

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

My Father and Janis Joplin

John Amen · Wednesday, May 13th, 2020

When I was five, my mother died and I left NYC to live with my maternal grandparents in NC. For some time after that, I didn't have regular contact with my father, though he always mailed me a gift on major holidays. Starting with my ninth birthday, he began to send me records over the next five or six years, gifting me with Cream's *Disraeli Gears*, Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, and various albums by the Beatles and Bob Dylan, among others. The first album he sent, however, on my ninth birthday, the first album I owned, was Janis Joplin's *Greatest Hits*, the one with the front cover that shows Joplin poised on a motorcycle. I hated the album at nine but fell in love with it at twelve, playing those songs over and over on my flea-market stereo.[1]

So it was with anticipation that I *finally* streamed Amy Berg's documentary *Janis: Little Girl Blue*. Berg does a fine job of spotlighting the milestones in Joplin's career, including her early and nightmarish years in Port Arthur, TX; her move to and love for San Francisco, specifically the Haight-Ashbury district; her time with Big Brother and the Holding Company; and her final months of peak stardom. What makes the film most compelling, though, is Berg's ability to flesh out the tensions or apparent contradictions in Joplin's personality. We witness excerpts from live performances, including Joplin's dynamic set at Monterey, during which she clearly won over the members of the Mamas & the Papas [2] as well as the thousands of others in attendance (one of the most striking scenes shows Mama Cass mouthing the word "wow" following Big Brother's set). Also of interest are the clips from earlier and later performances as well as an impromptu gathering on a train with the members of the Grateful Dead, during which we hear Joplin singing a rough version of "Me and Bobby McGee" [3]. In these excerpts, we see Joplin's confidence as a performer and her charisma when socializing with kindred spirits. These scenes are contrasted with comments she makes during interviews, insights offered by others, and sentiments she expresses in various letters (recited by Cat Powers), in which we witness her craving for fame, dependence on others for validation, and distorted association of praise with love.

Joplin's struggle with drug use gets significant but ultimately cursory attention. Most striking in these segments are troubling comments by various friends and colleagues, including Peggy Caserta (a close friend of Joplin's and the author of *Going Down with Janis*), who essentially trivialize or at best grossly euphemize Joplin's addictive tendencies. Several people mention how she was challenged by "the down hours," alluding to Joplin's dependence on the adrenalizing nature of performance, how she often used heroin to soothe herself after shows or when she was alone and lonely.

Also compelling is the well-developed portrait of the San Francisco "flower" scene in the mid-1960s. Numerous bands—Big Brother, The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and Country Joe and the Fish, among others—emerged from this particular setting and time. Of particular interest for someone such as myself, who was too young to have experienced the 1960s directly, is how Berg presents Monterey, in 1967, as the peak of the psychedelic period, suggesting that Woodstock, rather than being a cultural apex, actually marked the end of an era. I'm reminded of those compelling lines from Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run ... but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world.

and:

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.

Most haunting in the film, perhaps, is what is most haunting in any portraiture of someone who died young and tragically: given the facts of Joplin's life, she was probably, at the age of twenty-seven, at the threshold of major changes, personally and professionally. Her alliances with Columbia Records President Clive Davis and producer Paul Rothchild; her romantic connection with the sober David Niehaus, whom she met in Brazil; and the fact that she had supposedly been clean for several months all pointed to an initiatory period in her life, one in which she might have successfully addressed various psychological issues and self-destructive proclivities, emerging a new and transformed person and artist. Alas, she died of an overdose on October 4, 1970.^[4]

During the credits, various people elegize Joplin, including Pink, Melissa Etheridge, and Juliette Lewis. A clip from the Dick Cavett show, in which John Lennon and Yoko Ono mention Joplin recording "Happy Trails" for Lennon's thirtieth birthday, is also of note. Ultimately the film portrays Joplin as a restless spirit, a boldly creative talent, and a feminist icon, though she had no aspirations to such a role. Berg effectively leaves us with mixed feelings, the melancholy sense that Joplin accomplished much in her twenty-seven years, leaving an impressive musical legacy; and that she died with many inner struggles still unresolved, a young woman who never had the chance to fully mature.

[1] Incidentally, the first album I ever sent my father; perhaps hoping, at the age of fourteen, to impress him with my own individuated musical tastes, was The Cars' *Candy-O*, a choice that still makes me chuckle, given how there was probably nothing on the album that would have appealed to him. In fact, his awkward thank-you note seemed to indicate that my gift entirely perplexed him – not just the album itself but how someone who was an extension of his gene pool could display a penchant for something so aesthetically alien.

I'll add that the last gift I gave him was a Leadbelly box set, which would have probably been one of his favorite gifts *ever*, had he not already been on the decline, cognitively and physically, from an aggressive lung cancer that had metastasized during the prior year. As it was, when I played disc one for him, he sat quietly through the first five tracks, brow fretted, as if he were trying to decipher a foreign language. He started laughing when the sixth track, "Where Did You Sleep Last Night," came on, hopefully a response engendered by some fond association buried within his blurring consciousness. I might *also* add that around the same time I played him Nirvana's cover of the abovementioned song, from their *MTV Unplugged* album, toward the end of which he pressed his palms against his ears and flashed a facial expression that reminded me of how I must have looked during those winter weeks when my grandmother made me swallow a tablespoon of cod liver oil each morning prior to catching the bus for elementary school.

While I'm at it: my father also sent me books on a regular basis, including Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* for my tenth Independence Day; Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* for what I think was my graduation from fifth grade; and at some point Oscar Wilde's *Happy Prince*, a collection of what might be the saddest stories ever written in the history of western lit. As is probably clear by this point, my father had his own ideas regarding what was age-appropriate. My favorite lit-memory involving my father, however, is when he called me sometime in the summer of 1991 and read me his poem "On the Runway," which had just been published in *Grand Street* and is now posted in the http://www.oberlin.edu/alummag/oampast/oam_spring98/Alum_n_n/ontherunway.html.

[2] My father sent me *If You Can Believe Your Eyes and Ears* the Christmas of my eleventh year. I had the album for around four years before trading it to a pot dealer in Campobello, SC, for, I think, five joints. A year after that I found the album in the used record bin at a Landrum, SC, pawnshop (I knew it was my copy because of a random black mark on the inner sleeve) and repurchased it, overpaying for sentimental reasons. I had the album until a few years ago at which point I traded in three large boxes of vinyl at a record store in Charlotte. I still have a dream from time to time during which I see that album – the four members of the band squeezed into a bathtub – resting on an old coffee table I had when I lived in my first apartment off Tryon St. I reach out to pick it up, and the album disappears.

[3] The first song I ever figured out by myself on guitar. I remember how excited I was when I finally realized that the stanza starting with "From the Kentucky coalmines..." switched from G to A, that stanza also involving the use of the exotic E7!

[4] I reconnected with my father in the mid-1980s; however, our relationship was solidified when I got sober in 1989, at which point he'd been sober for nine years. That summer we spent a week together in Ocracoke, NC, staying at Blackbeard's Lodge. We swam in the ocean, ate seafood and frozen yogurt, and talked about how we had broken a chain of addiction that went back at least four generations. Our common interests over the next few years, prior to his death, mostly centered on sobriety and literature; however, music was always a reference, and he was in attendance the

first time I ever played in public – an open-mic at a place called SRO (Standing Room Only) off Tyvola Rd in Charlotte (I think there's a Target there now). I banged out a couple of original songs and then, yes, I couldn't resist: I closed with "Me and Bobby McGee." My father was possibly impressed but certainly amused.

(Featured image: cover shot for the film *Janis: Little Girl Blue*)

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