Just Ask the Axis: Jimi Hendrix Unpicked

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I: I Just Want to Talk to You: The Guitar Speaks

Jimi Hendrix's 1968 *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)* is cited as a seminal influence on many professional electric guitarists, and even hailed as the "holy grail of guitar expression."[1] But what exactly does this track express? Music is frequently described as a universal language, with artists like Hendrix as its fluent speakers, but what does his guitar convey that spoken language cannot? What is it we are truly appreciating when we hear it?

This lecture unpicks Hendrix's extraordinary musical language—rooted in the familiar yet infused with the evocative vocabulary of something otherworldly. His playing is grounded in but reaches beyond the conventional genre boundaries of blues, rock and folk, drawing on everything from Hindustani music, free jazz to electronic experimentalism. It is as if Hendrix stands with one foot firmly on Earth and the other in deep space. Beyond these florid descriptions, his music deserves a deep exploration with all the tools available. But to even start to understand the communicative power of his music—and its profound impact on listeners and musicians—we must first consider how spoken language and music compare.

When we hear someone speak, even before decoding meaning, we must recognize that speech is occurring at all. In an ocean of sound waves, our brains perform the extraordinary task of segregating and integrating frequencies to identify the sound of a human voice (perhaps an adult male), and that they are speaking in a particular language. Visual cues often help, but even in their absence, we can also extract their *emotional intent*, and whether we should react—pursue, evade, or investigate. Beyond this layer of intent, we break speech down into its smallest recognisable units: phonemes. We take a continuous stream of sound and transform it into discrete linguistic elements—/ˈbʌʈə flaɪz ænd ˈziːbɹəz ænd ˈmuːnbiːmz/[2]—which our brains then map onto familiar words: *"Butterflies and zebras and moonbeams "* . These symbolically map to objects in the 'real world' (or imagination) but recognition is not enough – we must also interpret semantic meaning. What is actually meant by the phrase?

Music shares some cognitive processes with spoken language, but crucial differences set it apart. We identify and segregate music also, employing 'filters' to decode its various layers: we perceive a cohesive whole (e.g. a rock band), the guitar from the drums and bass, and component notes and *musical objects* from within the guitar 'voice', yet. These musical objects, like language, follow structures—patterns of question and answer, phrasing, and even echoes of the speech rhythms of its native speakers.[3] Even without words, in these musical objects we detect mood, intent, gesture, and emotion: a tremor in a voice, a moment of flight, a broken scream, a steadfast defiance. Music also possesses a particulate nature, much like language, where small units—like pitches and durations —combine into larger, meaningful structures. But here the similarities end. Music rarely, if ever, points to specific objects in the external world. Occasionally it might include *musical onomatopoeia* imitating the sound of an object (like gunfire and

[1] See seminal electric guitarist Joe Satriani's interview on MusicRadar 2017

[2] The English language has approximately 44 of such *phonemes.*

[3] Hendrix's guitar playing is extraordinarily vocal (even without the use of wah), he enters into call and response with it, and even bonds with it simultaneously singing and playing the same lines (see for example the opening of *Gypsy Eyes*, the chatty *Belly Button Window* and the extraordinarily dialogues between Buddy Miles' voice, Jimi's voice and Jimi's guitar on the *Band of Gypsys* album.

bombs in *Machine Gun* and *The Star-Spangled Banner*, or even other instruments) but there are no agreed universal 'musical words'. There is no musical object to point at "*moonbeams*". Instead, music evokes something more elusive: the inner experience of encountering an object, a place, or a moment. Like the peaceful solitude of gazing at the night's sky. Perhaps this holds the key to what we are truly communicating through music—a resonance, a shared feeling that exists beyond words. It's as if the musician is saying "This sequence of sounds I have gathered feels important, profound, meaningful, joyful, cathartic, amusing, or simply worth sharing. And perhaps, by hearing it, you will share this numinous experience too."

If music communicates through shared experience rather than fixed meaning, what are its limits, its dictionary of emotions, and dimensions of control? More importantly, how does Hendrix stretch these dimensions—using the guitar as a vessel for raw expression? To answer this, we must examine the very fabric of musical language: its *axes of expression*.

