

## The HOME FORUM

*Black History Month introduces a fourth-grader to Woodstock, 'Purple Haze,' and the groundbreaking guitarist JIMI HENDRIX.*

*It's groovy, man.*

# Homework and Hendrix

**M**y 9-year-old son Andy is sitting at his desk listening to "Purple Haze" by Jimi Hendrix, and he loves it. It was written and first performed more than 25 years before he was even born, but somehow Andy relates to it. It all started with Black History Month.

In fourth grade, the assignment was to choose an African-American from history, do some research, and make a presentation to the class. Andy had just started learning to play the French horn, so we skipped down the list of suggested people and went right to the musicians.

Let's see... Dizzy Gillespie? What did I know about Dizzy Gillespie? Puffy cheeks, funny tilted trumpet bell? Andy didn't bite.

Cab Calloway? White suit, great dancer. I started singing "Hi-De-Hi-De-Hi-De Ho," but that didn't get Andy going either. I wasn't doing much of a job selling the classic Harlem entertainers.

Next on the list was Jimi Hendrix. In 1969 when Woodstock, the legendary hippie fest of music and mayhem, took place, I was 8 years old. I never went to Woodstock. I watched "The Brady Bunch" on TV. But I knew that Jimi Hendrix had captivated the crowd there by playing a radical, electric guitar version of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

I also knew Hendrix had died young—something to do with drugs? I was afraid there would be a "teachable moment" in the project somewhere, but it was too late. After I briefly tried to explain Woodstock, Andy was hooked. He chose Jimi Hendrix.

A trip to the library yielded a lengthy photo-filled book, "My Son Jimi," penned by Hendrix's father. Andy enjoyed looking at the crayoned pictures of fast cars and fighting soldiers, drawn by Jimi as a little kid. I flipped through the book ahead of him, trying to find the part about how he had died. Maybe if I got a jump on the information, I could explain what I knew was going to be grim news.

"Jimi always loved his dad..."  
"Dad never saw any sign of drug use..."

"Last visit home was two weeks before he died. Everything was fine..."

Then, there it was. Hendrix's death was related to foreign sleeping pills that his German girlfriend had given him while they vacationed in Britain. His father wrote that he was sure it was a terrible accident. His son was unfamiliar with the dosage of the European pills and would never commit suicide. He had not been on drugs at the time.



PHOTO/ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT WALLACE—STAFF/AP PHOTOS

I would have to explain the dangers of drugs—again. In the meantime, I bought Andy a Hendrix CD, and he was busy getting to know "Purple Haze," "Hey Joe," and "Foxy Lady."

"You know, Jimi Hendrix invented all this way before punk, way before Green Day, or even the Ramones," I lamely expounded like some History Channel authority. I was trying to put the music we were listening to in Andy's time frame.

"Jimi lived before any rappers or guys like that," I

added. "When he played his electric guitar behind his back, loud and crazy like that, he was the first person to do it."

"I know. I like it," Andy replied simply. "This next song, 'All Along the Watchtower,' that's the one by Bobby Dylan."

"Bobby Dylan?" I said. "Who told you that? You mean Bob Dylan."

"Yeah," Andy said. "Isn't Bob the same name as Bobby? Daddy told me it was by Bob Dylan."

Explaining Woodstock would be my next stop. Fortunately, the DVD, "Woodstock: 3 Days of Peace & Music," was available at the library.

A quick parental preview while Andy was still in school showed it to be mostly crowd shots of the huge, muddy audience looking up at Grace Slick, John Sebastian, and other performers I couldn't identify.

I fast-forwarded through the interview with the girl explaining how "the dudes were all speeding and not coming down." But that afternoon, Andy and I watched a lot of it together.

We both enjoyed the scenes of naked toddlers dancing to the music and frolicking among the crowds. Andy thought the slang was funny when one performer announced that "some dude's old lady just had a baby right here at the festival, maannn. That kid's going to be groovy."

We fast-forwarded through more scenes of hippies, more decorated school buses, guys with ponytails, and then there was Hendrix in a red headband; tie-dyed bell-bottoms; and a white, fringed leather jacket.

He tore through several minutes of electric riffs and crazy musical variations, and then the melody line morphed into "The Star-Spangled Banner." It was loud, it was out of control, and it was amazing.

Neither of us could stop watching him push his beringed fingers up and down the frets of the guitar, wailing the lines of music.

Neither of us reached for the remote to turn it off. We were mesmerized by the power of his performance.

Hendrix did die too soon. If it takes

Black History Month to introduce his particular genius to 21st-century kids, then that's a good thing.

So, Andy's all set. For his oral report, he's going to wear a headband like Jimi did and a dashiki shirt I found at an urban store. He wants to tell his class about the great guitar player who died too soon because of drugs. Then he'll play them "Purple Haze" from his CD.

Andy's sure it will be groovy, maann.

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