

On *Electric Ladyland* by Jimi Hendrix

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"I Want Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*!" ~ my mom

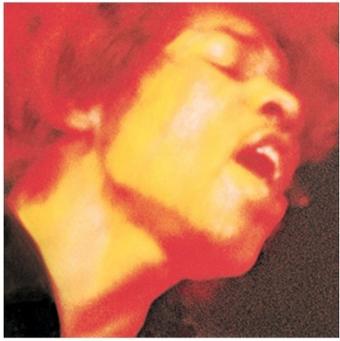
The year 1969, in retrospect, was one of the biggest in classic rock music. It was also the year my friends Sue and Mary Jane and I, three 16 years old, signed up for summer telemarketing jobs. It was during these working hours we perked up our ears, not for music, but the sounds of potential clients' unenthusiastic one-word responses across the wire, and the lilting, if not often monotonous, rhythm of our own voices as we repeated rote telephone pitches. Our goal was to sell small plots of Wisconsin resort property to older folks in the south Chicago suburbs, not an easy sell for a peddler of any age or experience.

For escapism from the din of the phone center, the three of us would take our lunch break together outdoors at the local snack shop's picnic table. There, near the corner of North and Harlem Avenues, we'd quickly wolf down our brown bag lunches and purchase a pop at the shop counter to at least feign the impression we were legitimate customers.

Once food was consumed, we moved on to our true destination, Peaches Records, a few doors down from the snack shop. This record shop served as our rock music "museum." Our paltry paychecks from the telemarketing job were needed to be spread elsewhere than on pricey record albums, for the likes of school clothes and bus fare. After we entered the record store, we headed straight toward the stacks. With Sue and Mary Jane at my sides, one particular afternoon I held up an album cover with the saffron yellow and fiery red solarized portrait of a man dancing before us—*Electric Ladyland*, the Jimi Hendrix Experience's third album. It was part of the ritual we undertook with one another, showing off the most recent rock albums that we admired, like auctioneers at an estate sale, presenting a beautiful object to bidders for examination. We all had our current favorites "of the moment" and took turns with this show-and-tell game until our lunch hour was over. We would examine, we would discuss, we would laud and fawn over, we would disagree, though we couldn't bid. It was like touching fine paintings, something the guards wouldn't let you do at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The graphics of *Electric Ladyland*, though colorful, weren't as visually psychedelic as the group's second album, *Axis Bold as Love*. *Electric Ladyland* featured large aforementioned solarized close-up of Hendrix singing. The back cover photo flanked Hendrix with his fellow musicians, Mitch Mitchell and Noel Redding, who were two white guys sporting Afros nearly larger than the man's himself. Their well-fitted garb was totally psychedelic, jackets jumping with surrealistic cartoon characters, polka dot ties popping and brilliant neck scarves furling, all which satisfied the freaky fashionista in me.

The album cover wasn't what really attracted me to this album. I, as many others were, found captivation in the originality of the music. I had been enamored with Hendrix' music since "Purple Haze," a single 45 rpm record I purchased in 1967 while still a dooper at Taft High School. A dooper, by the way, is a Chicago term for a collegiate, an acronym for "Dear Old Oak Parker," meaning someone who's similar to a suburban Oak Park youth



Jimi Hendrix

Electric Ladyland

10/1968

Track / Reprise

who can afford Ivy League schools – and record albums – or, like me, a Chicagoan from the northwest side who merely dressed like one with clothes snagged from bargain basements and thrift shops. By 1969, my friends and I were “hippies,” or at least hippies who toned down their outfits enough to get summer jobs like the telemarketing ones, and still, evidently, trying to be all that in this Oak Park record shop.

Double album *Electric Ladyland* is viewed by some as the peak of Hendrix' mastery of the electric guitar. In recent liner notes, it read, “After Woodstock, Neil Young said that Jimi was ‘absolutely the best guitar player that ever lived; there was no one even in the same building as that guy.’” Besides Mitchell and Redding, a number of guest artists made cameo appearances in various tracks on *Electric Ladyland*, including Steve Winwood, Al Kooper, Dave Mason and Brian Jones. The most well-known song on the album is by far “All Along the Watchtower” of which music and lyrics are written by Bob Dylan. Hendrix wrote the remainder of the songs.

My personal favorite is “1983...A Merman I Should Turn to Be,” which tracks at over 13 minutes. Some say it is the most psychedelic and political song on the album, if not among all of Hendrix' body of work. I fantasized as a child about what it must be like to be a mermaid, influenced by “The Little Mermaid” story by Hans Christian Anderson as well as the film “Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid” with Ann Blyth and William Powell. In the Mr. Peabody film, Blythe portrays a mermaid brought to land in order to try fit in like everyone else. When it's clear she cannot, she is mercifully returned to the sea.

