

**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)*

**The Making of *Janis: Little Girl Blue***

In 2007, soon after the release of her acclaimed documentary *Deliver Us from Evil*, Amy Berg was approached by the estate of Janis Joplin with the idea of making a film about the iconic singer. A lifelong fan, Academy Award-nominated Berg immediately jumped at the opportunity; though Joplin is perhaps the most influential female vocalist in rock & roll history, no one had ever explored her story on film.

Eight years later, Berg has completed ***Janis: Little Girl Blue***, an insightful and moving examination of the musician's complex, tragic life. Using interviews with those closest to Joplin, riveting performance footage, and the singer's own personal diaries and correspondence, Berg has assembled a layered and revelatory portrait of a misunderstood figure, as shy and vulnerable offstage as she was explosive and aggressive in front of a band.

Soon after meeting with the Joplin family, Berg started gathering interviews whenever she could—on her first visit to Janis' hometown of Port Arthur, Texas, she filmed a crucial conversation with one of the singer's high school friends, opening up the notion of Joplin as a woman who never escaped the scars from her painful adolescence as an ambitious outcast in a typical Southern town. For two years, the director continued to shoot with sources across the country, from Joplin's musical colleagues in San Francisco to her friend and frequent interviewer, television host Dick Cavett.

But the project lost momentum, and Berg spent several years trying to get the film back on track. Eventually she met with Oscar-winning filmmaker Alex Gibney (*Taxi to the Dark Side*, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*), who has worked on numerous music-related documentaries over the years, even touching on eras and communities close to Joplin in his films about the blues (*Lightning in a Bottle*), Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters (*Magic Trip*), and Hunter S. Thompson (*Gonzo*). Gibney agreed to join the Joplin project as a producer, and put together the funding and resources that Berg required to get the film made.

The director determined that she wanted the movie to be told as much as possible in Joplin's own words, so she dove deep into the singer's private letters, many of them never previously published. What she discovered was Joplin's constant need for approval and validation—what Berg calls “the little girl inside of her” with a permanent sense that she had to prove, especially to her own family, that she truly was somebody, that her desire for freedom and individual expression was leading her toward real accomplishment, not just a rejection of her upbringing. Janis' unique and ultra-powerful voice was driving her journey, shouting angst, pain and heartbreak from every stage she visited.

Berg searched for the perfect person to read the letters and give voice to Joplin's innermost feelings. She heard an interview with the celebrated Georgia-born indie rock artist Chan Marshall, who performs under the name Cat Power, on the internet, and instantly thought she found the right reader to convey these difficult emotional experiences.

“I was terrified because I didn't want to hurt Janis,” says Marshall. “She's not a character, not a cartoon, she was a real young woman with so much heart and feeling. But I was moved by the letters—I was the weirdo, the only person in my family who ever left the South, and they reminded me of letters I wrote to my grandmother in hopes of acknowledgment and validation. I felt parallels.”

“When I was reading the last letter,” she continues, “I couldn't do it. I was so upset, I started bawling. But right at the end, I imagined Janis sitting there, saying ‘Do it, it's cool, do whatever you want.’ She was there all of a sudden, saying ‘You're helping me out.’ So I felt that spirit vibe for a second, and I was able to finish.”

Even for such a legendary subject, finding archival material was a challenge. It was essential to take a thorough look at Joplin's early years, Berg felt, to really understand what shaped her character and drove her performances. But documentation of her life before she reached the spotlight was sparse, and the director had to dig deep to find photos, flyers, and newspaper clippings to illustrate Joplin's high school and college years.

Even once Joplin became a star, though, footage could be surprisingly difficult to come by. Many archives have been erased or lost, and even coverage of some of her most celebrated performances was often limited to one camera that wasn't always focused on the lead singer. Berg's research, though, turned up some extraordinary, never-before-seen clips, including stunning footage (shot by groundbreaking documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker) of Joplin in the recording studio; a scene of her playing the not-yet-released “Me and Bobby McGee” for

the musicians in the Grateful Dead and the Band on the Festival Express tour; and audio from her triumphant concert at London's Royal Albert Hall.

Eventually, Berg settled on the five most significant performances—including Joplin's break through at the Monterey Pop Festival and her set at Woodstock, which she considered one of her worst appearances—to establish the building blocks for the narrative. The edit was challenging as it was solely based on the archive, and since she wanted the film to be from Janis' perspective, Berg had to make difficult decisions on omitting stories that had no visuals to accompany them. But the sole goal of the edit was to keep Janis' world feeling small and real and three-dimensional.

Along the way, Berg also discovered Joplin's remarkable rebirth late in her life, when she kicked heroin, found a new romance with a man her friends all believed was the right guy for her, and created her finest album, *Pearl*. For the first time, Janis could see a real future for herself as an artist—until she slipped and took a final, fateful shot of the drug that killed her in 1971, at the age of 27.

“Janis is huge in our collective memory,” says Chan Marshall. “People still listen to her voice and feel that happiness—it's like a shotgun blast to your chakras.”

***Janis: Little Girl Blue*** reminds us of Joplin's incomparable musical power. More importantly, though, it reveals for the first time the woman behind that voice, the conflicted and fragile visionary who forever transformed the image of and the possibilities for women in rock and roll, and beyond.

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