

Busted Flat in Baton Rouge

Tracy Stephenson Shaffer

[*The stage area contains a small table and chair at stage-right, a small stage upon the stage, or metastage, at upstage-center, and a bar stool at stage-left. I enter and circle the area carrying an old red suitcase. Blues music plays in the background. The chorus pleads, “Come home early.” I step up on the metastage, sit the suitcase down, and look out at the audience as the music fades. I begin to sing in a bluesy voice.]*

Chorus: [*sung*]

She listened to the blues, and she loved to imitate
Her musical heroes, onstage and off
But she was unique, an individual, one of a kind, a true original
She expressed herself through art
And she longed for love and a place she could call home
Where she truly belonged
This . . . is . . . her story.

“SHE” (Prologue)¹

She was born in the south. The deep south. The gulf coast south where the weather is thick like a roux. She was born in a big town made into a small city by the petrochemical industry and a river that ran straight to the ocean. Here, oil refineries sprang up like weeds and were responsible for overnight fortunes and steady incomes for thousands of blue-collar families. Her daddy worked at the plant right down the street from her first home. He was a hard-working man who was self-made, and he believed in the power of education. She was the first child, not the only child, but the first born into her tiny family and treated as such, and, if you believe the psychology books, she acted as such, a girl eager to please both her mother and father. Her mother was a woman with big dreams for her daughter right from the start. There was nothing her daughter couldn't have, nothing her daughter couldn't do. She dressed her in the finest they could afford and signed her up for Bluebirds and pretty soon, extra-curricular activities became a way of life. She excelled in school. Her desire to please extended to her teachers as well. She loved to perform and to play pretend. She was dramatic! She would create performances in her backyard with the other children in the neighborhood. She was often the writer, the director, and the star. All of this was done to the background of good music.

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She was a smart child. Raised around a family of extended adults, she was able to hold a conversation at an early age. She had a round face, and the bluest eyes, and a broad forehead her mother always said showed her intelligence. When she was very young, she had fine, shiny blonde hair, and on special occasions, her mother would curl it and fix it just right. She wasn't a classic beauty, but her personality made sure she always stood out in a crowd. Still, she was a southern girl. She was made to behave, she was taught to be polite. She learned to say, "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am," "Thank you, ma'am," "Excuse me, ma'am." She was served southern foods: fried chicken, roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, string beans, lima beans, butter beans, red beans and rice, cornbread. All of this cooked in bacon grease; most of this topped with Tabasco. But there was one thing different in this southern home: her opinion mattered. See, in the south, children are meant to be seen and not heard, but she was allowed to ask questions and report what she had learned at school. At first, her parents thought this was charming. In fact, they encouraged it. But as she grew older, her questions got harder to answer. Her opinions clashed with theirs. She was becoming bored and frustrated with the way of life she knew. She sought out people who were different. She was pushing against the edges of her safe little world. She pushed them as far as they would go. Still, she didn't feel as if she fit. She'd have to leave the home she knew, the place where she had once flourished, to find a new place, a place where she could be herself.

Chorus: [*sung*]

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 But she was unique, and individual, one of a kind, a true original
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Discovery

[At this time, Joplin's version of "Summertime" begins. I pick up the suitcase and travel to center stage. There, I sit the suitcase down on the floor, open it, take out a bottle of Southern Comfort and a cocktail glass, close the suitcase, and move stage-right to the table and chair. I sit down, open the bottle, and pour some into the glass. On second thought, I pour a bit more and take a sip. The alcohol is bitter! The music fades.]

I first really discovered Janis Joplin in a bar. Go figure! I was busy redefining myself as a young college student who was open to new ideas, and there she was. That pained, passionate voice pulsing through the speakers on the jukebox. Soon, she was everywhere: on the walls in my dreary beige apartment, on the tape deck of my white Honda Accord, on every jukebox I could find, and on my own lips . . . at open mic nights, at karaoke bars, and even in front of one-man bands who would indulge me. I even sang Janis Joplin in front of Tom Selleck once!

