

# Janis Joplin:

## The Hippie Blues Singer as Feminist Heroine

Jerry Rodnitzky



*The women's liberation era was treacherous for all heroes and heroines. The 1960s and 1970s shook up culture more than politics, and the cultural terrain moved even more quickly than social foundations. Amidst this rapid change, young people had difficulty finding heroes and models in the traditional fields of politics, business, and sports. The new 1960s heroes were increasingly activists or entertainers, especially musicians and singers. Because American women had seldom found heroines in politics and business, and precious few in sports, the change seemed less revolutionary for the new aggressive feminist heroines. Most feminist heroines were activists, yet some were just actors or singers. Women entertainers had always been viewed frivolously, and women activists had usually been ladylike. Thus the new female heroines were more revolutionary in their way than Abbie Hoffman or Bob Dylan.*

*Whether activist or artist, they were all cultural models. How they lived and what they did often was more important than what they said. They were models of life and not exponents of ideology. In short, they were countercultural heroines.*

At first glance it seems odd to see Janis Joplin as a feminist heroine. Although few would deny her credentials as a countercultural figure, she seems somewhat ludicrous in the company of feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan. Janis was not a card-carrying member of any feminist group, nor did she lend support to specific feminist campaigns. Her feminist influence was indirect and subtle, but also powerful and long-lasting. Joplin did have a clear stake in feminist issues. Many of her personal problems stemmed directly from the new gender relationships of the 1960s. Her move toward a fatal, drugged personal world was clearly linked to a long struggle within her psyche. Janis was born January 19, 1943, in Port Arthur, Texas, during World War II. In October 1970, at age

the Beatles only wanted to hold hands with the “groovy chick.” This coincided with the rise of so-called hard and acid rock and, incidentally, with Joplin’s appearance on the national scene. The difference between the “groovy chick” and the traditional sweetheart was that the “groovy chick” performed sexually, and, in the lyrics of hard rock songs, women usually appeared as eager sexual partners.<sup>2</sup>

Rock festivals would be difficult without “groovy chicks,” but most of the stage patter was addressed to males. A typical comment was “when you and your chick go home.” Janis Joplin was an anomaly—a groovy chick who performed for and rapped with the audience rather than passively enjoying the scene. Female singers of the 1950s and 1960s such as Connie Francis

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27, she died of a heroin overdose while the Vietnam War raged. Joplin was killed by a far more subtle war than the Vietnam conflict that absorbed the energies of so many of her contemporaries. She was a casualty, in part, of the war between the sexes. Ironically, she was a victim of sexism within a sexual revolution that she helped fuel. This is but one of many contradictions in her rise as a rock superstar, but perhaps the most important irony was her role as a feminist symbol in a male-dominated, sexist rock culture.

In the 1960s, it seemed somewhat strange to label the rock culture sexist. Feminists were quick to confess that they had been taken in by rock music because it had challenged the status quo. But, like Saul on the road, each sooner or later had a conversion experience and came to see that rock culture was only a groovy microcosm of the brutal larger society, which, according to Cheryl Helm, had “ruthlessly amplified” the rule of “male supremacy.”<sup>1</sup> While rock music promoted unisex clothing and sexual freedom and revolted against conformist, middle-class values, 1960s rock lyrics stereotyped women as classic sex objects, and it was almost entirely written and performed by male musicians. Female rock disc jockeys were almost nonexistent. The most dramatic change came in the mid-1960s when the women in rock lyrics changed from the “girl next door” that

and Brenda Lee were stereotypically cute and sexy. The 1960s girl rock groups, such as the Shirelles and Ronettes, had beehive hair and high heels but projected a similar, if updated, cute sexiness. They often sang silly lyrics because record producers thought dumb was cute. Women folksingers of the 1960s, such as Joan Baez and Judy Collins, were not self-consciously cute and often spoke out on political issues. But they had a saintly image and were not particularly sexual or involved in gender issues. Joplin was a new kind of aggressive female singer who became a unique rock superstar and inadvertently a feminist heroine by crossing gender lines and raising gender issues.

