8. Broadsides and Backsides (1811)

If the more recent popularity of John Dowland far beyond the confines of the art music world has something to do with former Police front man Sting’s decision to record some of Dowland’s most popular ayres on *Songs from the Labyrinth* (2006) (including a version of “Come again” with a rather unsatisfying choice of text, oddly breaking off in mid-stanza two of the second set of lyrics), and if Sting’s recording of Dowland is ultimately a consequence of his famed decision to exchange a safe career as an English teacher for the chances of rock stardom, it follows that Dowland’s more recent fame may after all have something to do with a Jimi Hendrix performance in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1968, attended by 14-year-old Gordon Mathew Thomas Sumner (dubbed ‘Sting’ only much later during a Dixie-jazz gig, as legend has it, wearing a black and yellow jersey with hooped stripes that made him look like a bumblebee). In an interview, Sting animatedly recalled the effect of seeing Hendrix perform thus:

> He was like a Venusian. Like someone from another planet. All that hair. And there were hardly any black people in Newcastle – I think he actually was the first black person I’d ever seen. It was absolutely electric, almost too awesome to deal with. […] That was what decided me to become a musician, although I’d probably decided in some vague way already. (Salewicz 1987, 22)

Jimi Hendrix was ‘discovered’ in Greenwich Village by Chas Chandler, former bassist of The Animals, who was just launching himself as a rock manager. Chandler consequently brought him to London in September 1966 where Hendrix hit the music scene with a vengeance; partly, of course, owing to his unparalleled musical skills and style, partly, however, because he played out his exotic status as an African American to the full. As Paul Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic*: “A seasoned, if ill-disciplined, rhythm and blues sideman, Hendrix was reinvented as the essential image of what English audiences felt a black American performer should be: wild, sexual, hedonistic, and dangerous” (Gilroy 1993, 93). Hendrix was staged – and staged himself – as an unprecedented threat and thrill, both musically and sexually, across the contested intersections of race and gender. What apparently thrilled adolescent Sting scandalised white British mothers and lovers who feared that their loved ones would fall for a dangerous “Wild Man of Borneo” as Hendrix was styled in the London tabloids, which treated him
much like an “anthropological discovery,”\(^1\) or, in Hendrix-biographer Charles Shaar Murray’s words, “like a freakshow” (Murray 1989, 44). Such exoticist sensationalism in the popular press was accompanied by persistent rumours about the alleged size of Hendrix’s penis, which was eventually ‘objectified’ in a legendary encounter with the Plaster Casters in February 1968, two Chicago groupies whose fame rests on a substantial collection of plaster casts of rock circuit genitalia. Hendrix, of whom Cynthia P Caster enthusiastically claimed that “[h]e has got just about the biggest rig I’ve ever seen!” (qtd. in Henderson 1983, 180) became their first exhibit.

Hendrix’s mythicised potency and sexuality was uncannily tied to ideas of race in popular British discourses, and Gilroy accordingly remarks that “the overt sexuality of Hendrix’s neo-minstrel buffoonery seems to have been received as a sign of his authentic blackness by white rock audiences” (Gilroy 1993, 93). Race served to ‘authenticate’ sound, and Hendrix consequently presented a thrill and threat not only to British audiences, but also to the professional guild of London-based rock musicians in terms of “the political aesthetics implicated in representations of racial authenticity” (ibid.). Operating within the conventions of a genre that claims a large part of its legacy from the blues, the British rock scene found in Hendrix a protagonist in their midst against whom ideals of authenticity and masculinity could be negotiated and acted out. Some, such as Eric Clapton, saw in Hendrix’s stage performances a showiness which deflected from his artistry,\(^2\) while others per-

\(^1\) Charles R. Cross writes, recounting the anecdotal evidence of Hendrix’s arrival in London in *The Rolling Stone*: “Once in England, Chandler immediately set out to turn Jimi into a star. On the way from the airport, they stopped by the house of bandleader Zoot Money. […] Also rooming in the house was twenty-year-old Kathy Etchingham, who would soon also be smitten by Jimi. […] Money’s wife tried to wake her to tell her about the new sensation in the living room. She said, ‘Wake up, Kathy. You’ve got to come and see this guy Chas has brought back. He looks like the Wild Man of Borneo.’ The tag would later end up as one of Jimi’s nicknames in the tabloids, a consequence of his unkempt physical appearance and his race, both of which were so unusual on London’s music scene that he might as well have been a new anthropological discovery” (Cross 2005).

\(^2\) Clapton stated in an interview in 1968: “You know English people have a very big thing towards a spade. They really love that magic thing. They all fall for that kind of thing. Everybody and his brother in England still think that spades have big dicks. And Jimi came over and exploited that to the limit, the fucking tee. Everybody fell for it. Shit. I fell for it. After a while I began to suspect it. Having gotten to know him, I found out that’s not where he’s at, not at all. The stuff he does onstage, when he does that he’s testing his audience. He’ll do a lot of things, like fool around with his tongue and play his guitar behind his back and rub it up and down his crotch. And he’ll look at the audience, and if they’re digging it, he won’t like the audience” (Wenner 1981, 28). Clapton’s rather twisted opinions about Englishness, immigration and ethnicity will be briefly discussed in the following chapter.