

Of Purple Haze and a Pink Lady



By Marc Connelly

When I heard the news of a special exhibit of Jimi Hendrix memorabilia at the 1996 Bumbershoot festival, I immediately cleared my calendar and made plans to go and pay my respects. For me and thousands like me, *nothing* is more important than *anything* Jimi.

As a teenage rock and roller, Jimi charged everything in my world- from what music is, to how the guitar might be played. Perhaps at that time I lived in a fairly small world, but Jimi surely changed it all. With one deafening, surreal glissando pouring out from his Fender Stratocaster, he stood the music world on its' collective ear. And like the greatest of artists, he left an impression that is so indelible that today, 20 years since his passing, Jimi is as important to the music scene as he ever was in his life.

I grew up on the other side of the lake from Jimi, at about the same time, but in a completely different world. I was a white kid from Mercer Island and Jimi was an African American kid from the inner city. But I still feel a strong personal bond to Jimi, as a Seattleite, as a guitar player, and as an artist. As I have travelled near and far, Jimi has always served me well as a cultural symbol supporting our regional identity. Boston can claim the Celtics and Ted Williams, Chicago claims Michael, and New York claims just about everything else. But Seattle can claim Jimi and in the pre-Ichiro days that was always good enough to garner props for our fair city, anywhere.

The bits and pieces of Jimis' life that were displayed at the Bumbershoot exhibit held yet another connection to Jimi for me- one that I did not expect at all. There was his guitar- or one of them anyway- and his clothes, a contract, and other odd bits and pieces of a great life, long over. It made me feel wistful to see these things up close. And then something caught my eye- over there on the far wall they had posted several artifacts from his school days- his school paintings! Here were insights into the child's mind, clues about the child who became the man, paintings from his art class- paintings of *hydroplanes!*

Looking back, I can't imagine why the idea of Jimi as a hydroplane fan caught me by surprise, but it did. Perhaps the psychedelic nature of his work left no room in my imagination to see him as one of the thousands of beachcombers and pit crashing kids that strained for a closer look at Jack Regas or The Slo Mo IV. But his artwork presents clear evidence that he was there, pressed up to the cyclone fence with the rest of us, soaking it all in, dreaming Seattle kid dreams.

To my mind, these school day paintings offer remarkable insights into Jimi Hendrix. The first thing that one notices about them is that they are really quite good for a 12 year old kid. Jimi had a real talent for fine art. His paintings are *paintings*, not outlined brush drawings that are so typical of early attempts to paint. He dealt with scale, perspective and form quite well for his age. By the confidence expressed by his hand, one would assume that Jimi liked to draw and paint. And by the exactness of his representations, it's obvious to me that Jimi had a real interest in boats and a keen eye for detail. It isn't hard to imagine that, if music had not entered his life, Jimi might have become an illustrator or fine artist. At a glance, it seems clear that he had talent, exposure to good instruction, or both.

There were two paintings that really intrigued me: one of the Hawaii Kai roaring towards the finish line alone, and another with the Kai and the Thriftway Too barreling it out down the backstretch. From the invested effort, I get the clear impression that these boats were his two favorites as they appear most often and seem to be lovingly painted onto his art class paper. And this, I believe, is also quite telling.

The 'Pink Lady' is arguably the most outrageous and classy paint scheme ever to grace a raceboat. Direct, pure, and way over the top, that pink hull is instantly recognizable even today. Nobody else ever painted a hydroplane like the Kai and no one ever will again. It's bold and unique look was to boat racing what Jimi's flamboyance was to rock and roll. Seeing this on paper, in his own hand, the Kai seems like an obvious choice for the kid that we would all know later as Jimi. It seems that he also favored the Thriftway Too and this seems to fit the world shaker that we all knew as Jimi. Unconventional, risky, big, loud, radical and unpredictable, the 'Too' serves as an effective metaphor for Jimi's emerging tastes. It all just fits.

It is almost always a mistake to project one's life onto another, especially when they are gone and cannot represent themselves. Sadly, this has happened to Jimi's legacy far too often in the intervening years since his passing. It corrupts the real truth of his life and alters the value of his art. And yet, when that person is gone, projection is often all that is left to the living. I don't really know if Jimi favored the Kai over, say, Maverick or the Bardahl, and I never met him personally so I cannot report on his real interest in hydros. But it is generally true that kids paint what they love and I feel these childhood paintings tell us something about the kid who became the man. Jimi Hendrix, it seems, was not just a monster guitar player and a distinguished Seattleite, he was also a hydro nut, and a certified Hawaii Kai / Thriftway Too freak to boot! If his legacy as a musician wasn't endearing enough, knowing that Jimi was seriously into these hydros just makes him all that much more of a brother in my eyes.