There was little in Joplin’s background to suggest that she would become either a feminist heroine or rock superstar. Her hometown, Port Arthur, Texas, was an oil refinery center 100 miles from Houston and across the river from Louisiana. Port Arthur did have a diverse population of native Texans, Louisiana Cajuns, Mexican Americans, and African Americans from around the country—all drawn by the good union refinery jobs. Yet, despite the diversity, in the 1950s Port Arthur was a typical Texas oil boomtown where Southern Baptists dominated religion, the Democrats held most political power, and oil companies held the economic power.



Photo courtesy Sony Music

Janis's parents were not average Port Arthur residents. Her mother, Dorothy, moved to Port Arthur from Amarillo at age 22, and, after a one-year courtship, married Seth Joplin in 1936. Dorothy had a high school education and usually worked as a businesswoman. Seth had an engineering degree from Texas A&M University and

and San Francisco, the moody freshman became an apprentice hippie almost overnight.

Back in Texas in 1962, she tried to impress her old friends with her hip ways, first in Port Arthur and then at the University of Texas at Austin, where she enrolled in the summer of 1962.

*"They don't treat beatniks too good in Texas. Port Arthur people thought I was a beatnik and they didn't like them, though they'd never seen one and neither had I."*

had worked for Texaco Corporation since coming to Port Arthur. The Joplins had three children: Janis, another daughter Laura, and a son, Michael. As the first born, Janis was showered with parental attention and evidently was a happy, normal child.<sup>3</sup> Seth Joplin was an active, resourceful father. Janis often later called him "a secret intellectual" who had only one other person in Port Arthur to whom he could talk. Traditionally, American feminists have had strong intellectual relationships with their fathers as children, and Janis seemed to enjoy such a paternal bond during her formative years. In a July 1970 interview, Janis reminisced about her father's influence:

My father was like a secret intellectual, a book reader, a talker, and a thinker. He was very important to me, because he made me think. He's the reason I am like I am, I guess . . . The biggest thing in our house was when you learnt to write your name, you got to go and get a library card. He wouldn't get us a TV, he wouldn't allow a TV in the house.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the simple, "just-folks" verbal style that Janis cultivated, she was surprisingly intelligent and well-read, especially in classic American fiction. As a child, she was a quick learner and creative student. As a teenager, she showed a flair for writing and a larger talent for painting.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, adolescence brought common physical problems that plagued Janis throughout her life. Her youthful good looks dissolved into a general heaviness, complicated by a bad case of facial acne. Thereafter, Janis would be haunted by the fear that men might find her unattractive. In her junior year of high school, she solved her relationship problems with boys by running around with a gang of four hell-raising boys. In the process she picked up a reputation for Bohemian toughness and was ostracized by many of her classmates. Janis was glad to graduate in 1960, and she immediately enrolled at Lamar Tech University, a state school in nearby Beaumont. After an unhappy, humdrum year at Lamar, she traveled to the West Coast, and in Los Angeles

She had occasionally sung at coffeehouses in Beaumont and Houston earlier in 1962, but in Austin, she sang regularly, both at the student union and at a gas station that doubled as a bar named Threadgill's. She was drinking more now and became a favorite of the Austin post-beatnik crowd that centered on an apartment complex called "The Ghetto."

Janis's happy Austin era ended suddenly in January 1964, when a thoughtless prankster officially named her "Ugliest Man on Campus" in a contest. Janis then wrote her parents about the cruelty of the Austin campus and told them she must leave. Shortly thereafter, Joplin and a male friend hitchhiked to San Francisco. Janis returned to Port Arthur and Austin in 1965 before going to San Francisco for good in 1966. However, Texas was never really home for Joplin after 1963. Looking back in 1970, Janis felt that in Texas she had been a "beatnik" and "weirdo" and she observed:

