

Janis Joplin

1943-1970

Born: January 19, 1943 in Port Arthur, Texas

Died: October 3, 1970 in Hollywood, California, United States

Occupation: singer, songwriter

BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Though her career was cut short by a heroin overdose in 1970, Janis Joplin's bluesy influence on **rock** music lingers.

Janis Joplin, one of the most influential women **singers** of the late 1960s, first came to the attention of **rock** fans as the vocalist for the San Francisco, California-based band, Big Brother and the Holding Company. Compared to music greats like blues artist Bessie Smith and soul singer Aretha Franklin, most critics agree that she was the main reason for the group's success with songs like "Piece of My Heart" and "Summertime." Renowned for her performance at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, and later for her solo appearance at the Woodstock festival in 1969, Joplin nevertheless failed to achieve a chart-topping single until her rendition of country composer Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee" was released posthumously in 1971.

A Loner Who Favored Folk and Blues

Joplin was born January 19, 1943, in Port Arthur, Texas. Though her family was middle-class, as a teenager she showed signs of the unconventional woman she would become. She was something of a loner, and, unlike her siblings and neighborhood peers, she listened to folk and blues music. Joplin's favorite artists included Odetta, Leadbelly, and Bessie Smith, and she was greatly influenced by them in her own vocal style. By the time she was seventeen, she had decided to become a singer, and she left home.

At first Joplin found work in country and western clubs in Houston and other Texas cities. Gradually she formed the goal of saving enough money from her gigs for bus fare to California, and after a few years she accomplished this and arrived on the Pacific coast. Joplin enrolled in several different colleges while singing folk songs for little money, but her attempts at continuing her education never lasted long. She also tried living in various communes, and eventually settled in San Francisco for a few years.

Provided Classic Moments in Rock

Ironically, a disheartened Joplin went back to Texas in early 1966, right before a friend of hers, Chet Helms, became manager of a new **rock** group called Big Brother and the Holding Company. The band needed a female vocalist, and Helms thought of Joplin. He contacted her and convinced her to return to San Francisco. Though Joplin had not had much previous experience singing **rock** music, the combination of her gravelly, bluesy voice with Big Brother's hard **rock** sound was a success. The group quickly became popular in the San Francisco area, and by the time the Monterey International Pop Festival took place in 1967 in Monterey, California, Big Brother and the Holding Company were a featured attraction. Joplin's performances at this festival and at Woodstock in 1969, are considered by many specialists in the music of the late 1960s to have been classic moments in the history of **rock**. As Geoffrey Stokes reported in his portion of the book *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll*, at Monterey, "Janis Joplin walked away with an afternoon blues show."

Big Brother's triumph at Monterey gained them a recording contract with Mainstream, a small label, with whom they released their debut album, *Big Brother and the Holding Company*. Also, Joplin and the rest of the band were in demand on a national scale; they toured many areas of the United States and Canada, including New York City. Increasingly, Joplin was the member of Big Brother who was singled out for critical acclaim; for instance, a *Village Voice* reviewer lauded one of her concert performances thus: "She sure projects....She jumps and runs and pounces, vibrating the audience with solid sound. The range of her earthy dynamic voice seems almost without limits." With critiques like that, it is not surprising that Joplin left Big Brother to go solo in 1968, soon after the group recorded their second album, *Cheap Thrills*, for Columbia.

First Album Went Gold

The first group of musicians Joplin recruited to back up her solo career was dubbed the Kozmic Blues Band; with them she released her first album on Columbia, *I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama*. Though it contained no overwhelmingly successful single, *Kozmic Blues* went gold, and Joplin's popularity as a concert performer continued. After a brief reappearance with Big Brother and the Holding Company in early 1970, she formed yet another back up group, the Full-Tilt Boogie Band. They played on Joplin's last album, 1970's *Pearl* (the nickname the singer's closest friends called her). Besides her acclaimed version of Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee," *Pearl* included cuts like "Get It While You Can"--which she considered one of her theme songs, "Cry Baby," and the humorous "Mercedes Benz," a song she composed herself. But before *Pearl* could be released, what Stokes called "a drug she'd had an on-and-off affair with for most of her performing life" brought about Joplin's death. On October 4, 1970, the singer's body was found in the Landmark Motor Hotel in Hollywood, California. Joplin had died the day before from an overdose of heroin. She was cremated and her ashes were scattered off the California coast.

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born January 19, 1943, in Port Arthur, Tex.; died October 3, 1970, in Hollywood, Calif.; father was a canning factory worker, and mother was a registrar at a business college. *Education*: Attended various colleges for short periods during the 1960s. **Addresses**: *Record company*--Columbia/CBS Records, 51 W. 52nd St., New York, N.Y. 10019.

AWARDS

One gold album with Big Brother and the Holding Company for *Cheap Thrills*; two gold albums as a solo artist for *I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama* and *Pearl*.

CAREER

Sang in various small clubs in Texas and California, c. 1960-66; vocalist for Big Brother and the Holding Company, 1966-68, 1970; solo recording artist and concert performer, 1968-70.

WORKS

- **Selected discography**
- (With Big Brother and the Holding Company) *Big Brother and the Holding Company* (includes "Women Is Losers" and "Down on Me"), Mainstream, 1967.
- (With Big Brother and the Holding Company) *Cheap Thrills* (includes "Piece of My Heart," "Ball and Chain," "Turtle Blues," and "Summertime"), Columbia, 1968.
- *I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama*, Columbia, 1969.
- *Pearl* (includes "Me and Bobby McGee," "Get It While You Can," "Cry Baby," and "Mercedes Benz"), Columbia, 1971.

FURTHER READINGS

Books

- Dalton, David, *Piece of My Heart: The Life, Times, and Legend of Janis Joplin*, St. Martin's, 1986.
- Friedman, Myra, *Buried Alive: The Biography of Janis Joplin*, Morrow, 1973.
- Ward, Ed, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker, *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll*, Summit Books, 1986.

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