I had just graduated with my Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, and I had gotten my first job in Phoenix, but I still had some things down in Baton Rouge. (That's where I'm from.) So, my friend, Robin, and I were going to move me from Baton Rouge to Phoenix. But this wasn't going to be any ordinary move. Oh, no! This was going to be our last hurrah, our last big throw down before "truly becoming adults." We were going to hit every town, tourist trap, and major city along the way: Austin, San Antonio, Carlsbad Caverns, White Sands New Mexico, the great meteor crater, Santa Fe, the Grand Canyon, Sedona, you name it.

Well, by the time we got to Santa Fe, we had already gotten into a kind of rhythm. What we would do is tour around and look at the museums during the day, and then at night, we would party. We arrived in Santa Fe on a Monday. Now, you might know that most museums are closed on Mondays, so Robin and I went into every church we could find, but we spent most of our day in art galleries, looking at southwestern art.

By around four o'clock, we were tired of art galleries and southwestern art, but then we turned down this road, and we saw it! Art that really caught our eyes! It was . . . pop art . . . it was . . . industrial art . . . it was every color of the rainbow . . . it was iconic representations of cities, little buildings, and taxis, and people, all attached to weights that would wave back and forth creating the energy of the city. And they waved us right into that art gallery.

Inside, we met Eddie, a hip, Native-American, art dealer with tan skin and long black hair and a chiseled jaw. We started talking to Eddie, and he asked us where we were from. Now, sometimes, this is not an easy question, so I started my spiel, "Well, I'm originally from Baton Rouge, but I just graduated from Southern Illinois University in Carbon- . . ." And what do you know? Eddie graduated from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale in 1979! So we started talking, and what do you know? Eddie's favorite bar in Carbondale was my favorite bar in Carbondale. Now, there are not that many bars in Carbondale, but we started talking about the people and places we knew. All the while, Robin was standing in the background listening. And, then, Eddie said, "Hey I know Elizabeth Taylor's son. He's in a band in town, and they're playing a gig tonight at a swanky hotel right down the road from here. Would you girls like to come?" And Robin and I, being the good time girls we were, always the life of the party, always up for a good time, we said, "Sure. We'd love to go with you to hear Elizabeth Taylor's son (he never gave him a name) at a swanky hotel right down the road from here."

So, he told us where the hotel was and we agreed on a time to meet. Then, we left Eddie to finish his day, and we began what promised to be the most exciting night of our journey. We went and had a couple of beers. And then we thought that we should probably get a bite to eat before the big night, get something in our stomachs, you know, so we went to a little Mexican restaurant and had a couple more beers, and then it was time to meet Eddie. So, we got to the swanky hotel and bellied up to the bar and had a couple more beers. Then Eddie got there and ordered another round of beers, and then the phone rang. The bartender picked it up and listened and talked for a while and then handed the phone to Eddie who listened and talked for a while, and then he handed the phone back to the bartender who put the phone on the hook. Eddie turned to us and said, "The gig's been canceled. BUT, I know a real cool bar up

on Canyon Road where there's always live music. You girls wanna come?" And Robin and I, being the good time girls we were, always the life of the party, always up for a good time, we said, "Sure. We'd love to go with you to a really cool bar up on Canyon Road where there's always live music." So we did.

Now, this bar was everything I could have ever imagined. We walk in from the front porch, and the place is filled to the gills with urban cowboys and wannabe Dixie Chicks dripping in turquoise. So we mosey on over to the bar and order some beers, and then I hear it . . . classic rock! Played by a one-man band! And it must have been the beers, but I walk straight on over to him and say, "Excuse me, sir, can you play 'Me and Bobby McGee?'" And he says, "I think I can swing it; you wanna sing?" And I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "Well, what's yer name darlin'?" And I said, "Tracy." And he said, "Well, Tracy, you just go and have yourself a good time, and when I'm ready, I'll call you on up to the stage." And I said, "Thank you, sir." And I was so excited that I stepped out onto the front porch to get a breath of fresh air. And what do you know? TOM SELLECK was sitting at a picnic bench with a couple of other people. And it must have been the beers, because I sat down right next to him and said, "Hi, Tom. I'm Tracy." And he said, "Hi, Tracy." And I don't really remember what I said, but I think I said something like, "My mother's a big fan." And then I heard it. My name. I was being called to the stage. So I excused myself and walked back into the bar. And I must have not had enough beer, because I was really nervous. [*Here, I step onto the metastage.*] But I walked onto the stage, smiling at the one-man band, and I remember that the mic stand was too tall for me, but I didn't fix it properly, I just tilted the mic head down, and I put both hands behind my back, and then I closed my eyes and began to sing in the noisy bar.