II: Axes of Expression

Music is often described as a structure of intersecting dimensions—a system of distinct yet interrelated properties. We can think of it as existing along three fundamental axes: pitch, rhythm, and timbre. Notation reflects this model (albeit in a very pixelated manner), treating pitch as a function of frequency, rhythm as a function of duration, and timbre as a coloring agent—something less precisely defined but intuitively understood as the *quality* of the sound in pitch and rhythmic space.

Important musical elements may be composites of such axes: melody can be framed, in essence, as the intersection of pitch and rhythm. It is a succession of pitches unfolding in time. 'Gesture' (like a crescendo) might be seen as a changing timbre over time. More complexly, harmony is an extension of pitch relationships, while rhythm functions somewhat independently—an organizing force in both vertical and horizontal time.

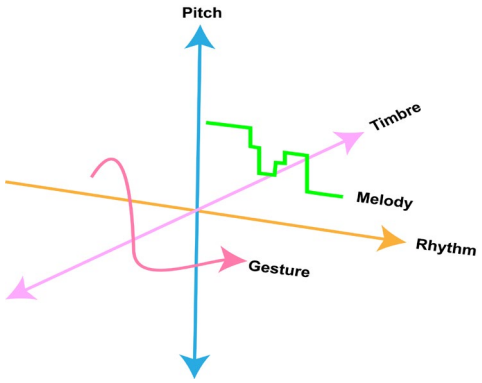

Figure 1: An illustration of some *Axes of Musical Expression*

However, this framework is not without problems. Firstly, pitches and rhythms do not exist in a linear space—they appear in cycles (octaves, overtone relationships, tuning systems, beats, meters and hypermeters). Furthermore notation, and music theory in the simple axis model treat these axes unequally and approximately. Notation – for convenience – provides these parameters in a very 'stepped' manner, a lattice rather than a smooth space. We lack descriptions for the 'in-between'. Also, unlike in language where timbre is the fundamental mechanism by which we understand phonemes and emphasis, timbre is often treated as an embellishment rather than a fundamental parameter—a sonic fingerprint that colors the other dimensions but does not structure them. These biases imply that music is somehow incomplete if it avoids a sense of rhythm, or vertical harmony, or distinct pitches, 'falls between the cracks' of simple divisions, or communicates primarily through timbre. The breadth of beautiful music across era and genre made within these 'limits' reveals the issue of this simple axis reveals its flaws. Even defining the boundaries between axes is problematic: Timbre is not a singular quality but a composite of frequencies, meaning it is already built from pitch interactions. And if timbre is made up of pitches, and rhythm emerges from periodicity, then the boundaries between these dimensions may not be as rigid as they appear.

This bounded nature of the axes is revealed on the guitar fretboard itself—a landscape where pitch and timbre are intrinsically linked.

III: Timbre with Pitch: The Fretboard Diamond

Unlike a piano, where each pitch has a single fixed location, the guitar allows for multiple versions of the same note.[4] This repetition is a direct result of three factors:

1. String tuning (how close or far apart the open strings are)
2. The number of strings
3. Fretboard length

We can imagine two extremes: if all six strings were tuned identically, every note would have six locations, maximizing repetition. On the other hand, if there was only one string, or in the physically unlikely scenario where each string were tuned so far apart that no note overlapped, there would be zero pitch repetition. Standard tuning falls somewhere in between, balancing playability, range, and variation. This repetition has huge musical implications. It makes sight-reading more difficult, but in return, expands the timbral and expressive options available to a player. The same pitch played on different strings carries a different character—a note on a wound string is darker, while the same pitch on a plain string is brighter. An open string has a uniquely chiming sonority. A guitarist can choose a location not just for convenience, but for its timbral colour.

