

Janis Joplin

Next Pop Superstar

Frank Kofsky

1967

Mark me words, Janis Joplin is fated to be the next American pop superstar.

If, that is, Janis and her fellow members of Big Brother and the Holding Company decide that stardom is their goal. Right now, they are properly ambivalent about that trip, because they are mindful of the way in which pop fame and fortune can erode the soul. Fearful of losing their own, they teeter on the brink.

(This dilemma is common to most of the most of the most famous San Francisco rock bands. Many of them have gone to great lengths to avoid the loss of a sense of reality that pop stardom often brings in its wake. The Grateful Dead, for instance, maintain a house in the Haight, so they can keep in touch with the hippie rank and file. Both the Dead and the Jefferson Airplane have been known to turn down paying gigs in order to play a free concert in the park for their hippie followers. In one case, the Airplane even flew themselves and all their electronic equipment up to San Francisco from Los Angeles, where they were cutting a record, for that express purpose. Whether such measures will produce the desired effect, however, remains to be seen.)

Gracie Slick of the Jefferson Airplane has given us some idea of how far a rock group can travel on the strength of a powerful and unique feminine lead voice. The mass media being what they are, it is inevitable that there will be hundreds of comparisons made between Gracie and Janis Joplin. Most of these, if not all, will be irrelevant, simply because the two girls use totally different styles to achieve totally different ends. Gracie, while certainly a strong and forceful singer, cannot properly be called a belter of songs; Janis couldn't be termed anything else.

It's apropos to discuss Janis Joplin in the context of white blues bands like the Electric Flag, because what she does is—among other things—to demonstrate that white singers can project the same emotional qualities that have characterized the work of the best Negro blues performers. (I have heard her cut Big Mama Thornton—doing Big Mama's own tunes!) If that were all, it would be a significant attainment; but there is more, much more.

The truth is, at the moment, I can't bring to mind the name of many single white vocalists, male or female, who are comparable to the remarkable Joplin in being able to electrify an audience. The closest analog is perhaps Mick Jagger, whose ragged — edged and sometimes hoarse voice (not to mention body movements on stage) generate something of the same excitement. (Though I've never been privileged to see Jagger perform, the comparison with Janis has been suggested to me by enough different rock devotees for me to believe it valid.) If you're looking for an American equivalent, try the old Ray Charles, when he still recorded for Atlantic; or, in another but related field, the late John Coltrane.

Richard Goldstein could probably work himself into an orgasm of verbal pyrotechnics in attempting to describe the components of a typical Joplin performance. Lacking Goldstein's flair with words, I'm not even going to try. Some aspects of Janis' art, though, can be dealt with straightforwardly.

The first thing you tend to notice when she and Big Brother are on-stage, even before you hear her sing, is the fantastic exuberance and emotional involvement (with the music, the band, the audience) that she transmits. Whether singing or not, she can't help but draw all eyes to her. Her feet are never still; and just the continual movement of her attractive legs is enough to grab and hold your attention as far away as the second balcony. (You don't

even have to be particularly close for Janis to sock it to you.) I saw about eight or ten performances by Big Brother within a two week period, half from the balcony in the enormous Straight Theatre in the Haight, half in the much smaller Golden Bear nightclub in Huntington Beach. My own reaction was that I dug her much more at the Straight, where she wore a miniskirt instead of pants, and where the large stage gave her ample freedom to move around.) Her hands are equally as active: there is almost always a tambourine, a pair of maracas, a gourd, or some such, in them and she flails away at the instrument unmercifully.

The cumulative effect of all this movement is overpowering. Not only the audience, but even the band itself is spurred on to play harder and heavier; and on a particularly good evening, she will have the entire audience without regard for age, race, or gender rocking back and forth in synchrony with her.

And her singing! Her voice is neither the smoothest or the loveliest, but it's perfectly suited for her ends. She does not so much sing her songs as scream them, all the time caressing, strangling, and shaking her microphone. As for melisma, glottal stops, and the other vocal devices that Mike Bloomfield lists as the necessary constituents of a blues performance—Janis has mastered these in a way that no other white singer I've heard has ever done. Her upper register screams a la Ray Charles in particular—hits you with the force of a whirlwind—and as far as I can tell, she is always right on key with them. The result? Nothing short of mass hysteria when she is doing her thing. You don't even have to understand the words to feel the message—I can get fewer than half sometimes—which certainly isn't the way Gracie Slick and the Airplane operate.

Janis Joplin is not a pretty woman, at least in the way that Hollywood invokes that term. Nonetheless, she radiates an indefinable, undeniable beauty of her own. What she does on stage, put as delicately as possible, is to make love to her audience (which includes the other band members). It is unabashedly sexual, but accomplished with complete spontaneity and lack of contrivance, and as wholesome as a Fourth of July picnic. It demands a total emotional commitment on her part: you see her leave the stage limp and perspiring and you wonder if she can keep it up for another five years, let alone a lifetime. And, finally, it is a rather new kind of sexuality that Joplin exudes. Just as Mick Jagger's turned — on following is probably more male than female, Joplin gets to the girls in her audience at least as heavily as she does to the boys. It is making love not war in a way that everybody can dig.

Talk to her in her dressing room after the set, surrounded by open mouthed teeny bopper fans, and she tells you: "This music's about really feelin' things. It's like balling—you've got that same involvement. It's all about sockin' it to you and me and everyone.' Yes indeed!

In San Francisco I taped an interview with Janis, bassist Peter Albin and drummer David Getz. The members of Big Brother, Janis especially, brought that same depth of feeling to that interview as they do to their music (and to everything else, I suspect.)

It will be published soon; watch for it.

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