[*The following is sung with eyes closed. Parenthetical statements are made, with eyes open, to the audience.*]

Busted Flat in Baton Rouge
 Waiting for a train
 (The bar got quiet!)
 When I was feeling near as faded as my jeans
 (There were whistles and cheers!)
 Bobby thumbed a diesel down
 Just before it rained
 And rode us all the way in to New Orleans

[*I continue to sing the first verse with my eyes closed. At the end of the first verse, before the chorus, I open them and add as an aside:*]

(And I kept singing and when I got to the end, I gave it everything I had.)

[*At this point, I sing the closing of "Me and Bobby McGee" in Joplin's passionate and incoherent style. I attempt to replicate the end of this song as closely as possible, even including the howl at the end. At this point I open my eyes.*]

And the bar exploded into applause. It could have been the beers. Or maybe they were just glad I was finished. Or maybe they actually thought I was good.

[*I step down off of the metastage.*] So I got down off the stage, smiling at the one-man band. And Tom Selleck. . . . Who cares about Tom Selleck!? I slid into the booth with Robin and Eddie and they patted me on the back and bought me a beer, and this was it! This was the best night of our trip, the climax of our journey!

A few moments later, Robin leans over, taps me on the shoulder, and says, “Eddie wants me to go home with him. You mind?”

“No!” I protested. “No. You go with him. We’ve had a long day, and I’m so tired, and tomorrow we have to drive to the Grand Canyon, and it’s my turn to drive. No. You go with him. You go with him and have a good time.” And she did.

Just moments earlier, I had been one with the entire crowd. Now, I was just one. So I took a taxi back to our hotel, crying the whole way. And when I finally got back to our room, and no one could hear me, I swore that I hated Robin, and that I hated my life, and that I wasn’t pretty or talented. I was just ugly, and fat, and not talented at all. I was just a laughingstock. My mama always said, “When you’re high, you’re high, but when you’re low, I really worry about you.”

Busted

[*I open the suitcase again and take out a paperback book.*]

Myra Friedman was Janis’s publicist. She was assigned to Janis when Big Brother and the Holding Company, Janis’s first band, moved to New York to be managed by Albert Grossman at Columbia, who was pretty famous himself. Maybe you’ve heard of him. Uncle Albert? He’s represented lots of greats, and he was the one responsible for Bob Dylan’s career. Anyway, Albert assigned Myra to Janis, and Myra worked on Janis’s publicity. Janis was in *Vogue* and *Glamour*, *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. She was on *The Dick Cavett Show*. Through all of this, Myra wound up spending a lot of time with Janis, and a few years after Janis died, Myra wrote this book, *Buried Alive*.² It was nominated for the National Book Award, and it doesn’t paint a pretty picture. In it, Myra describes Janis as having a deep, underlying and insatiable need to be loved and accepted. She claims Janis was depressed most of the time and that she questioned her talent and looks. She portrays Janis as being lonely and confused, and she even alludes to Janis’s hints at suicide. [*I reach in suitcase for another book.*]

Well, there’s another biography, *Pearl*, written by Ellis Amburn.³ He didn’t know Janis; he’s a celebrity biographer, and he claims that Janis was just the opposite of the woman Friedman portrays. He says Janis was the life of the party, a good time girl. She was always up for a good time. Drinks were always on Janis. In fact, he argues that Janis would have never considered suicide. She loved life so much that she never wanted it to end.

Maybe she was both. Janis was fun. I feel comfortable making that statement of fact. There are too many stories of her good times to dispute it. But maybe she was depressed too. Maybe she questioned her looks and her talent. God knows the critics certainly did. Maybe she was lonely. Can you imagine all of the time she spent on the road, away from family and friends? And maybe she got confused (drinking will do that to you), and, when things looked particularly bad, maybe she thought of suicide as a way out.

How do I know? I don't. That's the busted part. When I began this project, I thought I could go out and find the Janis behind the icon. I thought I would be able to deliver her up to you. But I didn't, and I can't. I learned a lot about her, but I don't feel, like my good friend Charles described it, that I sat down and had eggs with her. So I guess I'm busted, in every sense of the word.