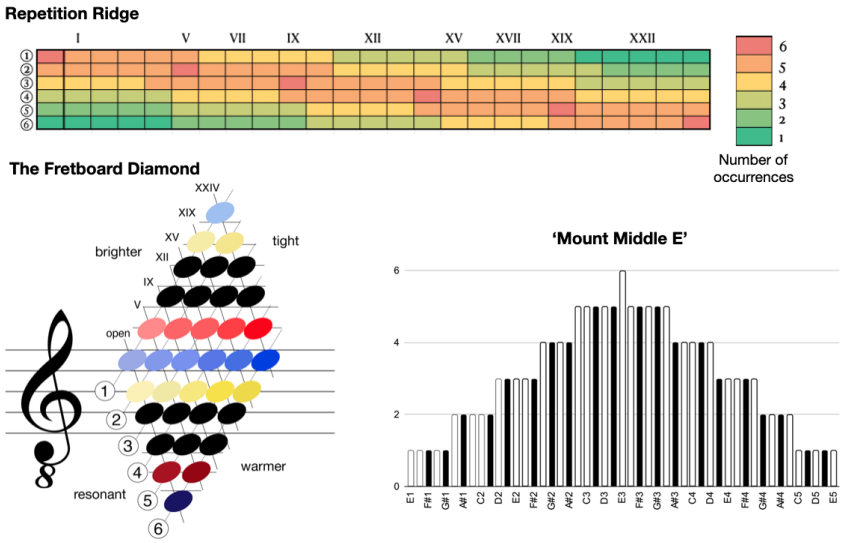

Figure 2: Three perspectives on the guitar fretboard (from Mermikides 2022a, 2023) Top: the layout of repeated pitches on a 24-fret right-handed guitar (note the diagonal 'repetition ridge') Bottom right: how this repetition would appear on a keyboard, and an illustration of *The Fretboard Diamond* how the fretboard offers choices of tonal colour, even with the same pitch (some Es are illustrated in blue tones, As in red tones and Bs in yellow)

Moreover, this pattern of pitch locations allows for flexible chord voicings and expressive choices. The distribution of repetition isn't even across the fretboard—certain notes appear more frequently than others. For example, E3 appears in six places on a 24-fret guitar, making it a kind of gravitational center in standard tuning. If we map pitch repetition visually, it forms a diagonal "repetition ridge" running through the fretboard. This means the 'same' note is in terms of the fretboard, expressively different in tone and surrounding musical opportunity. Other pitches above and below this ridge have fewer repetitions, and only one option at the extremes of the instrument's range. Only some of these are available within one position, but open strings are generally available anywhere creating a complex tapestry of pitch and timbral affordance.

[4] Mick Goodrick observed that the "average note on the guitar has 2.8 locations and 9.2 possible fingerings", an amusing but useful metric for understanding the guitar's unique pitch complexity.

Jimi Hendrix instinctively exploited this spatial richness of the guitar. In the opening of *Hey Joe* for example the repeated Es aren't merely identical tones; each instance carries a different timbral inflection, adding subtle variation and color. In his solos, by bending one note on the 2nd string to match one on the top string, we are rewarded with a rough dissonance that smooths into a unison – with extraordinarily visceral and vocal results. In *Castles Made of Sand*, his chord voicings sometimes contain as few as just two or three pitch-classes (e.g. the last chord of the intro is just Gs and Ds), but with their doubling and use of both open and closed sonorities, they convey far more than a simple harmonic reduction would suggest. The stunning opening chords of *Third Stone from the Sun* and *Angel* move fixed shapes against chiming open strings, giving them a beauty and identity beyond pitch axis alone. Hendrix explored the fretboard intuitively and deeply —treating it not as an interface but a playground,, where chords and scales were not static objects but a fluid field of possibilities.

IV: If 6 was 9: Fretboard and Chord-Melody Fluidity

While guitar duties (and bands of the genre) are often divided into "lead" and "rhythm" roles, Jimi Hendrix blurred these boundaries with a deeply expressive *chord-melody* approach—where harmony and melody coexist in a single, fluid texture. Inspired by soul and jazz guitarists like Curtis Mayfield and Wes Montgomery, Hendrix developed a style that was simultaneously harmonically rich and melodically free, giving his chord work the expressive depth and fluency usually associated with lead playing.

