

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Janis Joplin, Singer, 1943-1970

With startling intensity Janis Joplin burst onto the music scene of the late 1960s. Many consider her to be the most original and electrifying singer of the era.¹

Born in the oil refinery town of Port Arthur, Janis grew up playing records by Odetta, Leadbelly, and Bessie Smith. She suffered a miserable adolescence, feeling rejected by classmates on account of her affinity for black artists and her acne and body size. She responded with flamboyance and disdain. During her junior year, Janis fell in with a group of “wild” boys, and together they roamed nightspots in nearby Louisiana, mining a mother lode of American folk music.²

Upon graduating from high school, Janis enrolled at Lamar College in Beaumont. After an unhappy year, she traveled to California and was instantly drawn to the beatnik counterculture. Back in Texas in 1962, she enrolled as an art student at The University of Texas at Austin. Here Janis found her musical voice. With a group called the Waller Creek Boys, she performed regularly in the student union and in Threadgill’s, a gas station converted into a bar on North Lamar. Rejection stabbed her again when, in a fraternity prank, she was named “Ugliest Man on Campus.” Soon afterwards she hitchhiked to California.³

Taking up lodging in the San Francisco Bay area, she sang sporadically in bars and coffeehouses. Drugs permeated this milieu, and in 1965 Janis came home to Texas in poor health. For a year she alternated between Port Arthur and Austin, then received an invitation to audition for a band in San Francisco—a siren call that proved irresistible.⁴

Janis got the job with Big Brother and the Holding Company. From there her career steamed full-throttle ahead. Her raspy, belting voice and stomping performance stopped the show at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967. She played concerts in Madison Square Garden, Paris, London, Woodstock, and Harvard Stadium. She changed bands twice, garnered two gold record albums, and was working on another album when she died of a heroin overdose in a Los Angeles motel. Her album *Pearl*, issued posthumously, contains two of her biggest hits: the rollicking, haunting “Me and Bobby McGee” and the *cappella* satire “Mercedes Benz.”⁵



Quotations

*After you reach a certain level of talent (& quite a few have that talent) the deciding factor is ambition, or as I see it, how much you really need. Need to be loved & need to be proud of yourself. . . & I guess that’s what ambition is—*Letter to her parents upon her California successes⁶

Without the music, I might have destroyed myself. Now my feelings work for me. . . . Maybe I won’t last long, but if I hold back I’m no good now.—Response to concerns about conserving her voice⁷

[We] were holding our throats and watching, and being singers, it was hurting just to watch, and we were going, “Oh no, how can she do that?” I was fascinated by someone who could give so much.—Melanie Williams recalling a Joplin concert⁸

Photo

Caption: “Janis Joplin, 1968 Newport Folk Festival, Rhode Island.” Source unknown.

Endnotes

¹ For discussions of Janis’s significance, see Richard B. Hughes, *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. “Joplin, Janis Lyn,” <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/JJ/fjo69.html> (March 4, 2005); Jerome L. Rodnitsky, “The Southwest Unbound: Janis Joplin and the New Feminism,” *The Feminist Art Journal*, winter 1976-1977, online <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/13.html> (August 22, 2005); Jessica R. Powell, “Janis Joplin,” *Janis Joplin’s Cosmic Blues*, <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/3.html> (August 25, 2005); *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Janis Joplin,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janis_Joplin (August 26, 2005).

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² Janis's childhood and school years are discussed in *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Joplin"; in Margaret Moser, "Janis Joplin, Texas, and the Big Beat: How East Texas Shaped Rock's First Female Superstar," *Janis Joplin's Kosmic Blues*, <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/5.html> (August 22, 2005); in "Comments from Janis," *Hit Parader*, September 1970, online <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/41.html> (August 25, 2005); in Stephen Foehr, "Piece of her heart: Laura Joplin makes peace with her sister's tragic life," *Chicago Tribune*, October 18, 1992, online <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/40.html> (August 25, 2005); in "Laura Joplin Interviewed by Terri Gross," "Fresh Air" on American Public Radio, December 1996, online <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/20.html> (August 22, 2005); in Chris Watson, "Janis Joplin: Updated book reveals more from the first queen of white soul," *Santa Cruz (California) Sentinel*, August 14, 2005, online <http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/archive/2005/August/14/style/stories/01style.htm> (August 22, 2005).

³ College and Austin experiences are described in *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Joplin"; in Rodnitzky, "The Southwest Unbound"; in Paul Hendrickson, "Janis Joplin: A Cry Cutting through Time," *Washington Post*, May 5, 1998, online <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/features/joplin.htm> (August 22, 2005); in Lindsay Scottoline, "Janis Joplin: A True Diva," Penn State University, <http://www.personal.psu.edu/users/l/a/las420/joplin6.html> (August 22, 2005).

⁴ This period is described in *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Joplin"; in Watson, "Updated book reveals more from the first queen of white soul"; in Scottoline, "Janis Joplin: A True Diva"; in Laura Joplin, "Janis Joplin Biography," [officialjanis.com, http://www.officialjanis.com/bio.html](http://www.officialjanis.com/bio.html) (August 22, 2005); in Les Kippel and Robert Bromberg, "Big Brother Speaks: An Interview with Peter Albin," *Relix*, October 1992, online <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/45.html> (August 25, 2005); in Gene Sculatti and Davin Seay, "San Francisco Nights: The Psychedelic Music Trip, 1965-1968," (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), online <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/35.html> (August 25, 2005).

⁵ Ascending career and death described in *Handbook of Texas Online*, s.v. "Joplin"; *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Janis Joplin"; in Foehr, "Piece of her heart: Laura Joplin makes peace with her sister's tragic life"; in Hendrickson, "Janis Joplin: A Cry Cutting through Time"; in John McDermott, "Janis Joplin Considered 25 Years Later," *Relix*, August 1994, online <http://www.janisjoplin.net/articles/42.html> (August 25, 2005); in "Janis Joplin," Kenn's Artist Pages, <http://homepages.gs.net/~kgros/janicej.html> (August 22, 2005).

⁶ Quoted in Hendrickson, "Janis Joplin: A Cry Cutting through Time."

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ "Quotes," *Janis Joplin's Kosmic Blues*, <http://www.janisjoplin.net/kozmik/quotesll.html> (August 26, 2005).