



American
MASTERS



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American Masters – Janis: Little Girl Blue

Premieres nationwide Tuesday, May 3 at 8 p.m. on PBS (check local listings)

Director’s Statement by Amy Berg

Janis Joplin was—and still is— a force majeure in music, a rock-and-roll pioneer beloved by millions nearly 40 years after her death. Watching footage of Janis performing remains nothing short of mesmerizing. Her impact was worldwide, yet her material was intensely personal. The music and lyrics Janis created were often inspired by bits and pieces of people she knew and met along her journey. Songs were always about more than just Janis.

In this film, we show how her music became the comprehensive expression of humanity through rock and roll.

For all the praise and adoration she and her music inspired, what may be most striking about Janis is how utterly lonely and unlovable she often felt once the crowds went home. Music became her whole life and her shows provided a pulse for Janis to keep going.

Janis is still a vessel for our collective pain—the raw, eloquent voice through which our suffering gets duly acknowledged and nakedly expressed. She lifts us up while caressing and accepting the pain that lives in each and every one of us. This explains why her live performances were so electric. When Janis got on stage and let it all go, the joy—and the pain—she released was absolutely intoxicating. With the utmost love and respect, we honestly and openly explore this range of emotions—from the depths of tragedy and sadness to the heights of ecstasy and elation—because we feel such authenticity is exactly what Janis would have wanted.

When she belts out “Ball and Chain” at Woodstock, Janis uses her open and battered

heart to channel the blues of people like Odetta, Bessie Smith and Big Mama Thornton. When she sings, “I know you’re unhappy...Baby, I know just how you feel” on the Rodgers & Hart classic, “Little Girl Blue,” Janis is wailing for all the misfits and outcasts she’s collected and connected with over the years.

But our film explores more than just the tortured magic of Janis’ music and the depths of her pain and suffering. We also create a cinematic celebration of her exuberant spirit and the impact Janis left on the world after all these years. Her lust for life can be seen in the hundreds of iconic photos that catch Janis overcome with laughter—her image so powerful you can almost hear the famous Janis cackle. Janis had an unyielding power to throw her pain aside and be in the moment at level 10. Her message, she once told a reporter, was simple: “Get off your butt and *feel* things!”

Speaking of feeling things, it’s essential to note that we experience Janis’ story from two distinctive perspectives. On the one hand, we’re right there with Janis, living the journey from her POV. This allows us to learn who she is, how she sees the world, what turns her on, what she endures to “make it.”

Then, when the film shifts to her concerts, we go into serious fan mode, soaking up the show from the front row as we watch the electricity Janis creates onstage! This will have the inevitable effect of making Janis like a drug for the viewer. We not only see the overwhelming effect of her live shows, where Janis left audiences stunned, exhausted and screaming for more, but our front row perspective is the closest most of us will ever get to seeing Janis live, back in the day.

And when our story leaves the concert and shifts back to Janis’ offstage life—where she often uses drink, drugs and sex to mask her pain and escape the pressure—our impulse as a viewer will be to get her back onstage. Janis *needs* to get on that stage. Performing *saves* her. It is her drug in many ways.

Music gave Janis the acceptance she always craved and performing was her salvation. It’s hard to imagine how terribly vulnerable she was offstage when you see the explosion that was her performance. Once onstage, Janis was swept up in a wave of unconditional love that could never quite be duplicated and sustained offstage.

Brief as her career may have been, Janis’ impact on not just the music scene, but on the culture-at-large, was immense as well. She was real, relatable and not without flaws—the perfect reflection of all that was the ’60s. Janis was a human prism through whom many of the issues of the day can be closely viewed—from drugs and the counterculture to women’s liberation and the anti-war movement; from the sexual revolution to hippie fashion and tattoo culture, even civil rights. Janis was seemingly at the vanguard of *everything*.

And musically, she was nothing short of a maverick. Janis was the first true lady rock star, a trailblazing original in the macho world of rock and roll. She’s also been called by many “the greatest white blues singer *ever*.” By putting her stamp on the soulful suffering of her blues heroes, Janis became the bridge between the ladies who sang the blues and future generations of female rockers. Stevie Nicks says her life changed after watching Janis live. “She had a

connection with the audience that I had not seen before,” recalls Nicks. “And when she left the stage, I knew that a little bit of my destiny had changed. I would search to find that connection that I had seen between Janis and her audience.”

It was Janis’ courage that first got to Sonic Youth’s Kim Gordon. “When I was a teenager,” recalls Gordon, “listening to her voice, I knew it as a model for not being afraid to do something which may be considered ugly in order to create something entirely original—and beautiful.” Gordon and Nicks are not alone in their reverence for Janis. Her influence has been hovering over the music landscape for generations. Courtney Love, Exene Cervenka, Joan Jett, PJ Harvey, even Grace Slick, are just some of the women who’ve been inspired by Janis over the years.