He used this technique across all his recordings, with some notable examples in *The Wind Cries Mary, Castles Made of Sand, Wait Until Tomorrow, Bold as Love*, and the sublime *Angel*. However, *Little Wing*'s floating, ethereal progression and extended introduction makes it a masterclass in Hendrix's approach to harmonic movement.

At the heart of his chord-melody fluency were two key skills:

1. A deep command of the fretboard—seeing any chord (major, minor, or dominant 7th) not as a fixed-position shape but as a flexible structure available anywhere on the neck.
2. The ability to embellish these harmonic forms—using small, fluid, 2-3 note elaborations that extend and connect chords melodically.

In *Little Wing*, Hendrix takes a simple progression of major and minor chords and treats them as a playground for harmonic expression. The result is a constant evolution of texture, where chords are not just accompaniment but shifting, expressive colourations that respond to the melody and vocal phrasing. Unlike a static strumming approach, Hendrix's fretboard vision allowed him to inject melodic movement, harmonic nuance, and rhythmic subtlety into every chord voicing.

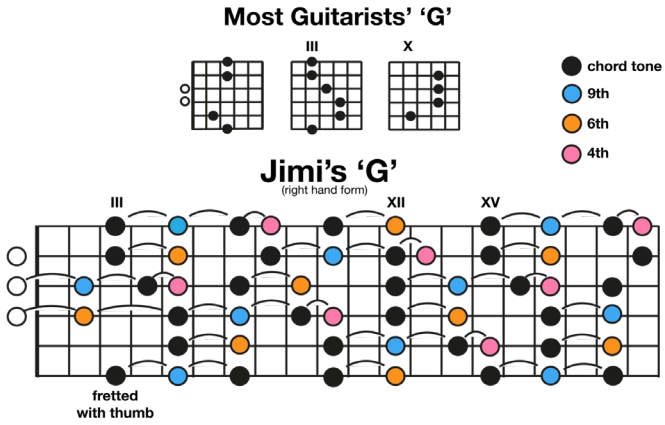

Figure 3: An illustration of Hendrix's fluid and colourful 'chord-melody' approach to a G major tonality. For comparison some typical static 'chord-grip' rhythm guitar approaches are shown above (Mermikides 2022b). Note, despite the left handedness of Hendrix, I have for the sake of broad accessibility opted for a right-handed presentation. Left-handed versions are available through miltonline.com, or if one prefers, a room full of mirrors.

To understand Hendrix's fretboard fluency, we can contrast a normative "strummer's" concept of a G chord with Hendrix's expanded all-fretboard vision. Where a typical guitarist might see a G chord as a single grip, Hendrix saw it as a network of interconnected voicings, revoicing chords in real time with added 9ths, 6ths, and 4ths for harmonic depth. These extensions were not merely decorative—they were essential to the melodic and textural movement within his playing. The choice of these particular notes is not arbitrary either – adding a 4th, 9th and 6th to a major triad adds beautiful colour but these particular three notes are very grounded, avoiding a diminished triad or leading tone fussiness (the same is true of the ♭7, 9th and 11th he added to minor triads). It might have been instinctive, but it is a sophisticated balance of elaboration, familiar accessibility and melodic fluidity. In addition to embellishing static chords, Hendrix used slurs, slides, open strings and double-stop melodies to connect positions seamlessly. This allowed him to transpose freely, applying the same approach to major, minor, and dominant 7th blues structures, making every chord progression not an accompaniment duty, but an open template for expression.

His fretboard fluency wasn't just about harmonic richness—it was also deeply rhythmic. He employed rhythmically compelling nuances throughout his playing, even in the shortest interjection.