But I do have this one thing. It's this feeling I get when an artist's work really speaks to me. Maybe you get it too. Maybe you see a film and really relate to the characters. Maybe you read a poem or listen to the lyrics of a song or see a performance or observe a painting and say, "Yeah . . . yeah, I understand." I get that sometimes. Not all the time, but I get it sometimes. Some people call it empathy. Some people call it identification. Some people call it stark, raving mad, but I get it sometimes. So, even though I haven't sat down and had eggs with her, if you will indulge me, that's the version of Janis I could give you. And, if you want, we could start with the "facts."

True/False Test⁴

[The house lights come up, and I interact with the audience. Before this section begins, I place the two books on the table, go back into the suitcase, and take out a clipboard.]

I'm an instructor at Louisiana State University, so I've prepared a little true/false test for you. So, what we'll do is: I will make several statements in regard to Janis Joplin and you just yell out "true" or "false."

[The text of this aspect of the performance is loose as I have to adapt to my audience's participation. Because of space, I do not include my discussions after each of these statements, but much of Joplin's biography comes out in this portion of the production. For clarity, I do include a few important statements that emerge during the discussions in parentheses.]

1. Janis Joplin liked to experiment with LSD. False. (Janis's drug of choice was heroin. In fact, it was an accidental heroin overdose that took her life in October of 1970. But alcohol could probably be argued to be her all time drug of choice.)
2. Janis Joplin was apolitical. She didn't march or act as a political spokesperson for any political causes. True. (While Janis is sometimes seen as a leader of the hippie subculture, she was all about Janis.)
3. Janis Joplin graduated from University of Texas at Austin with a business degree. False. (Janis went to a community college near her hometown as well as UT Austin, but she never finished college.)
4. Southern Comfort was Janis's alcoholic beverage of choice. False. *[I explain how she became associated with Southern Comfort here.]*
5. Janis Joplin was all talk and had only had sex with three men when she died. False.
6. Janis Joplin didn't write any of her songs. False. (She didn't write her most famous songs. "Summertime" was written by George Gershwin, and Kris Kristofferson wrote "Me and Bobby McGee." But she did write a few you might know. She wrote "Move Over," she wrote "Mercedes Benz.")
7. Janis Joplin despised Jim Morrison but adored Jimi Hendrix. True. (While she did sleep with both of them.)

8. Janis Joplin always wore pants and never wore shoes on stage. False. (Actually, Janis's look evolved over the years.)
9. Janis Joplin was critically acclaimed as the star of the Monterey Pop Fest. True. (The Monterey Pop Fest was the defining moment in Joplin's career. In June of 1967, she went from being a local star in San Francisco to an international star in one weekend.)
10. Janis Joplin rode the wave of her success for over a decade. False. (If you followed closely during the test, you noticed that Janis was only famous for a little over three years. From the Monterey Pop Fest in the summer of 1967 to her accidental overdose in October of 1970, her fame lasted only a little more than three years.)

In a little over three years, she created three albums with three different bands and enough buzz to become the icon that overshadows the Janis I went looking for.

Comeback Tour

[House lights back down.]

Just a little over three years. It's been over three years since I last directed a show. So, if we're playing with a rock-n-roll metaphor, this would be my comeback tour. It is! It's my comeback tour!

Just think of how we define a comeback tour in our culture. The person drops out of sight for a while. You don't know what he or she may be up to. Maybe the person gains a little weight, watches a little television. But then, when you least expect it, the person reemerges in a new incarnation. So, this is my comeback tour. Sad that it's about Janis Joplin because she is never going to get a comeback tour. She's never going to get to grow, change, evolve, get better, get worse, redefine herself. She is always going to remain frozen as that icon. Sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll, right?

I guess what I'm trying to say is that a lot can happen in three years. A lot can happen in three years! You could move across the country. You could move from Phoenix to New York for example. You could have incredible success. You could have a number one hit record. You could suffer terrible misfortune. You could lose one of your best friends. You could meet amazing people who love you and nurture you and help move your career forward or awful people who try to hold you back. You could wake up one day and be unrecognizable to yourself, and that might be a good thing. But if it's not, you might be so far away from who you once were, you don't have any idea how to get back. If you're lucky, maybe you'll have family and friends in the background, pulsing in and out of your life like a heartbeat.

