

A CERTAIN KIND OF LIGHT

Little Girl Blue Illuminates Janis Joplin's Brief Life by Steve Dollar

Almost a decade after the Janis Joplin Archives opened its vaults to filmmaker Amy Berg, the bawdy, soul-shouting 1960s legend comes back to life in *Janis: Little Girl Blue*. The biographical documentary has its television premiere May 3rd as part of the PBS series *American Masters*, and significantly offers a perspective on the performer that has yet to be explored: Her own.

The film makes intimate and revealing use of Joplin's letters, read as if in the singer's own Texas drawl by Chan Marshall (Cat Power), to draw insights into her fears and ambitions. "It was supposed to be my second film," recalled Berg, perhaps best-known for *West of Memphis*, about the fraudulent case against the West Memphis 3, and *Prophet's Prey*, which peered into the criminal sexual practices of Mormon extremists.

Instead, the Joplin project took eight years to finish.

"There was one year when I couldn't listen to Janis at all," she said. "There were so many different issues that came up. I honestly don't even know how I stayed focused on it but I'm so happy that I finally did this."

Was this project really personal for you?

Yeah. I grew up in Los Angeles and went through a late-teens Jim Morrison/Janis Joplin/Jimi Hendrix phase and I really connected with her music. Her presence was so strong for me, she was so raw, I could feel her energy and her pain in her music. I always found myself turning on my Janis Joplin CDs when I was going through break-ups or high points or whatever it was, she's been a part of my life.

It seems that you make a very focused effort to get beyond the mythic Janis. She's had such an afterlife of as pop icon, but it's like she's always presented as this kind of tragic hippie blues mama. Were you intent on presenting a more rounded portrait?

I wanted to create a small world that she existed in and take the audience on the journey I was going on. She was a very conflicted woman, very rich and deep with multiple layers. I wanted

to make the world relatable. When you have access to such personal effects, the letters – I needed to find a way to transition in and out of the letters without it feeling jarring. Obviously, working on a film this long, you try lots of different edits. When I finally got into the rhythm of it, it was easy to bounce back and forth between her most amazing, powerful performances and the quiet moments at home where she was trying to justify herself and connect with people.

What was it like sifting through and re-assembling all that material?

The archive selection took many years. I wanted to start with that. But what I kept finding was that people who were important to her were passing away and time was passing by and we didn't have solid contracts with the estate and we didn't have money to make the film so it was a balancing act. There was so much to organize and read. I had to let the archive performance story tell the story first, and fill in with the emotional cues from her closest friends and family. The letters evolved over time.

What sort of things did you discover about her?

It was surprising the level of anxiety she carried around about how people felt about her. It became obvious that she wanted to be perfect and have everyone love her all the time. She needed a very high level of validation and that was easy to connect back to her childhood. She had such a strong fear of failure. That came through very deeply for me in the discovery process. You always think of artists from the '60s as such free-spirited, groundbreaking artists. It seems like every time Janis met a man, he was going to be the one to marry her and validate her. Those were surprising, if you were to look at her from a distance. You wouldn't expect her to be so conventional relationship-wise. That was a sign of the times as her friends told me. Growing up in the '40s and '50s, the expectation was for her to be a keypunch operator, be a housewife or a schoolteacher, not to be a rock star in San Francisco. She had to prove that she was famous and that she was



Director
Amy Berg



successful. That was the way for her to get her parents to sign off on her path, which they never did unfortunately.

How has she been misunderstood? Were there aspects of Janis and her public image you wanted to fix?

Women who have overdosed when they are 27 are remembered differently than men. You constantly think of Janis Joplin, Amy Winehouse as these talented singers who died of a drug overdose rather than understanding their life and remembering their talents. I think it's different if you look at Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and even Kurt Cobain how we treat them in their legacy. I really wanted to make sure people understood what happened before that awful night in October of 1970.

On a certain level, a lot of these kinds of deaths were just bad luck. Heavy drug use was rampant and it could have happened to a lot more famous musicians at that time.

Janis didn't like psychedelics. All her bandmates were taking LSD and smoking pot. She was more drawn to meth and heroin. Obviously that's way more addicting and dangerous.

Watching the film, it appears Janis didn't want to continue using these drugs.

She had been finding ways to balance herself out, and [producer] Paul Rothchild, in her career, was the perfect producer/coach at that point. He was able to move her way from what she had been accustomed to and find her real voice. He softened her up. He allowed her sweet voice to just kind of carry.

The performance scenes are such a treat. It really comes kicking to life.

That stuff is vintage footage. There are costs attach to it. I wasn't as judicious as other people would have wanted me to be. I kind of did want it to be a concert film. When you see it in a theater, it does really play that way. It's got that momentum to it.


There's been a seeming boom in documentaries about various pop music icons and cult figures the past two or three years. What do you think accounts for the trend?

They're getting more attention in the last five years. I think it's just coincidence. It is very interesting that three of the people from the "27 Club" had documentaries in the past year. It takes the estates a certain period of time in order to be comfortable to share their materials. We're all hungry for really good material and we have so many more outlets for documentaries these days that I'm sure that's contributing in some way to the surge.

You've done some heavy-duty documentaries. Is there a different headset for something pop/historical as opposed to investigative?

It's a more immersive process, and less of a puzzle. It was more of an emotional journey. It was like a safety bubble that I created for myself to find the story. Distractions were really upsetting. I feel very passionate and protective of her and the story because it was so close to my heart.

Good call getting Chan Marshall to read the letters.

She is absolutely perfect. Her voice is a dead ringer. 



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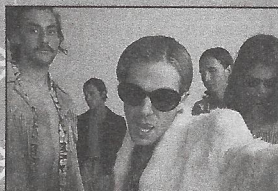
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