V: Let the Good Times Roll: The Language of Groove

Jimi uses a rich blend of fretting hand and picking hand muting to infuse a power to his rhythmic playing at the boundaries of harmony, rhythm and timbre, often imbued with a subtle swing. He also held a robust inner pulse against which all manner of rhythmic groupings could be anchored such as the dotted crotchet implication in the opening of *Crosstown Traffic*. He also challenged the rhythmic norms of the rock genre with 'partial bar links' (*You Got Me Floatin');* 3/4 waltz-time (Manic Depression) and the complete abandonment of any metric structure (e.g.*…And the Gods Made Love* and *EXP*). This rhythmic flexibility however was not exclusively for his 'funky' or 'wild' pieces. For example, part of the magic of *Little Wing* (1967) lies in a sophisticated rhythmic elasticity. While the song's demands seem to focus on chord melody technique, its time-feel is extraordinarily fluid, making it one of Hendrix's more challenging pieces to convincingly reproduce. His rhythmic nuance, embedded within these fluid harmonic movements, gave his playing a distinctive pulse, an elusive 'tight but loose' feel.

At the heart of its rhythmic expressivity is semiquaver swing—the bounciness of 16th notes. But unlike a fixed swing ratio, Hendrix's performance is dynamic, shifting between different levels of swing throughout the piece. One phrase may have even divisions (a 50% swing), while the next may be heavily swung (over 70%), or anywhere in between. Instead of being randomly loose, these values fall into *controlled groupings* (see Figure 3). Hendrix isn't just playing straight or swung as dictated by style —he is actively sculpting time, shifting the feel from phrase to phrase. This constant reshaping of time means the rhythmic feel is contributing as much cadence as the harmony. Instead of just signalling resolution through chords, Hendrix lets time itself breathe and resolve, creating moments of rhythmic tension and release that interact with the harmonic progression.

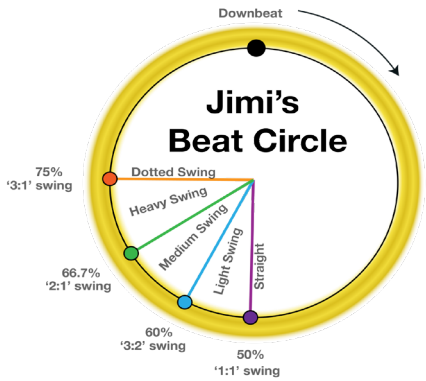

Figure 4: Jimi's beat circle' with some illustrative positions of swing values used in *Little Wing.*

This aspect of *Little Wing* is a hidden expression, tiny pushes and pulls that tweak at our prediction and enrich our experience. Hendrix was a master of such *expressive dissonance*, as is shown next in the context of *Purple Haze's contrastive valence* and sophisticated scrunchiness.

VI: All in My Brain: Expressive Dissonance and Contrast

Purple Haze is a masterclass in harmony, dissonance, and tonal ambiguity. While the song is conventionally notated in E major, Hendrix continually destabilizes this tonality, creating a rich harmonic tension that defines his unique voice. To fully appreciate this, it helps to understand some fundamental principles of common-practice harmony:

1. Tonality – In most tonal music, there is a “center of gravity” in both melody and harmony. The tonic (the I chord) serves as “home,” with other notes and chords moving around it, creating varying degrees of stability and instability.
2. Major vs. Minor – Traditional tonal music is typically built around either a major or minor key, with a defining third (major = happy, minor = sad).
3. Consonance and Dissonance – Some note combinations feel settled and stable (consonant), while others clash and demand resolution (dissonant). In tonal music, dissonance tends to occur away from the tonic and resolves toward more consonant harmonies.

Hendrix twists these conventions in *Purple Haze*, generating tension not by moving away from the tonic, but by embedding dissonance into it. The song is clearly centered on E, but rather than giving it a sense of stability, Hendrix surrounds it with dissonance.

The introduction alone locks the tonic E against Bb, forming a tritone—a famously unstable interval. Though the persistent myths about its historical “ban,” are unfounded, the tritone has long been associated with tension and ambiguity. Hendrix, rather than resolving it, embraces and repeats it insistently, making dissonance a core part of the song’s identity.

His use of the “Hendrix chord” (E7#9) further deepens this harmonic complexity. This four-note chord (E, G#, D, and G) is rich with clashing tensions.