[Joplin's version of "Summertime" begins again. I move to the table and the Southern Comfort. I sit down and take a sip. The alcohol goes down easy. The music fades.]

Rediscovery

I rediscovered Janis Joplin in a bar. Go figure! I was busy redefining myself as a young college professor who was open to new ideas, and there she was. That pained, passionate voice pulsing through the speakers on the jukebox. I was at the Irish Pub,

a little bar about a mile away from my house when I lived in New York. Deep down inside, I knew I shouldn't, but I had become a regular. I would walk in the door and the bartender, be it Kevin or Jimmy or Joey or Sean, would say, "Tracy, ladies and gentlemen," and everyone would applaud. It felt like home. See, I lived alone, and there was always someone at the Irish. But there was one person who really mattered.

His name was Denis Murphy, but everyone just called him Murphy. He was a fifty-year-old Vietnam vet who was also a regular. Deep down inside, I knew I probably shouldn't, but Murphy and I became friends. He was a great listener, and an even better storyteller. (He saw Janis at Woodstock.) And he was the only Democrat in an Irish pub where the other customers had done so well in life that their wallets begged them to be Republican. So, Murphy and I became a team. We'd pick on the other guys, all in good fun. I'd ask him about his day and he would ask me about school. We'd watch the Mets on television. We'd play *Jeopardy* and the jukebox. He'd give me a couple dollars and say, "Don't forget to play a few for me." So I'd go over and play some Counting Crows and Sheryl Crow, and then some Dylan, and some Jimi, and some Janis, and we would just sit there together. Sometimes not saying a word.

Murphy and I became close friends during my time in New York. In fact, he was the first person I told that I was thinking of leaving, and he was completely supportive. He said he would miss me, but he understood why I needed to go.

In December of 1999, I decided I would drive home (from New York to Baton Rouge) for the winter break. And on my last night at the Irish, Murphy gave me a CD for the road. He knew I liked to listen to the blues, so he gave me a compilation with a lot of old blues greats.

Well, the night went pretty much like any night goes when you know that you have to be fresh the next morning, and you go out anyway. I stayed out too late and had too much fun. When I got home, I put the CD on my stereo, and a couple of hours later, when my alarm went off and I had to get up and pack the car and get out of town before the morning traffic, I forgot the CD, and I didn't think about it again.

Christmas came and went, and I toasted the millennium with Robin in Tahoe, and just a few days before I had to pack up my car to make the long drive back to New York for the spring semester, my phone rang. It was Kevin, from the Irish. He said, "Tracy, Murphy died in his sleep last night. His heart stopped."

Because I had driven, I couldn't make it back for the wake, or the funeral, but when I finally got back to New York, I went straight to that bar and I mourned my friend. And when I got home I noticed the CD on my stereo. I put the CD in and pressed play, and the first song is by a blues musician I've never even heard of before. His name is Big Bill Broonzy, and the song is titled "Come Home Early." The lyrics are "Come home early baby. Please come home early." And it ends with the sentiment that if you don't come home early, I might not be here when you get back.

Lot for Sale

[This section of the performance works with slides. The images are personal photographs of some of the places mentioned combined with photos of Janis Joplin with the caption "missing" typed across each photo.]

I went looking for Janis Joplin this year, and I didn't find her. I found remnants of a life short-lived: biographies, albums, comments by people who knew her, comments by people who didn't. I traveled to her hometown of Port Arthur, Texas. I walked up to the second floor of the tiny but respectable Museum of the Gulf Coast and found a few shreds from her life, back in a corner: Port Arthur's claim to fame, not in a room of her own, but mixed in together with all of the other musical successes of the region.

There was a replica of her trippy, muraled Porsche, pictures she drew as a child, paintings she painted inspired by Modigliani, a letter she wrote to her mom in appreciation on Mother's Day. There were gold records, a few awards, a sequined Elvis-like costume. All in all, a representation of an average Texas girl who did good, but no Janis.

I went to St. Mary's, the hospital where she was born. Expanded to meet the needs of today's HMO generation, it was hard to figure out where the original building was at first. But after carefully considering the architecture, I think I found the original entrance, but I did not find Janis Joplin.

