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Review: 'Jimi: All Is By My Side'

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Written and Directed by John Ridley**Starring AndrŽ Benjamin, Imogen Poots, Hayley Atwell, Andrew Buckley, Oliver Bennett, Tom Dunlea, and**

‘Jimi: All Is By My Side,’ written and directed by **John Ridley**, the Oscar-winning screenwriter of ‘12 Years a Slave,’ is an atmospheric, deliberately paced biopic. The film, depicting a turbulent and pivotal year in the life of Jimi Hendrix, is slow at times, but ultimately offers a complex and resonant portrait of history’s greatest rock guitarist.



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The film's music scenes are lively, immersive, and shot with panache. But viewers hoping to marinate in Hendrix hits like "Purple Haze" and "All Along the Watchtower" should know upfront that, due to rights and contracting issues, "Jimi: All Is By My Side" doesn't actually feature any original Hendrix songs. The picture instead offers performances of songs like the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" and Bob Dylan's "Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat," which Hendrix covered during the year depicted.

"Jimi: All Is By My Side," taking place between the summers of '66 and '67, follows Hendrix's meteoric ascent from nobody to rock-god. But the film isn't a linear, propulsive, or dramatically escalating story. Instead, it's more of a free-flowing mood piece. The film dabbles in various corners of the Hendrix myth, frequently shifting focus between the rock legend's surging music career, turbulent romances, and, to a lesser extent, his issues with drugs, alcohol, and anger.

The filmmaker has a provocative perspective on the rise of Hendrix

(**André Benjamin**).

Ridley

posits Linda Keith (**Imogen**

Poots)

as the one-time girlfriend of Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards



as the chief architect and muse of Hendrix's early success. The film opens with Linda's discovery of Hendrix in New York, while Jimi is playing backup at the Cheetah Club to a sauced and indifferent crowd. Linda recognizes Hendrix's genius immediately. She teaches him to market himself and introduces him to her network of contacts, including The Animals' ex-bass player Chas Chandler (**Andrew Buckley**), whom Hendrix hires as his manager. Lest anyone confuse Ms. Keith for a saint, the film also has her introducing Jimi to hard drugs for the first time, a habit he wouldn't break until his drug-related death at the age of 27. The first third of the film focuses on Linda's efforts to get Hendrix onto the London music scene and on Linda and Jimi's burgeoning friendship and unspoken romantic feelings.

Benjamin and Poots have magnetic on-screen chemistry. As Linda, Poots exudes charm and confidence, while conveying the character's underlying vulnerability. Benjamin's Hendrix exudes the opposite: a gentle, soft-spoken exterior concealing underlying hardness, competitiveness, and emotional coldness. Benjamin deftly shuffles through Hendrix's many faces and moods, effortlessly shifting from soulful-to-philosophical-to-prideful-to-wrathful as needed.

The rest of the film focuses on Hendrix's career progress and continued romantic adventures in London, culminating in his June 4th, 1967 performance at the Savile Theater. It will be easy for music lovers and Hendrix fans to get caught up in Ridley's reenactment of rock history, including the formation of The Jimi Hendrix Experience, with Jimi's bandmates Noel Redding (**Oliver**

Bennett) and Mitch Mitchell (**Tom Dunlea**). The film's romantic focus also takes a hard left turn in act two, when Linda surprisingly and abruptly exits the proceedings, making room for Hendrix's soon-to-be longtime girlfriend Kathy Etchingham (**Hayley Atwell**). Linda's departure leaves the story with a bit of an emotional vacuum, largely due to the sudden absence of Poots's arresting performance. While it may take viewers a minute to mentally reset, Jimi's romance with Kathy is ultimately poignant and rewarding in its own right.

As Kathy, Atwell isn't as instantly charming as Poots, instead portraying the character as cocky and abrasive. But viewers will warm to Kathy as the film progresses. Atwell allows a desperate vulnerability to seep through, as Kathy unravels over the course of her relationship with an unstable



and temperamental rock star. Ridley portrays Hendrix as a man capable of loving women, but incapable of prioritizing them over his music or himself. In fact, this film’s Hendrix is outright abusive, committing numerous acts of jarring domestic violence. This portrayal has been hotly contested by the Hendrix estate and by a still-very-much-alive Kathy Etchingham, and could be one reason that producers were unable to procure the rights to use Hendrix’s original songs in the film (though that’s just speculation). If Hendrix’s domestic violence is an instance of pure fictionalization, it raises the question of whether or not it’s ethical for a filmmaker to take dramatic license that unfairly and inaccurately tarnishes a real person’s reputation (for a parallel, see Ron Howard’s portrayal of boxer Max Baer as a sneering, bloodthirsty sociopath in *Cinderella Man*).

Ridley displays an evocative visual style. The color and lighting schemes become brighter and more vibrant as the film – and Jimi’s career – progress, culminating in Hendrix’s climactic, brightly lit performance of “Sgt. Pepper” while draped in a hippie Technicolor dream-coat. Ridley utilizes overlapping dialogue and emphatic ambient noise to give viewers the sense of dropping in on these characters mid-conversation, like flies on a wall instead of spectators in a theater. The musical set pieces are lively and well-shot, Ridley’s bobbing verité camera at-times capturing the POV of a live Hendrix audience member, and at others putting viewers right up on stage with Jimi. Ridley and his editors sometimes fade the music out entirely during performance scenes, focusing on nothing but Jimi’s hands and the discordant twang of fingers plucking strings.

Jimi: All Is By My Side emphasizes a meditative, laid-back atmosphere over traditional narrative propulsion and momentum. This leads to a lack of focus, as the story jumps around, disjointedly at times, from Hendrix’s career pursuits, to his romances, to his seemingly random outbursts of domestic violence, to the film’s cursory and underdeveloped exploration of his drug use. An undercooked plot tangent about Jimi’s recruitment by the Black Power movement occurs so late and feels so shoehorned in that it lands entirely flat. Ridley’s film succeeds less as a traditionally satisfying dramatic story than it does as a palpable, atmospheric immersion inside a tumultuous and defining year in the life of Jimi Hendrix.

Ultimately, *Jimi: All Is By My Side* is a rewarding experience that gets more right than wrong, featuring a host of compelling performances, a distinct and provocative take on an American icon, and a sharp directorial turn from an Oscar-winning writer.