- A tritone between G# and D
- A semitone clash between G and G#
- The presence of both a major third (G#) and minor third (G)—creating a simultaneous major-minor ambiguity

Furthermore, as many a guitarist who first played this chord will attest, coupled with its satisfying ergonomic shape, is an indescribable visceral richness. As ever the source of this experience though magical, is not magic. This four-note chord is what’s known in musical set theory as ‘intervallically complete’. Let me explain. In set theory the harmonic world is simplified so that we treat octaves as neutral - any one of the 12 chromatic notes, whatever their octave can be depicted on a clock face. Other than being identical (e.g., octaves and unisons), any two notes can only differ by one of 1,2,3,4,5 or 6 chromatic spaces (namely interval classes 1 through 6, or ic1–6). It so happens that the Hendrix chord is one of only 4 possible ‘all interval tetrachords’ - a 4-note chord that includes all 6 of these interval classes. It is an efficient, direct, and elegant dissonance. A concentrated harmonic expression. See Figure 5 and you will see that the interval classes (the length of the coloured bars) between each of these notes is collectively 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

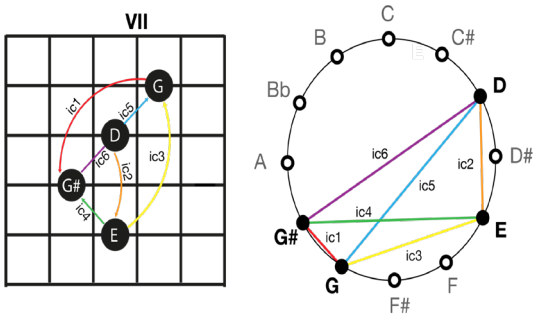

Figure 5: The Hendrix chord as used in *Purple Haze, Voodoo Child* and many other tracks. Note if we place these four notes on a chromatic circle every possible 'interval-class' (distance between chromatic notes) is produced. This 'all-interval tetrachord' produces an efficient, direct and visceral richness.

By using this as the tonic "home" chord, Hendrix defies the expectation that dissonance should resolve. Instead, he establishes tension as a permanent state, shaping the song's bittersweet, angular harmonic flavor. The Hendrix chord itself is an example of *contrastive valence.* An expressivity created by the superimposition of oppositional musical intent. This bittersweet flavour, occurs throughout the piece: he physically bends and explores the notes between the major and minor 3rd, the chords in the chorus are E7#9 (a mixed chord), G major (from E minor) and A major (implying E major). The solo uses the chords E5 F#5 and D5 and the melodic notes of the Dorian mode (a perfectly balanced scale of major and minor scale degrees). His use of microtonal inflections, vibrato, expressive slides, and vocal-like phrasing elevates the dissonance beyond harmony alone—it becomes a feature of his entire expressive vocabulary.

This extension of harmony into physical expression naturally leads to Hendrix's use of technology—distortion, feedback, and electronic effects—not just as enhancements, but as integral tools of his expressive dissonance, as is explored next.

VII: Body, Technology… And Beyond

We often think of a musician as someone who plays an instrument, but with virtuosi, the distinction between player and instrument begins to dissolve. The instrument is no longer an external tool but an extension of the musician's body, responding to thought and gesture as naturally as speech.

Jimi's very approach to the guitar—upside down and restrung for left-handed playing—was a physical adaptation that brought him closer to the instrument. The reversed orientation meant that his volume and tone knobs, pickup switch, and whammy bar were more easily within reach, allowing for seamless control during performance. His large hands wrapped around the neck, with his thumb effortlessly providing bass notes, affording a chord-melody fluency that set him apart. His physical gestures weren't just part of his stage presence—they were integral to his sound, melding performance with sonic expression.

