

THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL LONDON (March 2016)
LITTLE GIRL BLUE: Janis Joplin
Screening & Panel Discussion

Andrea Byrne Presentation

Watching extracts of Janis Joplin singing in *Little Girl Blue* I was struck by the incredible force of her breath which seemed to emanate from the gut as (a) matter of pure survival - an antidote to the horrendous bullying and abuse inflicted upon her by school contemporaries. Joplin seemed to follow the almost ectoplasmic ribbon of her singing breath which, in time, grew to become an iconic billowing banner and a clarion call in response to the second wave of feminism in the U.S. It is simply the sound of the abused fighting back. At a time when women were taking up smaller and smaller physical spaces (through dieting and the expected and unexpected female physical ideals of the era) Joplin was expanding, looking for bigger space for her presence, auralty and ambition. Her voice demanded more room, more audience, more ears. A personification of creative, voracious, need and greed for life in all its forms and yet always conscious of the pressures to conform to parental expectations. The philosopher Jacques Derrida theorises on his concept of the 'telephone in the grave' well Janis Joplin took the call from Bessie Smith, Odetta and other female black American chanteuses who had gone before. Joplin's voice was marinated in spirits, whether that be the aforementioned women or the irony of her alcohol of choice - *Southern Comfort*. Her southern life imbibed with peer bullying sardonically *devoid* of any comfort.

Joplin's life was punctured with periods of being lost and we are left in no doubt to the constant loneliness that plagued her yet onstage she would lose herself in her own performance. She seemed to occupy a space of liminality the between of 'letting go of the self' (substance / alcohol usage) and 'losing oneself' (in her voice / artistry) The 'losing of oneself' is characteristically the melding of the subject to invariably an object to create a "whole" – in this case her love of performing. It is a worthy aspirational experience where you willingly consent to the event. You will have been voluntarily arrested, consumed and returned from the occurrence richer, hopefully with rewards and resonances on a sliding scale of profundity. 'Losing oneself' speaks of levitation of many forms. 'Letting oneself go' – one's decision to go is a nominal fancy, in actuality you have been dismissed and are extraneous to the event of yourself, it's akin to swapping your soul with a 'hole'. Janis Joplin straddled the space between 'losing herself' and 'letting herself go'. Filling stadiums with her talent and authority of voice whilst simultaneously writing postcards of gentle assurance to her family. Returning home to Port Arthur to wrap china plates in preparation for her soon-to-be-aborted marriage whilst suppressing the natural exuberance of her performativity. Growing up / walking social tightropes / complying / non-complying / attempting to figure it all out whilst carrying the weight of her insistent ambitions must have been an unbearable challenge. She eventually followed her voice. That voice she was in possession of or possessed by, a voice that was calling out to the future and didn't bow down to conventions of the time. A voice of aggression, Blue Soul and machine-gun syncopations of urgency.

Towards the beginning of *Little Girl Blue* an image looms large on the screen of a 1960's newspaper headline declaring Joplin's voice a "mating call" - affronted I found the description to be offensively simplistic, reductive to both her talent and ambition and pretty sure would not have been applied to a male contemporary. But now I wonder if I have been too quick to judge and misconstrued 'mating'. Every intentionally produced sound for an audience needs an ear. A sonorous union, discussion, debate and (un)comfortable pairing - a mating.

This morning I heard *Slave To The Rhythm* Grace Jones on the radio – a song both sensual and sexual and whilst I listened it occurred to me that my presence / listening didn't matter to her recorded performance. As Jones sang, my interpretations and intellectualisms regarding the songs-meaning were ineffectual and absolutely irrelevant to the record being played. Jones would continue to sing exactly note-for-note perfect, true to the original pressing ad infinitum. Grace Jones was performing (performed), committed to vinyl and proclaiming in the final bars " Here's Grace!" and with that personal authoritative stamp of approval, confidently asserting that on every listening / play (regardless of your own personal interpretations) that this is *HER* and will be for posterity. All we really have left of Janis Joplin are the fecund elegiac recordings of a time when she was fighting *her* fight or fighting *the* fight. Her corporeality rebuilt from images and words, but it is the sound that remains the object and she fought hard to keep *her* sound her objective; no doubt confident that future female singers hence would be taking her 'call'. Interpretations of that sound are obviously subjective but we will always be presented with a whole *HER*.

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