Texas is OK if you want to settle down and do your own thing quietly, but it's not for outrageous people, and I was always outrageous. I got treated very badly in Texas. They don't treat beatniks too good in Texas. Port Arthur people thought I was a beatnik and they didn't like them, though they'd never seen one and neither had I. I always wanted to be an artist, whatever that was, like other chicks want to be stewardesses. I read. I painted. I thought.<sup>6</sup>

Her father, Seth, agreed that she was out of place in Texas. After her death, he acknowledged that Janis "had a pretty rough time of it in high school," because she insisted on dressing and acting differently and "they hated her for it." Seth thought Janis was "one of the first revolutionary youths" in Port Arthur, and that she was unable to relate to her peers. Clearly Janis was much more outlandish in Port Arthur than in relatively cosmopolitan Austin. Indeed, Port Arthur was very slow to acknowledge their most famous resident, but the town eventually came around, as indicated by the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual Janis Joplin Birthday Bash at the Port Arthur Civic Center on January 19, 2002. Past musical

honorees—all of whom had at least one hit single and were from the Texas or Louisiana Gulf Coast—include the Fabulous Boogie Kings, the Big Bopper, Lonnie Brooks, and, of course, the most famous inductee, Joplin.<sup>7</sup>

After Joplin returned to San Francisco in 1966 to team up with a rock band called Big Brother and the Holding Company, she became an instant success at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967. Two gold record albums later, she was a nationwide sensation and a symbol for gutsy singing and living. Her public image was symbolized by the tentative title of her second album, *Sex, Dope and Cheap Thrills*, subsequently censored down to *Cheap Thrills*. During the next four years, Janis broke up with Big Brother, formed her own Full Tilt Boogie Band, and put out another album, *Kozmic Blues*. However, her success was always based on the image established during her first triumph at Monterey. From festival to festival and concert to concert, her legend grew while her body and voice deteriorated. For

example, just two years after Monterey in summer 1969, at the high profile Woodstock Festival, Joplin was so stoned she ruined her concert set by stumbling around the stage and over lyrics and having her voice break at several points. Yet her voice was not her primary asset. Janis expressed feeling rather than lyrics; she communicated anxiety rather than art. She was never much of a studied vocalist and remained a mediocre songwriter. Perhaps her most popular written song was her satiric yuppie hymn, “Mercedes Benz,” with the opening line, “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz.” Despite her minimal musical talents, she had considerable influence as a hip model for youth in general and young women in particular.

After 1969, Joplin gained increasing acceptance in San Francisco, New York, and other centers of rock culture. Her crude, natural manner and dress now fit in perfectly with the new lifestyles. A more confident Janis would now often gloat over her countercultural image. For example, on a poster of herself she once wrote: “Guess what, I might be the first hippie pinup girl.”<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, drugs were part of the new counterculture lifestyles, and Joplin took to them quickly and passionately. From barbiturates to speed to heroin to liquor and back to heroin, Janis never got free of the downward spiral. Some rock stars used drugs to live the life, but Janis increasingly used drugs to ease the pain of life.

At the same time, both Joplin’s life and lifestyle lent themselves to the new feminism in America. Indeed, Janis’s path to stardom exactly paralleled the rise of the women’s liberation movement. In 1966 Betty Friedan founded N.O.W. (National Organization for Women). A year later, when Janis got her start at Monterey, radical college women began streaming out of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and forming their own feminist groups such as Redstockings and New York Radical Women. Joplin was largely oblivious to the feminist movement, as she was to most 1960s activism, but she served as an unconscious feminist symbol for younger women. Janis’s most universal influence came through her popularization of naturalistic dress and hairstyles. Then, as now, millions of young women often dressed in ostentatious “poverty” in uniforms of blue jeans and work shirts. But their hair and makeup often came directly from high fashion magazines such as *Vogue*. Moreover, on dates, jeans were usually discarded in favor of panty girdles and dresses. Joplin hardly originated the natural look that she picked up in San Francisco, but she did spread it nationwide. Janis liberated millions of young girls from makeup and girdles, while she pioneered the braless look and wild, loose, individualistic clothes. Also, Joplin’s long, brown, usually lack-luster hair helped free many women from the exaggerated brush, wash, set, color, and spray syndrome that still grips America through long and short hair fashions.