More recently, performers like Joss Stone and Amy Winehouse are obvious Janis disciples. As is Pink, who once said: “I have a deep, spiritual connection to Janis. I’ve always been extremely attracted to her energy, and her pain, and her voice and her life. I just think she is one of the most amazing women that ever lived.”

While she may have died in 1970, Janis has never truly fallen off the pop culture radar. Bette Midler’s 1979 film *The Rose* was loosely based on Janis’ life. A musical called *Love, Janis* won acclaim and packed houses off-Broadway in the late ’90s. More recently, Janis’ version of “Cry Baby” was hailed on *American Idol*. The star of a one-woman show called *Janis* at this year’s Edinburgh Fringe Festival won rave reviews. And a Hollywood biopic about Janis has been in the works for years, attracting actresses from Zooey Deschanel to Amy Adams.

Janis has also inspired more than one classic song. From Leonard Cohen’s “Chelsea Hotel No. 2” (“*You fixed yourself, you said, ‘Well never mind/We are ugly but we have the music...*”), to “Pearl” by the Mamas and Papas (“*Here’s a wish for a runaway girl/Here’s a prayer for honkytonk Pearl...*”), to Joan Baez’s “In the Quiet Morning” (“*That poor girl/tossed by the tides of misfortune/Barely here to tell her tale/Rolled in on a sea of disaster/Rolled out on a mainline rail...*”) — even a mention in Don McLean’s classic “American Pie” (“*Met a girl who sang the blues/And I asked her for some happy news/But she just smiled and turned away...*”).

Then there’s her own music. Has any artist ever generated this much love and fame from a four-album career? Janis recorded all of two studio albums with BBHC (*Big Brother and the Holding Company* and *Cheap Thrills*) and two solo albums (*I Got Dem Ol’ Kozmic Blues Again Mama!* and *Pearl*). But in the years since her death, there have been more than 15 greatest hits collections, reissues and live albums released to the Janis-loving public.

Four decades after her untimely demise, Janis is as big ever.

Yet for all the accolades and stardom she’s earned over the years—both during her lifetime and posthumously—it’s staggering to think how much Janis suffered, how deeply she hurt, during her short life. And the wounds came from every direction. During high school in Port Arthur she was teased for being a chubby bookworm and called names like “nigger lover” and “freak.” At the University of Texas, Janis was voted “Ugliest Man On Campus.” And while her parents were caring and supportive, they would’ve preferred that Janis become a teacher,

singing in the church choir every Sunday.

Then there were the romantic disappointments, of which there were many: Country Joe McDonald, Johnny Winter, Kris Kristofferson and Peter de Blanc, the San Francisco meth dealer who put Janis on a bus back to Port Arthur before asking Seth Joplin for his daughter's hand in marriage—only to be never heard from again. The closest Janis got to true, lasting love was when she stopped her drug and alcohol use during a trip to South America, where she met David Niehaus, a schoolteacher traveling the world who had no idea who Janis was for the first two days they spent together. David was her dose of hope and change. But a few months later, undelivered letters, bad timing and her reconnection with Peggy Caserta, a junkie friend who got Janis back into heroin, torpedoed the healthiest relationship she ever had with a man.

Fortunately for the music-loving world, Janis had a gift for taking pain and turning it into creative gold. This explains why her concert footage is still so electrifying. Has there ever been anyone in pop music better at conjuring up the alchemy of suffering and song than Janis? But she wasn't just singing the blues. The girl could rock hard as well. And Janis made some of the most soulful, danceable R&B music of the '60s. Just *try* to stop grooving when "Raise Your Hand" or "Move Over" comes up on your iPod.

The sheer force of her performance and the brushfire of love it ignited throughout the audience will also explain why she could not go to David. She was getting something that made her feel higher than any drug or love high. After so many painful rejections, nothing could match the live show buzz.

While the meat of our narrative follows a semi-linear storyline, we also take a flash forward, stream-of-consciousness approach that appears at pertinent times in Janis' story. In addition to a sonic blast of classic live shows, we also show some of Janis' saddest moments and what we're leading up to—from the high school reunion, to the trip to Brazil, to the various heartbreaks, to her revealing Dick Cavett appearances, to her demise at the hands of a batch of pure heroin.

We flash forward these moments, putting them slightly out of context while we loosely follow our three-act structure. The flash forwards are like manifestations of Janis' self-deprecation and skewed view of the world, giving things an off-kilter slant. Our goal is to make a film that stylistically mirrors the disjointed, psychedelic nature of Janis' life. For visual cues, think *Requiem for a Dream*—at the most bad ass Janis Joplin concert you can imagine.

By the end of the film, the viewer will have absorbed the visceral rush of a live Janis performance. This is, after all, a celebration of the world's first female rock star. It's also the portrait of a fallen angel whose wounded soul forever sought refuge in sex, drugs and the promise of romantic love. But it never ended well and Janis only truly found comfort onstage—singing to adoring crowds who understood every ounce of her pain.

"I hope there's someone out there can tell me / Why the man I love wanna leave me in so much pain..." -Janis Joplin "Ball and Chain"

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