But Hendrix's relationship with the guitar went beyond physical fluency. His use of effects wasn't merely about altering tone—it was about expanding the expressive potential of the instrument. The wah pedal, for instance, didn't just shape the guitar's tone; it transformed it into an extension of his voice, adding vowel-like articulations that made the instrument sing, cry, and scream. Similarly, his fuzz pedal wasn't a simple distortion device but a means of reshaping timbre, and fed into harmonic choices, the Hendrix chord with its unfussy but sophisticated dissonance retains its harmonic identity through the exaggerated overtones. Jimi's relationship with inventors and pioneering use of new effects – and embrace of experimental studio effects from phasing, 'reverse-input' *wah* and backward solos – demonstrated his dedication to timbral expression.

Nowhere is this fusion of player, instrument, and technology more profoundly illustrated than in his use of feedback. Feedback—where sound loops between the amplifier and the guitar's vibrating strings—turns the instrument from a generator of sound into a receiver of it. In Hendrix's hands, feedback wasn't a chaotic byproduct; it was a force to be summoned and tamed, like a surfer riding an immense, unpredictable wave. He manipulated it with movement, touch, and volume control, sculpting pure resonance and harmonic

overtones in real time. The opening of *Foxy Lady* demonstrates this mastery where feedback is summoned from thin air by just vibrato alone, into a cataclysmic and cathartic tidal wave.

Hendrix didn't just play the guitar—he played the entire signal chain, from pickups to pedals to speaker cone. A fusion and dissolution of his physical body, guitar, electrical impulse, and sound wave.

VIII: Voodoo Child: A Slight Return

Music theory traditionally emphasizes pitch (melody, harmony) and rhythm (meter, syncopation, phrasing). These elements are essential to *Voodoo Child (Slight Return)*, where Hendrix employs major-minor ambiguity, the Hendrix chord (E7#9), microtonal bends, and a mixture of straight, swing and a funky median semiquaver swing feel. However, an often-overlooked – a more analytically challenging – dimension of musical expression is *timbre*—the tonal quality of sound itself. Standard notation reflects this bias: We can prescribe any (albeit tempered) pitch, specific tempo, or (albeit quantized) rhythmic position and duration. However, timbre has but a handful of notations: a few levels of loudness (usually from an unspecified ***pp*** to ***ff***) playing indications (e.g., *sul tasto* and *sul pont.*), and general descriptions (e.g., *dolcissimo* (very sweet) or *secco* ('dry'). Our language for describing specific timbre is impoverished, and the dimension is often considered secondary to the 'important' pitch and rhythmic material.

Indeed, while guitarists obsess over their 'tone', this is often thought of as a relatively static quality—a pleasant or distinguishing "serving plate" for the melody. Hendrix, however, treats timbre as a primary expressive force, just as fundamental as pitch or rhythm. His dynamic control of tone color shapes the emotional impact of *Voodoo Child*, demonstrating that timbre isn't just how a note sounds, but what a note says. At its extreme, even our sonic identification of a guitar is dissolved – our listening is divorced from the source, acquiescing to the ocean of harmonics.

One of the most striking aspects of Hendrix's timbral control is his manipulation of resonance—the balance of high vs. low frequencies in a sound. He alters this constantly, using:

- Pick attack and muted strings to shape percussive textures.
- Pickup selection to toggle between bright, mellow and in and out phased tones.
- The fuzz pedal to push the guitar's harmonic content into new territories of sustain and aggression.
- The wah pedal, which provides a continuous, foot-controlled resonance shift, allowing his guitar sound to be moved dynamically between muted (like when we speak with our mouth covered) and bright like a baby's cry.[5]

Throughout *Voodoo Child*, Hendrix shifts between resonant textures, sometimes leaving the wah in a fixed position to color an entire section, other times sweeping it dynamically to create shape and motion. This interplay between manual and technological expression is what makes his sound feel so fluid—his touch, his phrasing, and his effects are not separate elements but part of a single language.

