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Janis Joplin: The Tragic Life of Cheap Thrills

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Janis Joplin is reputable as a Rock and Roll icon through her vibrancy on stage, her eccentric style and personality, her soulful and powerful chops, and the fast-living lifestyle that ultimately killed her. Joplin performed with three different line-ups in her short career, but nonetheless left a legacy for herself and the Hippie Movement of the 1960s. As a woman challenging the social norms of the traditional Southern town in Port Arthur, Texas, Joplin faced ridicule and ostracism through high school and college. After departing from Texas, Joplin was still misunderstood. Joplin was brought to fame for her unmistakable talent but was often painted as a whisky drinking mama, and nothing more. Janis Joplin's self-worth and quality of life was depreciated as a result of society's high expectations for women, despite her insurmountable musical and artistic talent.

Even from the beginning, Joplin was a uniquely brilliant child. Janis Joplin was born on January 19, 1943 (Friedman 1973). Joplin's mother recounts childhood memories of Janis being a happy, healthy, and creative young girl. Joplin was an achiever, even in infancy. Young Joplin had remarkable motor skills that her parents would show off to their friends at dinners. Joplin excelled in school academically and creatively. She often painted and wrote through her childhood, but did not discover music until high school. It is said Joplin was a play write in elementary school. Her mother built a small stage for her productions that the neighborhood kids would join (Friedman 1973).

Elementary school is arguably the last time Joplin was accepted in her small town surroundings. Port Arthur, Texas was home to French Catholic and Baptist

traditions (Friedman 1973). The town itself was racially segregated. Religion was possibly the strongest political force in the town, besides established political parties. This conservative view on the world did not suit Joplin. Her eccentricities began to emerge as high school progressed. She was outcast because of interests in poetry, reading, art and music. Students pegged her as a “nigger lover”(Gaar 1992). Janis sought a new crowd in the wake of her rejection. Joplin involved herself with the Beatniks of her town, most notably Jim Langdon, a jazz musician (Draper 1992). With this adventurous group, Joplin began to carve a deeper “bad girl” image as she strived to be “one of the guys”.

As a result of society’s criticism of Joplin’s individualism, she often felt depressed and uncertain about herself. Her peers ostracized her further when her Beatnik crowd graduated. Schoolmates made fun of Joplin’s chunky figure, untidy outfits, and lack of make up. Her crude manner of carrying herself created tasteless rumors about her sexuality. After her senior year of high school, Joplin was seeing a psychologist to deal with the pain of being ridiculed by her high school crowd (Friedman 1973).

In college, Joplin was further ostracized for her behavior and intelligence. Joplin attended Lamar College and the University of Texas. Janis found solace in the Beatnik scene in this area of Texas, known as The Ghetto. Although she was in a different setting, she still faced public embarrassment when at University; she was voted “ugliest man on campus” in 1963 (Gaar 1992). After this incident, she left University and hitch hiked to San Francisco with friend Chet Helms (Friedman 1973.)

In San Francisco, Joplin finally found her counterculture paradise in the comfort of the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. There, Janis performed with her first band, Big Brother and the Holding Company. In San Francisco, Joplin befriended bands such as Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and Country Joe and the Fish (Friedman 1973). She found a purpose in this toxic environment of drugs, free love, and eccentricity. Joplin, even in high school, was naïve (Friedman 1973). She would do anything for attention, and this behavior followed her into her music career. Joplin fell deeper into her “bad” image in order to “stick it to the man” back in her Texas hometown (Friedman 1973).

Although Joplin was free to be in San Francisco, she was still unnervingly insecure. She often questioned her talent and “unmade bed look” that famed her throughout the country (Werthheimer 2003). The ridicule of her classmates from long ago had a lasting impression on her. Joplin was one of the top performers in San Francisco by 1967. Big Brother and the Holding Company played at the historic Monterey Pop Festival, but still, Joplin was uncertain (Gaar 1992). Her questioning of the social norm was not a choice. News articles on Joplin usually paid more attention to Joplin’s unorthodox drinking and drug habits than her talent. Joplin believed she needed to act in such a shocking demeanor to attract a crowd. Joplin stated, “Maybe my audience can enjoy my music more if they think I’m destroying myself” (Friedman 1973).

Joplin’s fame was as glamorous as it was destructive. In her escapades in San Francisco, Joplin lost touch with her family. Although she was ridiculed in Texas, Joplin still loved her family and wrote letters at times. In *Love, Janis*, a collection of

letters written by Joplin through her career, messages home expressed her guilt for leaving Texas (Joplin 1992). This guilt, paired with her uncertainty in herself and her abilities was a diabolical combination. Joplin also wrote, "I can't go back to school now" and "I don't know about the music business so I'm just plodding along" (Joplin 1992). Sentiments of unease at the beginning of her musical career could be an immediate cause to her loneliness and uncertainty.

Loneliness was a feeling constant in Joplin's life. In adulthood, her promiscuity was the ultimate manifestation of her desire to be wanted. Joplin was notorious for her "one night stand attitude" towards love and sex (Braziel 2004). In her sexuality, Joplin chose to go against the social norm at the time. She publicly admitted to bisexual relations, including with Peggy Caserta, with whom she remained friends until her death (Braziel 2004). Joplin's sexual habits were "a throwback to an earlier bohemian model of sexual ambiguity" (Echols 2000). However, her hidden insecurities gave way to "an insatiable heterosexual appetite" to prove she was desirable (Echols 2000). Notable heterosexual relationships of Joplin's include those with Jim Morrison, Joe Namath, Kris Kristoffersen and allegedly Jimi Hendrix. In the weeks before her death, Joplin became engaged for the third time in her life, to Joe Whitaker (Braziel 2000). Inconsistency in her love affairs contributed to Joplin's involvement in drugs and out of the ordinary behavior.

Although Joplin was earning money and fame through her talent, she, in fact, was destroying herself. Joplin faced many repercussions to maintain her freewheeling lifestyle in San Francisco and on tour. Joplin is infamous for her bottle

of Southern Comfort that seemed never to leave her hand. She drank in such excess; this liquor company sent Joplin a lynx coat for her unintentional advertising for their product (Friedman 1973). However, alcohol was the least threatening of her vices. Joplin also heavily used speed for a number of years. After her first stay in San Francisco in 1963, Joplin reenrolled at Lamar College to stay away from the speed scene (Friedman 1973). However, upon her return to San Francisco, Joplin dove right into the drug culture once more. Joplin's drug use is what ultimately caused her demise. Throughout her career, Joplin faced bouts of heroin addiction. On October 4, 1970, twenty-seven year old Janis Joplin was found dead as the result of a heroin overdose (Gaar 1992).

Despite the number of troubles Joplin faced as a musician and woman in the 1960s, she left a legacy in pop culture. Notoriously, she is a member of the "Twenty Seven Club", with Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain (Gaar 1992). Beyond her drug use and alcoholism, Joplin served as a symbol of individualism well past her time period. Joplin is compared to the likes of Aretha Franklin and Billie Holiday as leading woman vocalists (Gaar 1992). Her reverence towards and comparison to African American music served as a bind between white and black culture during the 1960s. Joplin lead a tragic life, but left a lasting impression on American culture.

I chose Janis Joplin as the subject for my paper because I wanted to learn in more depth about the 1960s Hippie Movement. I am interested in the music of San Francisco originals, Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead. I also enjoy the fashion styles the people of this region popularized. I learned that although Joplin was famous, she

was painfully insecure in the wake of societal expectations she could not meet. I was unaware of this, as Joplin's biggest flaw always seemed to be her drug use.

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