

Rock History: Pearl

Janis Joplin's *Pearl* was released posthumously in January of 1971, three months after the singer's untimely death at age 27. The album was recorded with the Full Tilt Boogie Band, and was produced by noted rock producer Paul Rothchild (Barton). *Pearl* is an honest portrait of a troubled woman; Joplin struggled with insecurity, mental illness, and a drug addiction that eventually claimed her life. The singer was able to channel the ugliest parts of her life into all of her art. Her role in rock, and her impact on the roles that women were *allowed* to play in rock is invaluable.

To understand the impact of *Pearl*, as well as the impact of Joplin herself, one must first understand the culture of Joplin's time. The Cold War, especially the Vietnam War, pressured American citizens to conform; those who refused were often blacklisted, painted as communists, and excluded from mainstream culture. In response, the youth of the time – especially college students – found a home in a counterculture that rejected society's rigid ideals. This youth culture ended up defining the culture of the time just as much as the Cold War. Writing about 1960's counterculture, author Terry Anderson said that the youth “significantly altered cold war culture...The result is more personal freedom than at any time in the history of the republic.” (Anderson)

This counterculture culminated in 1967, during the Summer of Love in San Francisco. Thousands of young people from across the country made the pilgrimage to San Francisco, where they gathered in Golden Gate Park in a drug-fueled, free-love frenzy. When speaking his experiences in San Francisco, one participant shared that “the two most popular words that day

were dope and revolution. Our secret formula was grass, LSD, meditation, hot music, consolidation, and a joyous sexuality.” (Kosc, Juncker and Monteith)

Sexual freedom was a cornerstone of the Summer of Love, the Hippie counterculture, and, as the name suggests, the Free Love movement. These cultural phenomena, supposedly, promoted sexual freedom for both men and women. In practice, however, the counterculture excluded many women, especially those who did not fit the ideals of the time. In her book, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*, author Sheila Whiteley explains the sexual culture at the time, “inscribed as de-sexualized death mothers, fantasy figures and easy lays, there was little real opportunity [for women] to either take control or enjoy the prestige afforded to male artists.” (Whiteley) In other words, these movements touted sexual liberation, but that liberation was usually given only to men and the few women who fit into pre-existing ideals of beauty and sensuality.

Throughout *Women and Popular Music*, Whiteley explores the roles that women played in music, especially rock music, both as artists and as subjects. She explores the “Madonna/Whore” dichotomy, which has almost always played an important role in art. In the sixties, the Madonna was personified in soft, spiritual women. Consider the Rolling Stones’ “Gomper” (1967), which describes a gentle, mystical woman: “By the lake with lily flowers...To and fro she’s gently gliding/On the glassy lake she’s riding,”. (Rolling Stones) The Whore was personified in dark, sensuous women, as in Cream’s “Strange Brew” (also 1967), which describes a demonic woman: “She’s a witch of trouble in electric blue/In her own mad mind she’s in love with you...She’s some kind of demon messing in the glue/If you don’t watch out it’ll stick to you.” (Cream) (Whiteley) The movements of sixties, and the music that came out of those movements, romanticized women on either side of the Madonna/Whore binary, but left very little space for authentic representations of average women who rarely fit neatly into either mold.

Janis Joplin defied this binary: she was, in every sense of the word, real. Joplin was born in 1943 in Port Arthur, Texas. As a young girl, Janis was a tomboy who was ostracized from her peers. She found refuge from relentless bullying in art and music, especially the music of blues singers like Bessie Smith and Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton. Joplin briefly studied at the University of Texas in Austin, where the bullying she experienced in high school continued - Joplin once won the title of “Ugliest Man on Campus” in a fraternity competition. (Garner) Her experiences as a child and adolescent led to the development of extreme insecurity and a fragile sexual identity - a fragile sexual identity which hid underneath a mask of fearlessness, confidence and sexual liberation. This paradoxical identity can be seen and heard in *Pearl*, as it is in much of her music. Joplin’s relationship with sex, love, and herself was reflected honestly - that honesty was revolutionary.

