

# JANIS JOPLIN

**S**HE WAS A ROCK & ROLL WOMAN to her toes, a blues singer of unparalleled passion and the greatest white female performer to emerge from the tempest of the late 1960s. Janis Joplin shot out of Port Arthur, Texas, and blasted west to San Francisco during one of the most creative periods in this country's cultural history, when an amplified music rose up from a boundless love for the blues and brought to flower a prideful, inspired, authentic American art form. Driven by the music, Janis Joplin, more than any performer of her day, symbolized the mood of the decade that molded her genius; out of its theatricalities, its eye-popping colors, its peaks, its overdrive sex, its impatience, its excitements and its dangers, she made of herself a complete and dazzling original.

Joplin was not only a revolutionary figure in rock & roll — the very first of the all-stops-out white female rockers — but also a symbol of a new, empowered womanhood. It wasn't only her voice that thrilled, with its amazing range and strength and awesome wails — to see her was to be sucked into a maelstrom of feeling that words can barely suggest. Her presence was dominating, her sexuality so raw that she resembled a sort of majestic slattern, moving with the energy of a snapped cable in a storm. Her emotional might was overwhelming. And she was transcendent theater.

It is part of Janis Joplin's greatness that while she lived, the world wasn't really ready for her; in fact, she was a troubled young woman who wasn't quite ready for the world either. She was daredevil wild, gleefully nymphomaniacal and massively self-destructive. Confronting a historical moment as challenging to a woman as any physical frontier, she plunged into the unknown like a possessed, exterminating angel. Genius and junkie, rock diva and drunk, she died in 1970 at age 27 from an overdose of heroin boosted by too much booze.

The oldest of three children, Joplin was born in Port Arthur in 1943, a rebel in an oil-refinery town that didn't take kindly to her ways or to her appearance. She hung out with the boys and wanted to do things boys could do — but that her mother told her she couldn't. She did them anyway. Something emotionally missing in the Joplin household added to the pain of being hated by many of her classmates. The hurt never left her heart. Then a buddy gave her a Leadbelly record; Joplin discovered the blues and also found she could burn out the spine with her voice.

While a student in Austin, Texas, Joplin sang with a trio, doing bluegrass or 12-bar blues. She left after her nomination as Ugliest Man on Campus. She sang blues in San Francisco's North Beach, too, then returned to Port Arthur for a year. When she left in 1966, it was to join a San Francisco band called Big Brother and the Holding Company.

Joplin always acknowledged her major influences as being first Odetta and Bessie Smith, then Otis Redding and Tina Turner. There were strains of country in Joplin's work as well and of the swamp rock she heard as a girl. She spent years learning by imitation to build

inflection, phrasing and delivery, but the kinetic, explosively emotional performer breaking down walls with cosmic energy first burst to life with Big Brother and the Holding Company.

They made an album for Mainstream Records, then were signed by Columbia president Clive Davis after he saw them at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival and was thunderstruck by Joplin. *Cheap Thrills*, on Columbia, with versions of "Summertime," "Piece of My Heart" and the incomparable "Ball and Chain," though sometimes slipshod and muddy in sound, is cherished as a treasure-trove of material from a magical era.

After Joplin left Big Brother to go on her own, she recorded *I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama!* In 1970 she got together the rockin' boys of Full Tilt Boogie. The album she recorded with them, its tracks including "Me and Bobby McGee" (which became a No. 1 single on the *Billboard* chart), was almost finished when she died. *Pearl* was posthumously released, as were several other collections.

Joplin's artistry was brash and daring, but it moved things forward, and it burned. In the face of great personal difficulties, she was a disciplined artist, an improvisational singer who worked to perfect interpretations she could re-create in the studio. Yet her sheer musicality propelled an onstage immediacy of expression; what she did was always different from the time before. If subtlety wasn't her greatest gift, she created nuance with flawless timing and in the skillful arcing of every phrase. Her recorded output was relatively limited, and surely she had moments of musical excess that could grate on some ears. But she had a message, and she glowed with gutsiness as she put it out.

Those who loved Joplin the most — and do to this day — saw right into the depths of her heart and embraced her as one of their own. Like Joplin, they had not been "in" and knew they never would be. They were mesmerized by Joplin's appearance. She had a lousy complexion, indelicate features and a disorderly manner that drove the straights right up the wall. Onstage she worked up a sweat, and her mass of hair got stringy. Some would have called her a sight, but to her fans and even to herself, when she was in front of an audience, she was beautiful. And through her bravery (to get up there on that stage and bare her soul like that!) and the attitude of determination she wrung out of her very sorrow, she gave them the strength to stay the course and win.

Rock & roll has always encompassed more than just the music: attitude, rebellion, energy, sex, nonconformity, irreverence — not to mention the push-it-along and muck-it-up zeal of youth. From the day she socked out her very first note, and even before that, Janis Joplin was always totally, blatantly and loudly unacceptable. Way back when, one writer complained that even the name Janis Joplin had a kind of frontier lawlessness. Well, rock & roll gets the last word. As she takes her place in this pantheon of fabulous rockers tonight, it's sweet to know that in 1943, the year Janis Joplin was born, the two biggest hits were "Blues in the Night" and "Deep in the Heart of Texas." — MYRA FRIEDMAN

*Janis Joplin in the lobby of New York's Chelsea Hotel, 1968*

PHOTOGRAPH BY STUART FRIED

