Toronto International Film Festival 2015: Part Three

I Saw the Light (Hank Williams) and *Janis: Little Girl Blue* (Janis Joplin)—Popular music and its discontents

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This is the third in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 10-20). The first part was posted September 26 and the second part October 1.

Country music performer Hank Williams (1923-1953) and rock and roll singer Janis Joplin (1943-1970) were both significant figures in the history of American popular culture. Williams died at 29 and Joplin at 27. Each is the subject of a new film. *I Saw the Light* (Marc Abraham) is a fictional account of Williams' life; *Janis: Little Girl Blue* (Amy Berg) is a documentary about Joplin.

The gifted British actor Tom Hiddleston plays Williams and also creditably sings his songs (musician Rodney Crowell worked with Hiddleston for a month). *I Saw the Light* follows Williams' life from his marriage to Audrey Sheppard (Elizabeth Olsen) at a gas station in Andalusia, Alabama in 1944 (the owner is also a justice of the peace) to his death, from alcohol and pill-induced heart failure, en route to a concert in Canton, Ohio on New Year's Day 1953.

Abraham's effort is a fairly standard film biography. It treats some of the ups and many downs in Williams' life. The singer drank heavily, between occasional periods of sobriety. He was often in pain because of spina bifida occulta, a condition in which the outer part of certain vertebrae is not completely closed. He and his wife frequently fought, over money, over her desire to sing, over his affairs, over her affairs. They eventually divorced, and shortly before his death, Williams married again.

Williams had his first big hit with "Move It on Over," about a man in trouble with his wife, in 1947. In fact, it is an early rock and roll song, one that unmistakably reflects the postwar atmosphere. After a successful stint on the Louisiana Hayride, Williams first performed at the Grand Ole Opry in June 1949, where his "Lovesick Blues" was a triumph. The glory did not last long.

He was eventually fired from the Opry for alcoholism in 1952 and his famed producer, Fred Rose (Bradley Whitford in the film), stopped working with him. His life went from bad to worse … It did not help matters that a quack, who had obtained his "Doctorate of Science" for $35 began prescribing amphetamines, Seconal, chloral hydrate and morphine for the ailing and addicted singer. *I Saw the Light* fleshes out these various episodes. Hiddleston, Olsen and Cherry Jones as the formidable Lillie Williams, Hank's mother, all do well. The film avoids painting any of the characters as yokels, but it also avoids saying much of anything about them. This movie is not an immense step forward from Gene Nelson's *Your Cheatin' Heart*, the 1964 film with George Hamilton as Williams and Susan Oliver as Audrey.

Williams was a remarkable singer and songwriter. His lyrics are clever and insightful about everyday life. His liveliest songs "swing" with confidence and swagger, finding a large audience in a population that had endured the Depression and the war and now, with jobs and with some money in their pockets, had no intention of returning to the darkest days of the 1930s—"Move It on Over," "Honky Tonkin'," "I'm a Long Gone Daddy," "Lovesick Blues," "Mind Your Own Business," "Why Don't You Love me," "Hey Good Lookin'," "Honky Tonk Blues," "Settin' the Woods on Fire" and more.

In one of the better scenes in *I Saw the Light*, Williams-Hiddleston is in New York—where he feels like a fish out of water—for the Perry Como television show in November 1951. He speaks frankly to a reporter from a big city newspaper. "Everyone has a little darkness," he says. Williams refers to the anger, misery, sorrow and shame that everyone feels. "I show it to them [the public]. … They think I can help."

In another comment, cited by Colin Escott in his biography of Williams, the real-life singer told an interviewer (perhaps the one fictionalized in the film?) in 1951, "Folk songs [which are what he termed his own music] express the dreams and prayers and hopes of the working people."

This element seems deliberately played down in *I Saw the Light*. Perhaps Abraham was frightened of making sweeping and too easy generalizations, and unsubstantiated generalizations should obviously be avoided. But Williams was born in immense poverty in rural southern Alabama and grew up during the Depression. His father was a terrible drunk and his mother was not an easy person. He drank, and ultimately took pills, all his brief life to alleviate physical and psychological pain. But his songs reflected something more than merely his own personal distress and striving. Their rhythms and words tapped into the sentiments of large numbers of people.

