



Joplin, Janis (1943-1970)

by Teresa Theophano

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The name Janis Joplin is practically synonymous with the excesses epitomized by the counterculture of the 1960s: sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, all of which Joplin took to extreme levels. As troubled as she was talented, Joplin has been portrayed in numerous articles, full-length biographies, and documentaries as everything from a reckless, sex-crazed party animal to a victimized, lost little girl who never believed she was lovable.

The truth is likely somewhere in between--but what is clear is that Joplin's musical legacy lives on and crosses barriers of gender, race, and class.

Joplin was born on January 19, 1943 in small, insular Port Arthur, Texas, where she grew up. She always stood out as a bright, creative misfit in her oil-refinery hometown. She stood out too in her rather conservative family, preferring to pursue visual art and music rather than fulfill her mother's expectations of her becoming a schoolteacher.

Joplin reportedly relished the attention that gossip about her bad-girl image brought, but her status as a social outcast hurt her deeply and would remain with her throughout her short life.

For a while Joplin attended Lamar State College of Technology and then the University of Texas at Austin, but she decided that school was not for her and never graduated. During her college years she began singing at the hootenannies of the day and at bars in the Austin, San Francisco, and Venice, California areas.

After some time spent traveling and a brief, failed attempt to establish a conventional life back home in Port Arthur, Joplin moved to San Francisco and fully immersed herself in the counterculture there.

Before long, her voice had gained her many followers, and she joined the then-unknown group Big Brother and the Holding Company. Joplin scored a major hit at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival with her smoldering rendition of Big Mama Thornton's blues song "Ball and Chain."

That major "Summer of Love" event heralded her big breakthrough; Big Brother signed a contract with Mainstream Records, and Joplin continued to perform with them for two more years.

Joplin later formed the Kozmic Blues Band, and in 1969 released *I Got Dem Kozmic Blues Again Mama!* When the group fell apart, she spearheaded one last project, the Full Tilt Boogie Band, a more popular-style, professional-sounding group with whom she recorded her third album, *Pearl*.

The widely acclaimed record was released posthumously and featured her unforgettable version of the Kris Kristofferson tune "Me and Bobby McGee."

Life was difficult for Joplin. To frame her career in a historical context, one might recall that Joplin's star

rose before women's liberation flourished--and prior to the advent of the women's music genre. Her era--despite its proliferation of love children--was not particularly nurturing of a single, enterprising woman in the traditionally male rock 'n' roll world. As her fame grew, so did her alcoholism and drug use; she battled her heroin addiction but never relinquished her Southern Comfort habit.

Joplin's sexuality was expansive and open, encompassing both men and women; but the "freak" circles in which Joplin circulated were generally heterosexual and not immune to sexism. Hippie women, after all, were not supposed to be crass and, as Janis was often described, "ballsy."

In addition, Joplin crossed the race line. Most people had never seen a white woman singing the blues and letting it all hang out the way she did, and perhaps not everyone was ready for her full-on explosion of voice and soul. Citing influences and inspirations such as Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith, and Leadbelly, Janis interpreted the blues in a way that helped break down the old barrier of "black music" versus "white music."

Although Joplin took numerous female lovers, she never openly identified as lesbian or bisexual. Instead, she considered herself beyond categorization: she was simply *sexual*.

Her friends mainly referred to her as bisexual, yet the press has long loved to heterosexualize her past, while lesbian culture often claims her as one of its own.

The truth is that Janis maintained long-term relationships with several women, including Peggy Caserta, whose controversial 1973 memoir *Going Down with Janis* documented their affair and mutual drug addiction. At the same time, Joplin was also on the lookout for "one good man" with whom to settle down. Twice engaged, she never did marry.

Although she had kicked heroin around the time she formed the Full Tilt Boogie Band, Joplin was tempted again one night when she ran into her former dealer in the lobby of the Landmark Motel in Los Angeles. She died of a heroin overdose, alone in her room at the motel, on October 4, 1970.

Joplin's music continues to flourish. Her *Greatest Hits* album still makes the Billboard charts. She was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1995.

Bibliography

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Janis Joplin Official Website: www.janisjoplin.com.

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