I went to Griffing Park, the neighborhood she grew up in. It is still considered affluent by today's standards and certainly in dwindling Port Arthur. She wasn't there in suburbia. She's just an icon in suburbia. "Dope, Sex, and Cheap Thrills," right? She never belonged in suburbia then, and she doesn't now.

I went to the bridge where she and the beatnik boys she hung out with in high school crossed the state line to get beer and go to honkytonks to hear some real music in my great state of Louisiana. I imagined them crossing the bridge. I recalled a story where Janis got her friends in a fight with some Cajun boys. She had been flirting with the Cajuns, and, when she was ready to leave, they weren't ready for her to leave. A fight broke out, and she and her friends rushed to their car and drove over a hundred miles an hour back to Texas. They flipped that car that night, over and over and over again. Bodies and beer sloshing everywhere. Miraculously, nobody was hurt. They all survived. But Janis lives nowhere near that bridge now.

I drove past the small Louisiana towns where she looked for the blues. A few bars remain, but mostly there are casinos. "200 Slot Machines!" "A winner everyday!" "Jackpot!" But no jackpot for me.

I went to the local community college she kept going back to, to try and make a normal life for herself, the place where she felt the most stifled. How was I going to find her there?

With a little serendipity, I met Lisa Mills at Phil Brady's right in Baton Rouge. Lisa Mills is the new front woman for the original Big Brother and the Holding Company, Janis's first band. The guys who made her famous! I talked to Lisa hoping for a glimpse of Janis. But Lisa's smooth red hair is more reminiscent of Bonnie Raitt, and her blues are slick Stevie Ray, not down-hearted Willie Dixon like Janis's were. There are no Muddy "Mississippi" Waters in an upstate New York music festival reunion tour with an audience born after MTV, and there is no Janis.

I looked for her mainly in the books. I thought the people who knew her or spent some time researching her could tell me the most about her. It's where I learned the most to be honest. But the stories don't jibe. I can put them together like a puzzle, but there are so many missing pieces, and I can't see her face.

I see it most clearly in her music, music she mostly didn't even write. But I can hear it in that voice: empathy . . . identification.

I guess the jewel of my search sums it up the best. Looking for the house that Seth and Dorothy Joplin brought their five pound infant home to in January of 1943, the two bedroom brick house on Procter Street on the edge of town near the refinery, I found a small overgrown lot where the house used to be, a sign posted to a tree that said, "LOT FOR SALE" with a number. I called the number expecting an astronomical amount for the sacred ground in the bad part of town, but the guy simply said, "It belonged to my mother-in-law. We're asking \$3000." Janis Joplin was long gone from this place.

Some friends said I should buy the lot and put up a museum, but it would still just be a lot for sale. A version of the Janis you want her to be. The Janis she lived her life being—the Janis you/we/they want/wanted her to be.

[The end of the last line is a music cue for Joplin's "Piece of My Heart" which plays in its entirety. During the song, I change into Janis on the stage, complete with bell bottoms, bell sleeves, and stringy brown wig. Personal slides that reveal a "Janis-like" life, drinking and partying, accompany the change. The final slide is a picture of Denis Murphy and me at the Irish. The music fades.]

Janis Monologue⁵

[I begin by singing "Mercedes Benz."]

I wrote that song with Bobby Neuwirth in a bar. They put it on my third album after I died. A cappella. They called the album *Pearl*, after my alter-ego. See, Pearl is who I became when I didn't wanna be Janis anymore. Pearl is a good time girl; Pearl's just one of the guys; Pearl's not a star, just a person, see. My friends could say, "Pearl, break a leg!" "How ya doin' Pearl?" "Whatsa matter Pearl?" So they named the album *Pearl*, and they said it was my best yet. They said I was returning to my roots. The blues. See, on the day I died, I was supposed to lay down the vocals for a track called "Buried Alive in the Blues." I never got to do that, man. I got a hold of some pure stuff and my luck ran out. I didn't plan it like that, man, that's for sure. But cha never know what's gonna happen. Gotta live every day like it's the last minute of your life. But back to *Pearl*, it went to number one for nine weeks in a row. And that song . . . that song you know so well . . . maybe the only one of my songs you know . . . the only song my mother ever said she liked . . . it was a hit single. Kris gave me that song man. He was a fine cat, man. He knew Pearl, and we spent some time together. And when I heard that song, I picked up a guitar and played it immediately. They called me The Queen of Rock-n-roll. But I wasn't no Queen of Rock-n-roll. *Newsweek* called me "the white voice of the blues," and I liked that much better, man. I loved the blues. I knew the blues. I was the blues.