The film convincingly recreates the physical look of the late 1940s and early 1950s, but pays little attention to the larger forces at work that shaped and propelled Hank Williams and country music in general. One does not really obtain a sense in *I Saw the Light* of the quality and character of everyday life out of which his songs emerged.

Country music, including its very name, is full of contradictions that deserve to be explored. Like Williams' family, which moved from rural Butler County to Montgomery, Alabama, a city of 70,000, when the future singer was 13 or 14, the genre was created and developed for the most part by those who were, in fact, leaving the "country."

As historian Rachel Rubin notes: "In its most important early decades (the 1920s to 1940s), country music told the story of urbanization, and the genre's relationship to rural living was more a musical epitaph for a way of life increasingly being left behind as both black and white Southerners fled the rural South for the promise of good jobs in the city."

Neither is the question of Jim Crow segregation touched upon in the film. Abraham's may have had the healthy notion that *I Saw the Light* should not become prey to contemporary identity politics, but simply sidestepping complexities is not helpful either.

One of Williams' earliest influences was the African American street musician Rufus "Tee Tot" Payne, who apparently showed the eight-year-old how to improvise chords on the guitar. Williams had many African American fans. The final shot *I Saw the Light* is newsreel footage from the day of Williams' funeral in January 1953 in Montgomery, and one sees many black faces in the crowd milling about on the street.

Claudette Colvin was one of the pioneers of the civil rights movement in Alabama. She was arrested for opposing segregation on Montgomery's buses in March 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks was taken off a city bus by police, sparking the famous boycott. Speaking of her childhood, Colvin told her biographer Philip Hoose, "I listened to the *Grand Ole Opry*, too. The star of the show was Hank Williams, a famous country singer from Montgomery. When he died, his funeral drew the biggest crowd in the history of the city; Hank Williams' wife invited the black community to attend since so many of us liked his music, but Mom wouldn't let me go because the funeral was segregated."

These are the sorts of fascinating dramas and conflicts that a more serious work on Hank Williams' life and times might have raised. As it is, *I Saw the Light* is a pleasant film that does not go terribly deep.

Popular music has played, and continues to play, an immense role in American life. There are many reasons for this, including the extraordinary heterogeneity of experiences, traditions and nationalities that jostle against one another in America and seem worth calling attention to. But is it not possible as well that a population so politically disenfranchised and excluded as the American people must find some outlet, which social democratic, "Communist" or labor parties have provided to a limited extent in other countries, for its feelings and sufferings?

Janis Joplin

Amy Berg is making a name for herself as an interesting documentary filmmaker. Her *Deliver Us from Evil* (2006), about a Catholic priest who admitted to molesting and raping 25 children, and *West of Memphis* (2012), about the frame-up of a number of young men for the supposed "satanic" murder of three eight-year-old children, were both systematic and compassionate.

In *Janis: Little Girl Blue*, Berg turns to the life and career of singer Janis Joplin, who was immensely popular for the last several years of her life until her tragic demise from heroin and alcohol in October 1970.

Joplin grew up in Port Arthur, Texas, a sea port on the Gulf of Mexico and at the time the center of a large oil refinery network. Her father was a mechanical engineer in the oil industry. In high school, as *Little Girl Blue* details, Joplin felt persecuted and an outcast.

The civil rights movement and the social developments of the late 1950s and early 1960s were obviously critical to the course of her life. One of her first musical memories, Berg's film notes, was hearing folk singer Odetta's version of "Careless Love." Joplin tried folk singing in Austin, Texas, before first moving to San Francisco in 1963, where she sang but also developed a methamphetamine habit and became "skeletal."

After a brief period back home in Port Arthur, Joplin returned to San Francisco in 1966 and became the lead singer for Big Brother and the Holding Company, a "psychedelic rock" band. A major breakthrough took place at the Monterey Pop Festival, one of the first of the large, well-publicized music festivals, in June 1967, where she sang a memorable version of Big Mama Thornton's "Ball and Chain."

Berg's film follows the vicissitudes of Joplin's professional and personal life. She left Big Brother in 1968 and went out on her own as the leader of her own bands. She continued to use serious drugs. A friend says blithely, "We shot heroin for fun." She eventually took for Brazil to clean herself up, where she fell in love with an American tourist.