Hendrix wanted to be a merman, the male counterpart of a mermaid. But he longed for it as a means to walk away from war and oppression and straight into the sea “not to die, but to be reborn.” The title's “1983” was a year that Hendrix was destined never to experience himself. His short but artistic career as a musician ended only a year after I held that record album in my hands at Peaches Records, with his death in 1970.

A fond memory of my mother involves the *Electric Ladyland* album. Our local department store in the neighborhood strip mall, Turnstyle, featured a flyer advertising select albums on sale for only a dollar. Most record albums sold for about six or seven times that amount at Peaches Records. *Electric Ladyland* was one of the albums featured in the Turnstyle photo. I rushed to Turnstyle only to be told by a manager that the array of albums pictured were for marketing purposes and that *Electric Ladyland* itself wasn't actually among those on sale for that price.

When I came home and told my mother my disappointment, she took a close look at the flyer. My mother, Evelyn, had married my father during the Depression era. With money tight, they lived with my grandmother the first five years of their marriage, trying to scrape together enough to get their own place. They postponed starting a family, as well. During World War II, my mother did things like save cooking grease in cans and gather slivers of soap to ship to facilities using it to make munitions, from what my sisters told me.

She was one to count every penny, use every resource and read the fine print. She strived to get the best out of every deal, receipt, coupon and warranty. That was the way women from her era worked things to feel a tad more financially secure. My mother eventually became a widow and had to fend for herself, my two sisters and me on her own. As a result, she wanted to make sure I never had it too easy, that I might be independent and strong, as she had learned to the hard way.

With the “pull up your bootstraps” modus of her working-class stance, she usually let me fight my own battles and issues, whether win or lose. So I was a bit surprised that, with

flyer in hand, she uncharacteristically decided to take up the cause. She took off her apron, threw a chiffon scarf over her dark curly hair, straightened the cuffs of her polyester pants as she slipped marshmallow white flats onto her feet, and grabbed her car keys. "Cindy, let's go," she said. "Go where?" I said. "To Turnstyle," she said. "Mom, really?" I said, as I slipped into the seat next to her and she drove off.

Once inside the store, she approached the manager. Yet he, too, told her that he couldn't sell that particular album at that price. She wouldn't let his proclamation immediately dissuade her. My mother raised her voice and, pointing a finger forcefully at the page in the flyer, said, "Sir, I see *Electric Ladyland* pictured right here in your ad, and I want *Electric Ladyland* for the price advertised. I don't want any of those other albums on sale. I don't want The Turtles *Happy Together* album. I don't want *Polka Favorites*. I don't want Dean Martin's *Gentle on My Mind*. I already *have* that one. I want *Electric Ladyland*."

The manager sincerely apologized for the inconvenience. Hands on hips, his bald head glistening, his protruding belly battling three of his shirt buttons, the manager nonetheless held firm to the notion that he could not sell the album for a dollar. "You have to give it to us," my mother demanded. Everyone was looking. He looked exasperated. Then someone called him away to answer a phone call.

Ultimately, my mother had as little success as I. But I was touched that she went as far as she did to try to get some justice for me. And to hear my Dean Martin-loving, Depression-era mom demand a psychedelic album and reprise the words *Electric Ladyland* at the top of her voice, militant against this bait-and-switch in a public forum struck me as righteously incongruous as well as tremendously precious, dear, odd and sweetly funny. While I didn't land a copy of *Electric Ladyland*, and the idea of how my mother and I had joined forces only to lose this small battle together made me proud of her, and feel loved by her.

Decades later, after my mother was gone, I gathered with my own small family as we celebrated our usual Christmas stocking ritual for the holidays. By then, I had nearly forgotten about the album. When I spied a gift that my 20-something musician son, Julian, had tucked into my stocking, I thought it was a book. As I tore open the wrapping and uncovered the box it was in, I saw that it was none other than a CD version of Jimi Hendrix' *Electric Ladyland*. Two years before, during a family visit to the Rock & Roll Museum in Cleveland and inside the Hendrix exhibit, I had told Julian about the episode at Turnstyle with my mother and me.

So happy to receive the album, I wished I was able to call my mother to tell her I finally got it, although that was no longer possible. Once again, I was deeply touched by a family member who made a personal gesture for me in regard to the album, this time my son. I wept, and told him that this was one of the best Christmas gifts I ever received.

Since then, it has turned out to be more than a mere rock album for me. Every time I play it, I walk hand-in-hand with the living and dead, with the musical and otherwise, with the caring and savvy of my mother, son, Sue, Mary Jane, and Jimi, too, right into *Electric Ladyland*.