Janis brought new confidence to girls who had always worn their locks short or their clothes long because they had “bad”



hair or “bad” figures. With the new, diverse, natural styles, many women who could never be beautiful in classic ways radiated a unique personal charm. The Joplin look was well fitted to the rock scene. You would not dress otherwise when going to a rock festival. As rock writer Lillian Roxon noted about rock festival dress: “If you didn’t look like Janis when you got there, you sure as hell looked like her by the time you left.” Roxon thought that Joplin sometimes looked homely and sometimes looked beautiful, and that she “taught America that beauty didn’t have to be a constant, it could ebb and flow and surprise you by being there one minute and not the next.” For Roxon and countless others, Joplin “personified the new woman—blunt,

sexy performer to the hilt and did it well, she was typed as raunchy. When Mick Jagger did a crude imitation of Turner, in almost transvestite costume, he supposedly exhibited creative showmanship. Rod Stewart and Tom Jones could tease women with tight pants, suggestive pelvic bumping, and risqué lyrics and be described as sexy. However, when women did the same, from Janis Joplin to Joan Jett to Madonna, they were usually seen as sleazy or sluttish.

Also, Joplin’s sexy style highlighted some typical problems of feminists coping with the new sexual revolution. Janis reflected the feminist desire to be equal to men yet uniquely feminine, to be sexually liberated yet captive to true love, and wildly sexually

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straightforward, honest, unfettered, impatient and brave.” According to Roxon, Janis “liberated more American women than a hundred books.”<sup>9</sup>

Joplin was hardly unfettered or brave. Rather, she was often hung-up and frightened, but her legend was always more important than her life. Although Joplin’s clothing did not always suggest that she was sexually liberated, her manner did. Dress styles aside, the popularly defined sexy woman must be the pursued and not the pursuer. Joplin was clearly liberated, both in her bandstand patter and private life. She reserved the right to be the hunter as well as the hunted. Janis often declined to dress sexily on the one hand, yet insisted on the right to act sexually aggressive on the other. The most sexily dressed young women of the era would not likely even ask a man out on a date, much less to bed. Lillian Roxon was amazed that Joplin commonly invited men out for dates and also to bed.<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly, Janis’s performances generated sexuality. Thus, after listening to her album *Cheap Thrills*, Al Aronowitz, a *Life* magazine reviewer, suggested that, like Mae West, Joplin “could be the greatest lady who ever worked the streets.” Aronowitz felt that Janis’s singing made you feel she was “calling out to you from the second-story window of a bordello, inviting you up.” Aronowitz likely found Joplin’s concert performances even more bordello-like. Joplin always fed off the crowd, and her anguished, intense expressions and suggestive body language while singing added to the sexuality of her lyrics.<sup>11</sup>

Yet as a woman rock star, Joplin had a sexuality problem that still plagues female rockers. Male rockers such as Mick Jagger or Rod Stewart could be as trashily sexual as they wanted. Indeed, they were imitating sexy women on stage as a type of female impersonation. In contrast, women rockers who tried to be sexy were often classified as trashy. When Tina Turner played the

fulfilled in the process. Joplin often could not satisfy her own sexual longings, but on stage she held out the promise to others. At the height of her career success, Joplin could lament: “On stage I make love to twenty-five thousand people, then I go home alone.”<sup>12</sup> The more Janis put out for her audience, the less she seemed to get for herself afterward. From the start, she became a victim of her performing image. Country Joe McDonald, leader of the rock group Country Joe and the Fish and her lover for a brief period, thought Janis often wanted to be just another person offstage, but that others saw her as a conventional sex symbol. McDonald thought that many people wanted her to be traditionally feminine, and when she could not comply, they treated her “like one of the guys,” and that this pressure was “one of the things that drove her to drugs.” He noted:

On the one hand people wanted her to be a sex symbol and on the other hand she wasn’t the conventional sex symbol in any kind of way. Her bone structure was wrong, the way she acted was wrong. . . . they wanted her to be Billie Holiday and she wasn’t Billie Holiday at all because Billie Holiday was very very feminine and Janis wasn’t at all. . . . Yet, she was a real woman and people kept treating her like one of the guys.<sup>13</sup>

Being “one of the guys” was a decidedly mixed bag for women in the 1960s. Taking on male attributes often made a woman look more powerful, whereas men who took on female attributes were objects of ridicule. Women could wear slacks and smoke Marlboros, but men could not wear dresses or smoke Eves. There was usually grudging admiration for the tomboy. The same could not be said for the “sissy.” When high school boys complained

about girls, they usually said they were too feminine, always fixing their hair and holding back from the action. In short, girls were not adventurous like guys. Many aggressive women, encouraged by 1960s feminism, got caught in the same feminine-masculine dichotomy that tortured Joplin. Men tended to treat aggressive women like guys. Yet Joplin never shied away from coming on too masculine. Early in the 1960s, female folksingers, such as Judy Collins and Joan Baez, sang folksongs meant to be sung by men. For example, they changed "Man of Constant Sorrow" to "Maid of Constant Sorrow." But Joplin was the first big female rock star to sing songs written for men. In 1970, Janis role-reversed her big hit, "Me and Bobby McGee," which Kris Kristofferson had originally written to be sung by a man.

Joplin had a problem competing with Grace Slick, lead singer of Jefferson Airplane. Serious FM stations played both Slick and Joplin records, while AM stations generally kept playing sexy girl groups such as the Supremes. Slick, too, was a new-style aggressive rock singer. Shaped by the same San Francisco hippie lifestyle as

self-deprecation, less prone to play buffoon, and because she was less driven to sexual priority, less ridden with anxiety.<sup>14</sup> Possibly Joplin's ostentatious heterosexual behavior was a compensation for her bisexuality. In any case, as an aggressive bisexual, she appealed to all sides of the feminist camp.

In one sense, Joplin was a fake. Blues singers were traditionally black and poor. A blues superstar in the 1960s was thus a contradiction in terms. Steve Katz, a blues guitarist, thought that, although Joplin was "a good primitive blues singer," she was no longer credible, since, if "you're making \$10,000 a night," you could not come on projecting "hard luck and trouble." But Janis knew suffering, and to the charge that she could not sing realistic blues, she aptly replied: "You know why we're stuck with the myth that only black people have soul? Because white people don't let themselves feel things. Man, you and any housewife have all sorts of pain and joy. You'd have soul if you'd give in to it."<sup>15</sup>

Just as black blues had equipped generations of poverty-stricken blacks for living with economic pain, Janis's blues singing

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Joplin, she also identified with drugs and alcohol. Moreover, Slick was an accomplished songwriter whose early hits included "White Rabbit" and "Somebody to Love." Grace oozed a unique sexuality in concert and promoted naturalistic dress, but she never had the concert intensity, cult following, or news coverage that Joplin generated. However, Slick was a former model and much more graceful, attractive and feminine than Joplin. If there was an early hippie rock pinup, it was probably Slick. Joplin was almost in the position of feminist Betty Friedan, in terms of trying to find a way to compete with feminist Gloria Steinem's grace and beauty. Some rock fans saw Joplin as a homely Grace Slick, and although the two singers were friendly, Joplin often suffered from comparisons with the more conventionally sexy Slick.

Joplin's lesbian activities may have been part and parcel of her refusal to be sexy in traditional ways. Her homosexuality was likely exaggerated by some lesbian feminists who suggested that her problems stemmed from not admitting her lesbianism. However, Joplin's bisexuality had also been ignored by many rock writers who feared it would destroy her sexy image. Because Joplin was clearly bisexual, her lesbianism was more likely just part of her determination to get as much love and/or sex as she could, sexual orientation aside. Yet, Linda Gravenites, a close friend of Joplin, noted that Janis "was more comfortable, more herself in the presence of women. She was less on the rack of

eased her personal suffering. The pain her songs reflected also fit in with one new coping philosophy of contemporary feminism. The "anti-brain-washing" position of the Redstockings, a New York radical feminist group, stressed standing up for women who were down and not blaming women for their oppression.<sup>16</sup> This approach tended to glorify women as victims. The more marks of suffering you could show, the more credible your struggle with sexism and, consequently, the more support you deserved from your sisters. Clearly, Janis's music often glorified pain and suffering.

