

Sex, Drugs and other Cheap Hypes

Bob Stark

1968

Hello

“The problem with San Francisco groups is, I was expecting wonders and miracles and what I heard was a bunch of white blues bands that didn’t sound as funky as my little band in high school.”

—Frank Zappa

“Big Brother is a joke.”

—Mike Bloomfield

“That’s Jim Gurley. He’s the SADDEST guitar player in the whole world.”

—Hippie

“Have you ever seen Jim Gurley fall off the stage?”

—Barry Kramer

Words like these, along with the *Esquire* reviewer’s biting comments about Janis’s left nipple and the smacking rumors about the group’s drug preferences, have given Big Brother a reputation as one of the greatest groups in the country without anything of musical importance to back it up. Now we have “Cheap Thrills” (which should have been called “Sex, Dope, and Other Cheap Thrills” as the group wanted, for reasons this article will try to explain.)

This record, unlike the earlier album on Mainstream, has the group’s approval, as well as the seal of approval of the San Francisco chapter of the Hell’s Angels, but after the first listening I wasn’t quite sure why. Janis sounded almost great, the group barely adequate, and the recording quality atrocious. Gurley’s guitar solo at the beginning of “Ball and Chain,” (part of which, as well as part of “Combination of the 2,” was recorded here at the Grande though no credit is given) sounds like it was recorded through a mike set in front of his amp.

Then I looked closely at the album cover. the R. Crumb drawings and Hell’s Angel seal on the front, picture of Janis on the back, and the picture of the group on stage at the Fillmore East inside, and listened again. The second time I think I understood.

Big Brother represents everything the San Francisco scene and San Francisco rock is about. They’d rather fuck than play, if they’re too stoned to play well they play stoned, and they play like they feel like playing, the physical acts of playing and listening being far more important than pseudo-intellectual discussions about whether or not it’s “great” music, (or even music as opposed to just noise). (Sex first, then Dope, and then other Cheap Thrills).

Unlike the current crop of British Blues Bands they aren’t trying to imitate Elmore James, Howlin Wolf, Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson, or any of the other blues men. They aren’t just a white blues band. Their performance transcends the purely musical.

They don't try to reduce sex to the ridiculous with inane theatrics a la Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix or Arthur Brown. They play because they dig it, maybe not as much as getting balled but they dig it. They play the way they feel it. It's probably the secret dream of every freak everywhere to just do things they dig doing and be rewarded for it. America, as only America, the land where dreams come true, could, is making that dream come true for Big Brother. Every hip kid over twelve worth his balls secretly or publicly, lusts after Janis and I can't guess how many girls dream about "doing up" with Jim Gurley.

Maybe someday they'll become Janis Joplin and the Holding Co. (holding what?), or even just Janis Joplin (as some of the press have already decided they are) and move from San Francisco to Bel Air and all drive Rolls (or maybe Bentleys because of the reverse status thing) but hope not.

For now at least they've put out an album that isn't really too good when judged by the standards that most rock critics seem to be applying, but its failings constitute its greatest success.

A perfect imitation of Chicago blues is nothing more than a personal statement by a group who have become popular cult heroes of our generation which has as much relevance to the scene as anything Dylan said 3 or 4 years ago.

So find someone to ball, drink a fifth of Southern Comfort, do up, lay down and listen.

Goodbye

The dynamic blues-rock vocalist Janis Joplin plans to leave Big Brother and the Holding Company this November, after the band completes its scheduled run of appearances. According to Janis, the split was inevitable.

"We weren't growing together as a band any more. It should be very good for their heads as a band not to be dominated by a chick singer any longer, and as for me, I hope I will be able to develop further as a singer along lines I have in mind," she said.

There is some speculation that the break was engineered by Albert Grossman, the band's manager, who is also Dylan's. By giving Janis top billing and equipping her with sidemen instead of managing the band as a unit, Grossman would no doubt find his income increasing. Whatever the reason, the band plans to go back to San Francisco and develop a new mode of expression while Janis will begin performing with a new hand-picked (no doubt by Grossman) band that has not yet been assembled.

There is also talk that Columbia records has some recorded material from earlier sessions in the can, perhaps enough for a last album.

Rumor of the month: Janis has turned down Hugh Hefner's offer to appear as the Playmate of the month.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/63-october-3-16-1968/sex-drugs-and-other-cheap-hypes>
Fifth Estate #63, October 3-16, 1968

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