't live today, maybe tomorrow?' That's where it's at.

"But I want to talk about music," Jimi insisted. "Things were getting too pretentious, too complicated. 'Stone Free,' you know that? That's much simpler. That's blues and rock and whatever happens happens. People were singing about acid itself, man. Things start to rule you. Images. Drugs. Everybody forgets what happened to God.

"You know when you're young, most people have a little burning thing, but then you get your law degree and go into your little cellophane cage. You don't have to be an entertainer or anything to get it together. You can do the family thing. I've wanted to do that at times... I've wanted to go away to the hills sometimes, but I stayed. Some people are meant to stay and carry messages..."

"You think of yourself as a messenger?" asked Lombardi. "No, man, nothing like that," answered the offended Hendrix, who paused before speaking again. "I didn't want to do this interview because I was tired and I never get any time to myself. I wanted to relax, write a song. But how can you say that to someone?"

At this point Gerry Stickells, Experience road manager, arrived to tell Jimi it was time to get ready to leave for the show. Before ending the interview, Jimi made one more point. "Listen, I'm tired but this is what I'm trying to say. If you prostitute your own thing...you can't do that. We was having a lot of fun with that stuff we used to do, but the more the press would play it up and

the more the audience would want it, the more we'd shy away from it. Do you see where that all fits? When I'm on stage, playing the guitar, I don't think about sex. I can't make love when a beautiful record comes on. When I was in Hawaii, I seen a beautiful thing...a miracle. There were a lot of rings around the moon, and the rings were all women's faces."

Despite sitting in a room full of people, with an interviewer anxious to listen to anything Hendrix chose to say, Jimi chose to indirectly refer to his own isolation as a rock star. "I wish I could tell somebody about it," Hendrix said to finish the interview. Before leaving, Lombardi observed Jimi speaking with a pretty black girl who was trying to get Jimi to call her friend who was in the hospital. The hospitalized girl, a Hendrix fan named "Beefy," received a twenty minute call from Jimi before Hendrix and his entourage left for the performance.



The Concert

At the Spectrum, a large crowd awaited Jimi's arrival. Ticket prices ranged from \$3.50 to \$6.50, and although the all-reserved-seat show was not a sell-out -14,489 was the official attendance- the building was nearly full to capacity. In the next to the last row of the building was the author of this article, 13 years old and clutching an Electric Church concert program full of pictures of Jimi & Co. Appropriately titled *Electric Church* as the church that my parents belonged to, in an attempt to connect with the younger generation, bought a group of tickets to the Jimi Hendrix Experience show and chartered a bus for transportation! I couldn't believe it when I heard about it, but I knew that this would be my best chance to go see the musician who was the dominant interest of my young life.

I watched Noel Redding take the stage at the helm of Fat Mattress, and the band ran through material from their yet-to-be-released *Fat Mattress* debut album. The crowd received them well, although it was clear from the excitement in the air that the Fat Mattress set was simply a precursor to the night's main event.

As the stage was being set up for the Experience performance, an MC took to the stage to talk to the crowd about the police harassment that was now common at the Electric Factory. Police Commissioner Rizzo had gone so far as to hold a press conference in front of the Electric Factory, vowing to "turn this joint into a parking lot." With each new reference to "the man hassling us," the crowd's intensity went up a pitch, and the spiel ended with huge cheers as everyone optimistically vowed that the police would never succeed in closing the Electric Factory. Soon thereafter the lights went down to a roar from the crowd as everyone scrambled on top of their

seats to get a better view. I had abandoned my seat in the rafters, taking advantage of the fact that I was just a kid to work my way past security and toward the stage. I reached the sixth row, where a kindly girl let me stand on her seat so I could see.

Beneath the Spectrum seating Jimi emerged from the Philadelphia Flyers' locker room, carrying his white Stratocaster with maple neck. Escorted by police and security, Hendrix walked through the tunnel toward the arena and ran the gauntlet to the stage. As at most of the concerts presented at the Spectrum in its first years of operation, the stage this night was located in the middle of the arena floor. The circular platform would slowly revolve throughout the concert, giving everyone a constantly shifting point of view.

To a tremendous roar Jimi mounted the steps and walked onto the stage. I couldn't believe that Jimi Hendrix was now standing not thirty feet from me, but the figure bathed in the bright spotlights left no doubt that it was true. With a blue headband trailing down, Jimi was clad in an orange ruffled shirt and black vest and pants, a scarf tied around one leg. He smiled and greeted the crowd, and then Jimi and Noel began tuning and equipment checks. All was in readiness except for one thing - where was Mitch Mitchell? Jimi and Noel made small talk with 15,000 people until finally Mitch popped up behind his gold drum kit. It was a large set, a big snare joined by double rack tom-tom's, two floor tom-tom's, and two massive bass drums with one emblazoned in script "MITCH" and the other "MITCHELL" - just in case anyone was uncertain as to who was providing the percussion.

Though Jimi had seemed so somber and introspective during his interview just hours before, now on stage his mood was bright. The band launched into "Fire," Hendrix working his effects and pushing his amps as he fed off of the crowd's energy. Jimi capped off the solo with some quick guitar gymnastics, finishing the song with the inevitable pitch bends and clouds of feedback. The huge sound of the Experience was rivalled only by the cheers of the audience.

The stage was sliced neatly in half by the stacks of amplification equipment, and from my floor level vantage point I saw the Experience half of the time and black speaker cabinets stencilled JH EXP the rest of the time. As Jimi, Noel, and Mitch slowly spun back into view Jimi chose to slow things down from the frantic opening with a long journey through "Red House." Hendrix put extra emphasis on the "Wait a minute, something's wrong" line and repeated it to dramatic effect before grabbing high, wailing bent notes as he worked the upper reaches of the guitar neck during the long solo. On this night "Red House" followed a similar structure to the San Diego version that was recorded just a month later and released on *Stages*.