Joplin’s career took off when she joined the band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, in San Francisco in 1966. The group played blues-inspired psychedelic rock, not dissimilar to that of other San Francisco bands of the time, such as Jefferson Airplane. She and the band catapulted into stardom, touring across the globe. Due to her star-power, Janis reached a level of success that the band did not. By no fault of her own, Big Brother became secondary to the vocalist, little more than a backing band in the eyes of many. Due, in part, to the strain that Janis’ fame put on the relationship between her and Big Brother, as well as Janis’ desire to explore music beyond that made by the band, Joplin left Big Brother. In a letter to her parents, Janis wrote about her search for a new band: “I have to find the best musicians in the world (I already have two) & get together & work. There’ll be a whole lot of pressure because of the ‘vibes’ created by my leaving Big Brother & also by just how big I am now. So we’ve got to be just super when we start playing.” (Joplin)

Joplin released her first solo album, *I Got Dem Ol’ Kozmic Blues Again Mama*, in 1969.

She recorded the album with the Kozmic Blues Band. *Kozmic Blues* was a departure from her work with Big Brother as it incorporated more Soul/R&B influences than the harder psych-rock for which Big Brother was known. While the album was fairly commercially successful, it did not receive stellar critical reviews. In a 1969 *Rolling Stone* article, writer John Burks wrote that “Janis herself has never sounded better on record, but it took me four full listenings to the LP before I could hear her. That’s how bad her band is...The only answer is to get super-familiar with what they’re doing so you can ignore it. And *then* dig Janis.” (Burks)

Janis Joplin began working with her third and final band, the Full Tilt Boogie Band, in the spring of 1970, in preparation for her second solo album, *Pearl*. In the thrusts of a grueling alcohol addiction, Joplin found clarity in writing, arranging, and rehearsing the music for *Pearl*. (Friedman) *Pearl* echoed the vulnerability that permeated Janis’ life; songs on the album reflected the truth of a woman’s life, without mysticism or heavy metaphor. “Me and Bobby McGee,” written by Kris Kristofferson and Fred Foster, is a simple story of a couple hitchhiking through the South, before parting ways in California. This “on the road” narrative was often reserved for men; Janis’ version of the song presents a woman’s experience of the classic pilgrimage to California. “Cry Baby,” one of Joplin’s most well-known songs, was written by Bert Berns and Jerry Ragovoy. In the song, she wails for a lover, telling him that she’ll wait for him, no matter what he’s done. “Mercedes Benz,” written by Joplin herself, spoke about the search for happiness in material goods. (Pearl Liner Notes)

Janis Joplin died on October 4, 1970, just three days after recording “Mercedes Benz.” *Pearl* was released posthumously on January 11, 1971, and was well received commercially and critically. In a review of the album published in *The New York Times*, Mike Jahn wrote, “Janis Joplin’s last recording has been released by Columbia Records; sadly, it’s her most impressive one.” (Jahn) When writing for *The Rolling Stone*, Jack Shadoian wrote about the album’s impact: “The halcyon

days of rock are over, and it shows...with *Pearl* it's a case of a conscious attempt to make something of Janis' talent; simply having it wouldn't do anymore." (Shadoian) The album maintained the number one spot on the Billboard 200 for nine weeks, going on to be certified quadruple platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America. (Discogs) Whether the album's massive success was due, in part, to Janis' death will forever remain unknown. We do know, however, that the album was massively successful and impactful.

Joplin was a woman, through-and-through, and her music reflected the experiences of other women – a rarity in a male-dominated field overwhelmed by “cock-rock,” a slang term referring to male musicians expressing their manliness through excessive displays of masculinity and aggression. In all of its tragedy, *Pearl* captures Janis' (and countless other women's) truth, paving the way for female rockers of the future. Roseanne Cash wrote that “Janis really created this whole world of possibility for women in music: Without Janis Joplin, there would be no Melissa Etheridge. Without Janis, there would be no Chrissie Hynde, no Gwen Stefani. There would be no one.” (Cash)

Janis Joplin is the queen of rock - she redefined what it meant to be a woman in rock. Before Janis, women in rock had no choice but to subject themselves to the ideals of men; Janis maintained unyielding transparency and complexity in both her music and her personal life (the two were indivisible, after all). *Pearl*, captures the truth of a vulnerable, strong, sad, angry, sexy, insecure, tortured young woman from Port Arthur, Texas. Janis Joplin was a woman, and she made music about her life from her perspective, not a man's. For that reason, Janis Joplin's *Pearl* deserves to be honored in the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry. Her role in music, and her impact on women's roles in music, is immeasurable and invaluable.

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