I went back to San Francisco and rock and roll had happened. Well, I'd never sung rock and roll, I sang the blues—Bessie Smith kind of blues. They said, "Janis, we want you to sing with these boys," and I met them all, and you know how it is when you meet someone, you don't even remember what they look like you're so spaced by what's happening. I was in space city, man, I was scared to death. I didn't know how to

sing the stuff, I'd never sung with electric music, I'd never sung with drums, I only sang with one guitar. I'd learned "Down on Me." It's a gospel song, and I'd heard it before and thought I could sing it, and they did the chords. So we practiced it all week, and they were working at the Avalon that weekend. They played a few numbers, and then they said, "Now, we'd like to introduce . . ."

And nobody had ever heard of fuckin' me, I was just some chick, didn't have any hip clothes or nothin' like that. I had on what I was wearing to college. I got on stage and I started singing, *whew!* What a rush, man! A real, live, drug rush. I don't remember it at all, all I remember is the sensation—what a fuckin' gas, man. The music was boom, boom, boom! And the people were dancing, and the lights, and I was standing up there singing into this microphone and getting it on, and *whew!* I dug it. So I said, "I think I'll stay, boys." Far out, isn't it? It sure did take me by surprise, I'll tell you. I wasn't planning any of this, I wasn't planning on sittin' in cold dressing rooms all my life, I didn't even know it existed.

Even once I was a singer, I never wanted to be a star. I just liked to sing because it was fun, just like people like to play tennis, it makes your body feel good. Everybody gave you free beer. I don't remember much of the early period, we just worked around, all of us starving, I got some money from my parents.

Now, I'm on Broadway. The year 2001, and my name is in lights. "LOVE JANIS" based on my life, based on a book my sister wrote, based on some letters I sent home to my mother and daddy, man. Now, let me ask you a question, man. Ever written a letter to your mother and daddy, man? Ever leave the good stuff out? Nevertheless, some cat's getting on his zoot suit tonight and pickin' up his chick and laying down seventy bucks a pop to see that shit. That's some bread, man. Who's takin' home that bread, man? And that's New York for ya. I hated New York, man. 'Cause they got it all wrong see. They say if you can make it there you can make it anywhere, but that's not it. That's not it. I made it there, but ya got to make it here [*points to head*]. You got to make it here, man. But they're all dressed up tonight watching some version of my life, just like you cats, except they paid seventy bucks, man. And I know that crowd, man. I've performed for people like that. I grew up with people like that.

You never can tell. Sometimes they think they're gonna like you. And then you get out there and you really damage and offend their idea of femininity. You know, "No chick is supposed to stand like that." I mean, crouching down in front of the guitar player goin' "uuuuhhn!" You know, lettin' your tits shake around, and your hair's stringy, you have no makeup on, and sweat running down your face, you're coming up to the fuckin' microphone, man, and at one point their heads just go "click," and they go "oooh, no!" You get that a lot. It's really far out. When you're standing on stage you can't see the whole crowd. The trouble is the groovy crowd is usually in the back, because they can't afford the seats down front—the seats down front are the local rich people, the local doctors' sons and their country club dates. They're the ones that are just sitting there, man, with their knees just so. You know, only cross at your ankles, keep your panty girdle tight together, and you sit with your hands in your lap. And I'm up there singing, I'm going "cha-cha-boom-quack-quack" and I look out at the crowd and the front rows are goin'—these girls have these little pinched smiles and the expressions on their faces are absolute horror.

They've never seen anything like it, and they don't want to again, man. And that's what I left when I left Texas.

Chet Helms had heard me one weekend in Austin. He was famous, he was one of the crazies that made it away from Texas at a very early age, he had split at eighteen. He was back in town, on the way to the West Coast from the East Coast—all Texans come back to Austin—and he heard me singing. He said, "That girl's good, that girl's good."