Following the blues of "Red House" Jimi chose to make another radical shift in tempo, unleashing a long burst of feedback to usher in "Foxy Lady." As Noel and Mitch fell in Jimi dispensed a hail of hammered notes leading to the first verse. Jimi finished the song with a long solo improvisation unaccompanied by his rhythm section.

Jimi stepped to the microphone to introduce "I Don't Live Today" - "We're just jamming, we haven't played in a long time" - but the real introduction came via Mitch's lengthy and flashy drum solo before he moved into the familiar percussion pattern of the studio version. Jimi's lyrical delivery of the song was emotional, appropriately for a song that Hendrix often referred to in interviews as a reference point for his feelings. The guitar exploration in the song's middle section was a particularly intriguing sonic adventure, falling into a long section of eerie wails and then a sped-up reprise. "Nothing but existing, baby - all you're doing is existing" commented Jimi before he brought the song to a close.

"We'd like to do a thing called 'Getting My Heart Back Together Again,'" Jimi next announced. Then, remembering his conversation earlier in the day at the Holiday Inn, Jimi added a dedication

"to little Beefy, who's in the hospital now, and her little friend." Hendrix ran through many variations based on the familiar opening riff, before arriving at a melodic section that consisted of long sustained notes that sounded similar to the theme of "Midnight Lightning."

"Blues and rock and whatever happens happens" was how Jimi had described "Stone Free" earlier that day, and this song made one of its relatively infrequent appearances in an Experience set as the next song the band performed. But it was an exceptional performance that was energetic and passionate, showing the Experience were still a force to be reckoned with in spite of the rumors of dissension. The pace was fast, with a long solo by Jimi at the end yielding to a percussive improvisation among all three musicians. A brief drum break led to more improvising along a descending pattern followed by free-form jamming. Finally Jimi and company found their way back to the structure of "Stone Free" and brought the adventure to an end.

"Star Spangled Banner" began next, but a long pause after the "Oh say can you see..." notes left the crowd in doubt as to whether Jimi intended to do the whole song or was just teasing as he was known to do on occasion. But the anthem started up again, following a stately structure quite similar to the famed Woodstock version - complete with 'dive bombs.' A major difference was that Jimi used the tremolo bar heavily in this version for more vibrato on the verses throughout, and the short intro to "Taps" had yet to be added. But the ending was the same as Woodstock's, providing a gateway directly to "Purple Haze." This night's driving rendition of one of Jimi's most popular smash hits was crowned by a crazed solo that leapt and dived before it dissolved into roars of feedback. On long bent notes of seemingly infinite sustain Jimi navigated back towards the song structure to meet up with Noel and Mitch for the finale.

Jimi stepped to the microphone and thanked us for coming, immediately crafting the introduction to "Voodoo Child (slight return)." Hendrix treated the song to the type of incendiary performance that he always seemed to reserve for this track, although this version was especially long.

In fact, the entire performance at the Spectrum had been characterized by lengthy versions of Jimi's songs. While the set list may have been shorter than at other shows on the 1969 tour, the Experience had more than made up for it by stretching out instrumentally to an even greater degree than usual.

Jimi left the stage and, surrounded by police once again, rushed through the barricades protecting him from the crowd as he fled towards the dressing rooms. I made my way out to the bus, with ringing ears and awed by what I had seen. Some of the others on the bus didn't seem to get it - but I had definitely been experienced. The image that I will always carry in my memory is one of Jimi bathed in the hot glow of the spotlights, on his knees bent over backwards with the blue headband hanging down behind him and his Stratocaster held up toward the sky as an indescribable wave of volume poured off of the stage.

The Review

The show was reviewed on April 14 in the Evening Bulletin, one of the three major daily newspapers in Philadelphia. Writer Walter F. Naedele's review [headline: "Jimi Hendrix Fights With His Love Lady"] offers a glimpse at the kinds of weird, impressionistic journalism accepted in those days - and shows that perhaps Mr. Naedele was writing as much from his libido as he was from his head.

"A black Apache backed by two silent Englishmen," Naedele wrote, "Jimi came on, blue silk headband flowing to his legs, scarves knotted at elbow and knee, a soft-spoken young man and his bad-mouth electric guitar. Different from B.B. King's Lucille, the guitar became a woman Hendrix was love-fighting all night. To his wailing, she would shimmer back her own sass. As she

built toward her screams, Hendrix would stagger back from the effort to get that much fight out of her. Sinking to his knees, holding her at arm's length while she ran off at him, he would at last draw her around him, fondling her, kissing her into submission. All that, in ten minutes of 'Red House.'"

All that, in the first half of the review!

The Electric Factory eventually did close a year later, although it was as much due to business reasons as from police pressure. Larry Magid and the Spivak brothers formed Electric Factory Concerts, which has become one of the music world's key entertainment businesses, promoting concerts across the country and putting on events like the American half of the Live Aid show. The Jimi Hendrix Experience splintered when Noel Redding left the band following the Denver stop of the 1969 tour just ten weeks later. Jimi would play Philadelphia only one more time, accompanied by Mitch Mitchell and Billy Cox. The May 16, 1970 show on the "Cry of Love Tour" took place on a rainy day at the open-air Temple Stadium.

These days, the Spectrum is still Philadelphia's primary large concert site. The construction of the new Spectrum II to house Philadelphia's indoor sports teams promises that the original Spectrum will be free to host even more music, although it is doubtful that any of it will be as inventive and creative as the sounds that echoed within it on that April night in 1969.

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