

Died Free

Jimi Hendrix—Electric Gypsy, by Harry Shapiro and Caesar Glebbeek (Heinemann, \$34.95). Reviewed by Peter Beilharz.

In 1968 I was fourteen. Blissfully innocent of global events, I spent much of that year arguing with my friend Vivian Lees about the existence of God. Hendrix or Clapton? I was a devotee of Clapton. Viv was right. Viv became a rock entrepreneur; within months my brother and I were playing 'Purple Haze' with an English working class immigrant nicknamed Hendrix. It was Hendrix who revolutionised guitar playing, but more than that.

Some of the phenomena is explained by Shapiro and Glebbeek in *Jimi Hendrix—Electric Gypsy*. It's a massive, glossy, even scholarly work—baby photos, reference to Hendrix Archives. Hendrix was an icon then—Hendrix poster one end of the bedroom, Che Guevara on the other. Now he's even more of one as postmodern readers avidly gobble up biographies, and we continue to suffer this consistently perverse need for heroes: even ones with clay feet. And collectively we seem to have a massive need to romanticise the 1960s, when bands could get away with anything, endless jam-sessions, preening narcissism, dopey self-indulgence—flowers in our hair, dreams of Woodstock and Malibu, scoring big.

Hendrix's biographers rightly draw attention to his novelty in this setting. Not just his technical originality (the string-biting and all that) but his capacity to synthesise all kinds of heresies—Little Richard, Dylan going electric, anticipation of Prince. Certainly Clapton was a straight player by comparison, even when he was off his head. Maybe that's why I liked him. And anyway, Cream were a better band (leftwing weakness for notions of teamwork and all that). All this was also caught up with the transatlantic traffic which began to characterise rock and roll into the 60s—Hendrix had to come to London in order to be recognised, the Stones to America.

But the inflexion was also American—even Cream's first single, 'I Feel Free', sounds more New York than Ronnie Scott's Club. And there's the theme—freedom. Hendrix's theme was 'Stone Free', his autograph on photos 'Stay Free'. What was this freedom? Part of it was freedom to indulge, no doubt about that; the 60s was a period of the cult of hedonism. Blow your mind,



indulge your body. Rock and roll was a form of social mobility for working class boys with deprived backgrounds—Wyman, Clapton, Hendrix, cheap guitars bought on hire purchase, borrowed amps and dreams, hopes of freedom—freedom from 9 to 5, freedom from poverty, freedom from constraint, sexual freedom (free love—free women), free time, individual utopia. Free, free, free—who wrote or sang about friendship or reciprocity while we all just wanted to be free?

Funny looking back on all this, through the memories, the documentaries, the growing pile of assisted autobiographies, Noel Redding, Wyman, David Crosby, Mick Fleet-

wood. Piles of tragedy, 'friends' lost or gone crazy, nicked for drug use, gone, forgotten, ageing. It's hard to imagine how anybody would romanticise it all—just as it's hard to imagine Canned Heat playing a whole session consisting of three chord boogies and endless tedious solos, phallogentrism rampant.

Alongside the self-indulgence, however, there was also a sense of limits, of help—in Australia, with Chain, sometimes with the Aztecs—and certainly there was some soulful and searing playing by those white boys who chose to play the blues. Nor is it easy to look at rock and roll today with rose coloured glasses—transformed into sexualised visuality by MTV. No wonder people go back to the raw feel of the early Stones, or to the simple soaring beauty of 'The Wind Cries Mary'.

Hendrix's biographers detect something of the significance of this when they write of gentleness and violence in his music. This is at the core of his romanticism—an unending revolt against convention, authoritarianism, insincerity and moderation, an extreme assertion of the self, a celebration of the value of individual experience'. Only they write in praise, where some of us today may twitch—it all seems so period, and so postmodern. For freedom and experience do not seem, finally, to be enough to satisfy us, any more than the utilitarian pursuit of happiness or the welfarist utopia of provision. Our lives are made of more ordinary stuff. If we choose not to burn out but to survive, we have to learn to live with disappointment, complexity and frustration, tedium and responsibility as we search for love, work and recognition. I'm not sure what freedom means, in this context, but it would likely involve something more modest and more social than the 60s seemed to promise.

PETER BEILHARZ'S *Labour's Utopias: Bolshevism, Fabianism, Social Democracy* was recently published by Routledge.