Joplin's music also proclaimed a primitive joy at times. In dozens of ways, Janis made it clear that she would live for today. She was not going to save her voice, cut down on her drinking, or bypass a sexual partner in hopes of happier, healthier tomorrows. Janis had decided that, philosophically, tomorrow never comes. Her most characteristic song, perhaps, was "Get It While You Can." This hedonistic stress complimented the impatient mood of youth, but it also struck a responsive feminist chord. Women were constantly urged to put off personal pleasure for a more suitable time. Young girls were told to save themselves for their husbands. Wives were supposed to sacrifice immediate pleasures for their children. Even grandmothers had responsibilities to daughters and grandchildren. Joplin insisted that you were number one and that the present was everything.

Rodnitzky: Janis Joplin



Photo courtesy Sony Music

Feminists, too, increasingly stressed their own primacy, and the 1960s feminist slogan "Liberation Now" stressed "now" almost as much as "liberation."

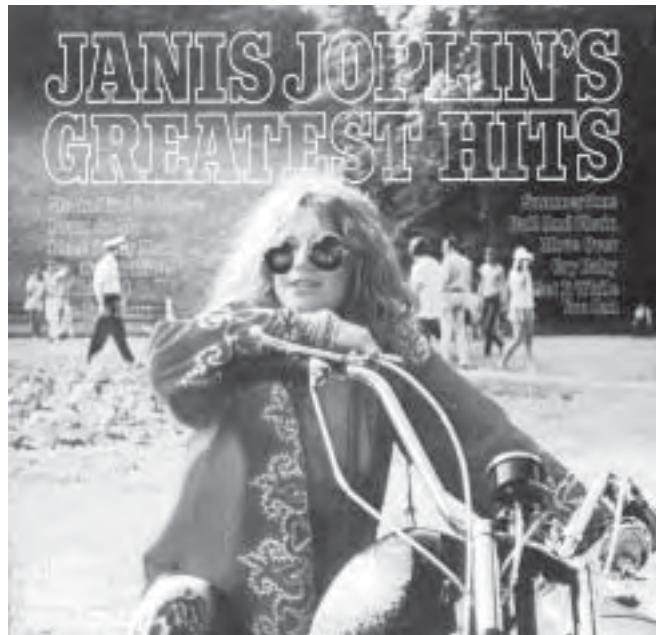
In the final analysis, Joplin made women feel better but hardly altered their most basic problems or hers. Her songs of complaint suggested things to identify with rather than goals to work toward. Moreover, her attempts to reconcile femininity with sexual aggressiveness and professional success with personal happiness were so personal and intense as to exclude the possibility of applying many lessons. Joplin's solutions were usually sensory, anti-intellectual, and shortsighted. For Janis, "being an intellectual" created "a lot of questions and no answers." You could "fill up your life with ideas and still go home lonely." The only things that really mattered to Joplin were "feelings" and the music that helped release and reflect them.<sup>17</sup> Janis felt that she had to make sacrifices for her music. She could not "quit to become someone's old lady," because even though being dedicated to one man was "beautiful," it could not touch "hitting the stage at full-tilt boogie."<sup>18</sup> Feminists tended to marry later than the average woman. Also, feminists urged younger women to establish themselves in careers before marrying. Joplin seemed to fit this profile.

