Rock Idol's Legacy Devolves Into Family Feud

By SARAH KERSHAW

Elvis lives — maybe. But Jimi Hendrix is definitely dead, and has been for 33 years. Even his most devoted fans accept that.

Lately, though, it seems that almost everything else about Hendrix — his image, the circumstances of his death, his message and his legacy — is open to debate, or else a nasty argument. How would Hendrix feel, for example, about the Jimi Hendrix "Road Rage" vanilla-scented car air fresheners sold by the official Jimi Hendrix online store? The golf balls? The boxer shorts?

Would he be hurt to know that Seattle, his hometown, had for years rejected pleas to name a street or a park for him, finally allowing a mere plaque, in the city zoo, only after a long fight? Finally, where would Hendrix side in a feud over his legacy and estate that has split his family into warring camps, with competing Web sites, charges of commercial exploitation and a lawsuit by a disinherited brother?

The posthumous world of Hendrix, who was 27 when he died in 1970 in London and remains a wildly popular and mysterious figure, has been filled with twists and turns over the last year. There is the fight between his brother Leon Hendrix and his stepsister Janie Hendrix over his estate, which intensified last year after Hendrix's father, Al, who had inherited the estate, died in April.

There is the new exhibition at the Experience Music Project in downtown Seattle, a hugely popular collection of Hendrix memorabilia that started with a large donation by Paul G. Allen, the Microsoft co-founder and hard-core Hendrix fan, and then vastly expanded last month with mementos from the family. There was the completion of a granite memorial to Hendrix, constructed by his family, at a cemetery near Seattle, where his remains were exhumed last November and relocated to the memorial, about 100 feet away.
And then there has been the growing criticism from fans and others over how Janie Hendrix, who won the rights to Hendrix's music and likeness in 1995 and now runs a company near here called Experience Hendrix, has marketed the image.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find any hard-core Hendrix fan that approves of the way Janie has handled the estate or Jimi's image or the marketing," said Ray Rae Goldman, director of archival research for the James Marshall Hendrix Foundation, started by Al Hendrix. "They've topped Elvis or the Stones or anybody for crass marketing."

Mr. Goldman is close to Leon Hendrix, who sued Janie Hendrix last year, contending that she illegally persuaded Al Hendrix to leave Leon Hendrix out of his will. Leon, 55, who lives in Seattle and plays guitar in several bands, inherited nothing from the Hendrix estate except a gold record. The suit seeks a quarter of the estate, which Leon Hendrix's lawyer, Lance L. Losey, said was what Al Hendrix had planned to leave Leon Hendrix before excluding him from the estate in 1998.

Ms. Hendrix denies the contentions in the suit, saying Leon Hendrix was a source of distress to Al Hendrix and was estranged from him.

"My dad and I had a wonderful relationship," she said. "As far as what he chose to give or not to give to Leon, my dad had all his wits about him. He did what he wanted to do."

Ms. Hendrix, 42, a former teacher, was adopted by Al Hendrix when he married her mother, June. Ms. Hendrix runs Experience Hendrix with 12 people, including a first cousin, Bob Hendrix, from an office building in Tukwila, near the Seattle-Tacoma airport. She said merchandise sales were "secondary" to the main missions of issuing high-quality recordings of Hendrix's music, educating the public about who he was and spreading his message of "loving each other." The company buses a museum around the country.

Experience Hendrix, which controls the estate, is a privately held company, and does not report on the value of the estate. Estimates vary from $100 million to $160 million. Forbes magazine estimated last year that the estate earned $8 million a year, $2 million less than Bob Marley's estate and $1 million more than Marilyn Monroe's.

Ms. Hendrix said she knew that the golf balls with Hendrix's likeness bothered some fans, but said Al Hendrix wanted them, because his own father had once worked on a golf course that excluded blacks.

"We definitely don't do it to offend anybody," Ms. Hendrix said. "It's kind of sad. It's like on one hand everybody feels like they own a piece of Jimi. But at the end of the day, who pays the bills? Who takes care of him? Who takes care of his grave? It's really easy to sit back and play Monday morning quarterback, but you don't walk in our shoes."

Ms. Hendrix, who was 9 when Hendrix died, said one mission was to correct a misconception about Hendrix's death. A common theory is that he died of a drug overdose. Ms. Hendrix said her stepbrother died of asphyxiation, choking on his vomit after consuming wine and sleeping pills. The exact cause remains in dispute. Hendrix's reputation as a heavy user of drugs has hampered efforts to have Seattle honor him officially, said Ms. Hendrix and others who have lobbied for a memorial other than the zoo plaque.
"A number of Hendrix fans have lobbied to get larger recognition in Seattle for essentially the most famous musician ever born in Seattle," said Charles R. Cross, a Seattle writer who is working on a Hendrix biography. "There has been a chilliness on the part of the city founders" associated with his reputation as a drug user, Mr. Cross said.

A life-size bronze statute of Hendrix in the Capitol Hill neighborhood was erected in 1997 by a private music company, and a bust of Hendrix is at Garfield High School, his alma mater, but neither of those is an official city memorial.

Officials said they could not comment on why there was no memorial street or park, because no request had been made to the administration of Mayor Gregory J. Nickels.

Ms. Hendrix and her company built the towering granite memorial at the Greenwood Memorial cemetery in Renton. Roughly 16,000 fans make their way to the grave annually, leaving notes, beer cans, marijuana cigarettes and other paraphernalia, Ms. Hendrix said.

Leon Hendrix said moving his brother's body upset him.

"If Jimi was alive right now," Mr. Hendrix said, "he wouldn't be happy about this stuff. They moved Jimi from his grave to the memorial. We've got Indian blood. We don't move people."

The feud has worsened since Al Hendrix died. Some relatives side with Janie, others with Leon.

The rival Web sites are www.OriginalHendrix.com by Leon and several by Experience Hendrix, including AuthenticHendrix.com.

"At Al's funeral, you could just see the factions in the family," said Janet Wainwright, who as a radio marketing director in the 1980's spearheaded the zoo and who added that she was very close to Al Hendrix. "It's just sad. It's very, very sad."