I was wanting to leave, I was wanting to get the fuck out of there, but I didn't have quite enough nerve to leave by myself. Chet was leaving, and he said he wanted me to come with him, help him get rides. We hitchhiked to San Francisco, and we slept on a bunch of people's floors, and I sang a couple of times. And that's how it started, man. And it was a rush. I went looking for love and I got a rush. No, that's not true. I got love, man. I got love from my audience, man.

Once you jump on the floor and start dancin' with them, unless they're sound asleep, that usually gets 'em up. There's something really strange I've noticed, there's some kind of artificial barrier built into their minds between the stage and us. *That's* the stage; *that's* the show. It's like an invisible wall between stage and audience. Once you break that barrier, and you jump down and walk out and touch 'em and say, "I'll dance with you, man, I'll get sweaty with you. Come on, I'm with *you*, man. In fact, I just happen to be standing on stage." Once they feel that barrier is down, that they're there with you it just rocks right on out, man. It's fun! It's fun! I used to get such a rush from that contact. You gotta get yourself off first for them to get into it. You gotta love it cause that's the only reason to be doin' it.

[*Sigh.*] Such a funny game . . . when you're nobody and poor, you don't care—you can just drift, but when you get a little position and a little money, you start really hustling to get more and then when you're numero uno, you've gotta really break ass so nobody catches you! Catches you? I've been looking around and I've noticed something. After you reach a certain level of talent (and quite a few have that talent) the deciding factor is ambition, or as I see it, how much you really *need*. Need to be loved and need to proud of yourself and I guess that's what ambition is—it's not all a depraved quest for position or money, maybe it's for love. *Lots* of love! That's what I was looking for, man. It eluded me all the way to the end, man. Even when I became a star, but I was the same chick, because I've been her forever, and I know her, and she ain't no star: she's lonely, or she's good at something. I have to get undressed after the show, my clothes are ruined, my heels are run through, my underwear is ripped, my body's stained from my clothes, my hair's stringy, I got a headache and I got to go home, and I'm lonely and my clothes are all fucked up, my shoes have come apart, and I'm pleading with my road manager to please give me a ride home, please, please, just so I can take these fuckin' clothes off, and that ain't no star, man, that's just a person.

"She" (Epilogue)

[*Performed as I take off wig and "Joplin" jewelry and frantically pack all items back into the suitcase.*]

She had become unrecognizable to herself. She had become a different person. She didn't like what she saw. She needed a break—she wanted to make some time to go home. She loved her parents; she missed her family. She needed to leave the life she had created for herself or she thought she might die. She was lonely and depressed. She thought of suicide. But there were people in her life that thought she needed to stay. What would she do if she left? Where would she go? She was getting pressure from all sides. Wasn't her life fantastic? What was the problem? And it was fantastic, in a way. She was confused. She was up and down. She began to self-medicate. She drank too much. She ate too much. If she left her success could she ever get it back? Could she afford the gamble? All of that hard work? She looked forward to visits with family and friends. They helped her forget her problems. But the visits always ended too soon. She felt she was becoming a burden. She promised herself that there would be big changes.

Chorus: [*sung on metastage*]

She listened to the blues, and she loved to imitate
Her musical heroes, onstage and off
But she was unique, an individual, one of a kind, a true original
She expressed herself through art
And she longed for love and a place she could call home
Where she truly belonged
This . . . this is . . . this is her story

[*Lights fade.*]

Notes

- [1] The style and many of the details of the prologue were inspired by Laura Joplin's *Love, Janis*. Petaluma: Acid Test Production, 1994.
- [2] Friedman, Myra. *Buried Alive: The Biography of Janis Joplin*. New York: Warner Books, 1993.
- [3] Amburn, Ellis. *Pearl: The Obsessions and Passions of Janis Joplin*. New York: Warner Books, 1993.
- [4] In addition to the three biographies already mentioned, Alice Echols's *Sweet Scars of Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000) provided a rich cultural context for understanding Joplin's life.
- [5] I combined multiple texts to create the Janis Monologue. I wove interviews collected by David Dalton and published in *Janis Joplin: A Performance Diary 1966-1970* (Petaluma: Acid Test Production, 1997) together with correspondence from Janis to her mother published in Laura Joplin's biography. I also imagined what Janis might say today based on my experience with her music as well as all of the aforementioned texts.

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