Probably the closest Joplin came to telling us what her performances and profession meant to her was when she explained:

But when I sing, I feel, oh I feel, well, like when you're first in love. It's more than sex, I know that. It's that point two people can get to they call love, like when you really touch someone for the first time, but it's gigantic, multiplied by the whole audience. I feel chills... it's a supreme emotional and physical experience... I live for that one hour on stage. It's full of feeling... it's a rush honey.<sup>19</sup>

A man could be a rock star, do gigs and "know that he was going to get laid that night," as Janis put it, but a woman had to sacrifice love to be a rock singer.<sup>20</sup> Joplin's philosophy was compensatory. She was going to get drunk, get laid, and, in the lyrics of her friend, songwriter Kris Kristofferson, "let the devil take tomorrow." This simple creed brought back visions of the ancient Greek ideal of a short, glorious, heroic life. It was, after all, quite romantic to live fast, die young, and leave a good-looking corpse.

Alice Echols and Lucy O'Brien have both suggested that Joplin would have had support from the stronger second wave of feminism in the 1970s, if she had lived. Echols felt Joplin's "refusal to sound or look pretty, prefigures feminism's demolition of good-girl femininity." O'Brien thought that Joplin died too early to get support from the second wave feminism which "rescued many a 'bad girl' from oblivion." She believed that, had Joplin survived, "she could have been an astute, mature



CD cover courtesy Columbia Records / CBS Inc.

voice in the women's movement."<sup>21</sup> There is little to suggest that Joplin would have ever become an active feminist. After reading *Rat*, an underground New York paper, Janis told a radio interviewer in 1970 "it seemed like" the radical feminists "hadn't a good time in months." Joplin felt feminists were going crazy about just not getting one thing or another. Janis admitted that she was missing things too. She was not getting "peace of mind" or "a steady home," but she was "having a good time," and that's what she thought was "important." Joplin's advice to the feminists was "to rock on out."<sup>22</sup> This is classic Joplin, but I doubt that it would have impressed second-wave feminist leaders such as Gloria Steinem. The erratic, enigmatic, profane Joplin could never have become a feminist poster child.

Joplin's music raised the right questions but suggested no answers. Her songs offered solace, but not wisdom. As feminist educator Florence Howe aptly put it, popular songs told women "to love being a sex object," but they need songs that show them how to "love being a woman."<sup>23</sup> Joplin's songs often told about the pain of being woman and how to live with the pain and compensate for it. It remained for other voices to teach women how to prevent or avoid that pain. Janis adapted the black blues tradition to the needs of an affluent but culturally rootless youth culture. It was clearly a confused generation of white Americans that she spoke to. Her uninhibited style and flamboyant escape from the social conventions of a small Texas city acted out the conscious desires of thousands of youthful Americans. Joplin's music and lifestyle provided them with a vicarious escape from middle-class America, just as it allowed Joplin to escape her unhappy coming of age. Perhaps, Mimi Farina depicted Joplin

best. In her memorial ballad for Janis, "In the Quiet Morning," Farina describes Joplin as "the great Southwest unbound."<sup>24</sup>

Joplin's stature as a feminist heroine can only grow with time. Indeed, time is what distinguishes heroes from mere celebrities. The hero remains a man or woman famous for his or her deeds; the celebrity is just a temporary big name, "famous for being famous."<sup>25</sup> Long after Cyndi Lauper and Britney Spears are but forgotten historical footnotes, people will remember Janis Joplin. Joplin was a heroine because she broke common female stereotypes. She influenced by her words, deeds, and images. Her fame put her in the spotlight, but only the responses of masses of men and women confirmed her role. As a real heroine, Joplin appealed both to men and women. Indeed, if her mystique was limited to only half of American society, she could not appear very powerful.