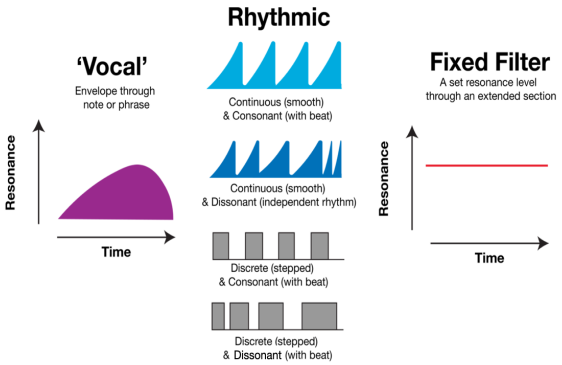

Figure 6: Some of Jimi's timbral strategies employed through the wah, pickup selector and playing technique. For example the wah's resonance can be fixed through a section of music, shaped through a note enhancing its vocal quality, pulse in time with the beat, or in a cross rhythm. Fretting and picking hand muting – or even the pick=up selector can produce more discrete timbral rhythmic patterns against the pitch material.

[5] A popular model of Wah (or Wah-Wah) was in fact called the 1967 *CryBaby*.

Hendrix's timbre-first approach reveals a powerful lesson: sound itself can be expressive, even before considering melody or harmony. His use of feedback, fuzz, wah, and resonance manipulation allows him to bend not just pitch, but the very nature of the sonic experience itself. Throughout this extraordinary piece, whose roots in early blues is unmistakable, there are remarkable vocalisations, sonic control and dissolving of the distinctions between pitch, rhythm and timbre. One remarkable illustrative moment occurs at 0:43–46 where a held pinch-harmonic note (itself an extraordinary timbre) – its sustain supported by a fixed filter wah and near feedbacking distortion – glides down slowly through the blues '♭5' microtonal landscape. While so doing Jimi toggles the pickup selector – a device typically only used to 'set' the instrumental tone *before* a piece or song section. Here however uses it as an expressive device, altering the tone *in a specific and meaningful rhythm.* In 3 seconds, the artifice of the axes is dissolved entirely.

IX: Castles Made of Sand

Hendrix's premature death leaves a tantalizing enigma—what music he might have created had he been granted the decades ahead. His final recordings hint at new frontiers: the raw power of *Band of Gypsys*, the unfulfilled vision of his *Sky Church* music, and even his consultations with Miles Davis, who reportedly urged Jimi toward a greater use of silence and a broader harmonic palette. Jimi also repeatedly expressed the desire to go to music college to study classical music – a fascination echoed in Jimi's joy at living in Handel's erstwhile Mayfair flat, and playing records of Bach, Elgar, Beethoven, and Vivaldi, among his eclectic listening diet of Ravi Shankar, blues, Roland Kirk, Miles Davis, Joan Baez, Bob Dylan and others. Where this restless creativity, musical curiosity, and unfulfilled ideas he might have had are sadly lost forever, like castles melting back into the sea.

Yet, despite the brevity of his life, his music continues to shine—an enduring inspiration in its ability to dissolve boundaries. Hendrix blended what others kept apart: blues and sound design, rhythm and lead, voice and instrument, raw power and delicate sensitivity, the body and the guitar, the guitar and technology, technology, and the surrounding air. His fluidity extended beyond genre or technique—it reached into the very fabric of music itself. His rhythm was as much about timbre as timing, his harmonies existed in multiple identities across the fretboard, timbral and rhythmic axes, and his guitar and voice became symbiotic and indistinguishable in their expression. In preparing this lecture I found even the latest AI tools could not completely tease apart his guitar and voice vocalisations, a testament to the extent their expression was blurred.

Hendrix's artistry was a 'rainbow bridge' – a colourful connection—not just between musical styles; but between pitch, rhythm, and timbre; human and machine; the acoustic and the electric, structure and freedom; order and chaos. Ultimately in fact, musical elements cannot be separated. Timbre is made up of frequencies, which are themselves pitches; pitches exist in time, which makes them rhythm; rhythm shapes articulation, which alters timbre. And so, in the end, we are left with something indivisible—a pulsating wave from which all of this experience emerges, blossoms, and dissolves.

References and Further Reading

The Nature of Music

https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/series/nature-music

This lecture series and essays provide fundamental background material on rhythm, music as Language, harmony, dissonance, technology, tuning Expression and musical structures.

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