Joplin was more successful than any other female singer in merging popular music and the counterculture. She was the

closest female equivalent to Bob Dylan in terms of cultural influence, her short career notwithstanding. She taught men and women that a talented woman with problem hair, pimples, and a weakness for food and drink could make herself beautiful because of who she is and not just how she looks. She popularized a new style and standard for feminine beauty. As a cultural rebel, she helped both men and women to see themselves in new ways. The fact that she ignored organized feminists and that no overtly feminist messages appeared in her songs did not make her less a feminist model or heroine. In the 1960s women were on the make for suitable cultural models, and when they found them they did not apply a feminist litmus test. In the future, there will be increasingly less focus on the tragedy of Joplin's life and more attention to her triumph as a key cultural model of the watershed 1960s. ■

## NOTES

- Cheryl Helm, "No One Cries for the Losers," *Paid My Dues* (January 1974), 12-13.
- For specific examples of the sexism of rock music during this period as seen by contemporary feminist critics, see Marion Meade, "The Degradation of Women," in *The Sounds of Social Change*, ed. by R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 173-178, and "Cock Rock: Men Always Seem to End Up on Top," *Rat* (October-November, 1970), 8-9.
- For a long while, the most reliable biographical information on Joplin was in Myra Friedman's *Buried Alive: The Biography of Janis Joplin* (New York: William Morrow, 1973). The best biography of Joplin is now Alice Echols, *Scars of Sweet Paradise* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), a marvelous biography built on a vast spectrum of interviews with people who knew Joplin. Although Friedman's work is still very useful, Echols provides much more detail, especially in looking at Joplin's Texas roots and following her career. However, Echols spends little time or effort on Joplin's connection to Women's Liberation. Feminism is only mentioned in passing on four pages, although Echols does say that Joplin "expressed women's anger and disappointment before feminism legitimized their expression", 306.
- Interview with Janis Joplin, taped in July 1970, printed in David Dalton, *Janis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 54. On balance, Dalton has the best collection of complete, unedited Janis Joplin interviews.
- Echols, *Scars*, 3-37. Jeanne Ford, a college teacher and former colleague told me she had been Janis Joplin's junior high teacher in Port Arthur and that Joplin had been a very bright and creative student.
- Janis Joplin quoted in "Janis: 1943-1970," *Rolling Stone* (October 29, 1970), 2.
- Seth Joplin quoted in Dalton, *Janis*, 139. Information on the Annual Joplin Birthday Bash given by organizer and former Janis Joplin classmate, Don Ball, in *Texas Journey* (January/February, 2002), 14.
- Friedman, *Buried*, 82. For Joplin's Woodstock performance in 1969, see the DVD, *Woodstock: 3 Days of Peace & Music, The Director's Cut* (Warner Brothers # 13549, 1997).
- Lillian Roxon, "A Moment too Soon," in *No One Waved Good-Bye*, ed. Robert Somma (New York: Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 1971), 95-97. Roxon followed Joplin's career closely as a rock writer and this essay is a frank and affectionate memoir.
- Ibid.
- Alfred G. Aronowitz, "Singer with a Bordello Voice," *Life* (September 20, 1968), 20.
- Janis Joplin quoted in Ellen Willis, "Rock, Etc." *New Yorker* (March 15, 1969), 45.
- "Interview with Country Joe McDonald," *Rolling Stone* (May 27, 1971), reprinted in Dalton, *Janis*, 146. In part McDonald split with Janis because she wasn't political enough. For McDonald's political views, see "Country Joe Unstrung," *Sing Out!* 18 (June 1968), 20-21.
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- Janis Joplin interview, quoted in Deborah Landau, *Janis Joplin: Her Life and Times* (New York: Warner Books, 1971), 14.
- Taped comments by Janis Joplin in 1970 on record attached to Dalton, *Janis*.
- Lucy O'Brien, *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop, and Soul* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 105; Echols, *Scars*, 306.
- Joplin interview on Louisville, Kentucky radio station in summer 1970 from tape, courtesy of Myra Friedman, quoted in Echols, 306.
- Florence Howe, "Feminism and Literature," in *Images of Women in Fiction*, ed. Susan K. Cornillon (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1972), 259.
- Mimi Farina's memorial ballad, "In the Quiet Morning," was recorded by Farina's sister, Joan Baez, on her album *Come From the Shadows* (A&M Records, 1972).
- On the nature of celebrities as opposed to heroes, see Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: Or What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 45-76.