Berg treats Joplin's life with a great deal of sympathy. The singer, who exuded confidence and bravado on stage, was beset by anxiety and insecurity. She told a Montreal reporter in 1969, "Send me your review. I agonize over all of 'em. Man, I'm really neurotic. I really want people to love me."

Joplin's recordings are not generally as good as they could be and she tended, as filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker remarks, to "shout and scream." It will elicit cries of outrage from some, but, in my opinion, there is very little of the "San Francisco Sound" that stands the test of time: too much self-indulgence, too many drugs, too much self-delusion.

However, anyone who saw Janis Joplin in person, especially in a more intimate space, is not likely to forget it. This writer saw her in concert three times in 1968 and 1969, including on a bill with B.B. King only a few hours after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968. I have never from that time to this seen a performer as generous and as giving—and as vulnerable. One almost inevitably fell in love with her.

Her last boyfriend David Niehaus comments in Berg's film that Janis "could feel everybody else's pain." She could not be oblivious, Niehaus explains, to suffering, her singing represents an "entire honesty."

Laura and Michael Joplin, Janis' younger siblings, participated in the making of Berg's film and are interviewed in it. They were present at the public screenings in Toronto. Each makes a highly favorable impression. They spoke with considerable affection, four decades or more later, about their elder sister. Laura described Janis' emotional life as a "roller coaster" from early on. She made clear that her sister hated "racism" (Port Arthur had an active branch of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1950s) and felt strongly about "integration" and "equality." Footage of Janis's mother, after her death, reading one of her daughter's letters, is also very moving.

The final and most apt comment in *Little Girl Blue* comes from John Lennon, on a talk show following Joplin's death. Lennon observes that no one is asking the most important question, why people take drugs in the first place. He suggests that it comes from a "problem with society. People can't live in society without guarding themselves from it."

Gillian Armstrong's latest film

Australian film director Gillian Armstrong (*My Brilliant Career, High Tide, Oscar and Lucinda*) has made an intriguing and original documentary, *Women He's Undressed*, about the legendary Hollywood costume designer Orry-Kelly (1897-1964), born Orry George Kelly in Kiama, New South Wales.

Armstrong has actor Darren Gilshenan portray Orry-Kelly in various slightly camp reenactments of episodes from the designer's life. Sent to Sydney by his parents in 1917 to study banking, Orry-Kelly developed a love for the theater, before emigrating to the US in 1922. He shared an apartment with the future Cary Grant, then Archie Leach, in New York City, where they sold ties together.

Orry-Kelly moved to Hollywood in 1931 and eventually found work at Warner Brothers. In the end, he had 300 film credits, including as costume designer for such films as *Juarez, When Tomorrow Comes, The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex, The Sea Hawk, The Little Foxes, An American in Paris, Oklahoma!, Auntie Mame, Sweet Bird of Youth, Gypsy* and *Irma La Douce*. During certain periods, he worked on as many as 50 films a year.

The talking heads include Angela Lansbury, Jane Fonda and award-winning costume designer Ann Roth, all of whom speak about Orry-Kelly with great respect and affection.

The designer, who was gay in what he described as a "homophobic city" (Hollywood), never found personal happiness. He drank a great deal, and when drunk was apparently "foulmouthed" and "mean." Orry-Kelly won three Academy Awards for his design work (the most won by an Australian until costume designer Catherine Martin surpassed his total in 2014).

Trumbo, directed by Jay Roach, is a biographical film about the trials and tribulations of American screenwriter Dalton Trumbo (1905-1976), blacklisted and sent to jail in 1950 as one of the "Hollywood Ten," screenwriter and directors who refused to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Roach is best known to this point for directing the *Austin Powers* series of films with Mike Myers and the *Meet the Parents* series with Ben Stiller and Robert De Niro. He also directed the execrable *Borat*, with Sacha Baron Cohen. None of this is very auspicious or seems a serious preparation for taking on one of the most complex and fraught political periods in American history.

One's misgivings are largely confirmed. More can be said about the film when it eventually comes out to the movie theaters, but *Trumbo* represents the writer (played by Bryan Cranston), a Communist Party member from 1943 to 1948, as little more than a tepid liberal. Granted, the Stalinist party presented itself during this period as the most fervent supporter of Franklin Roosevelt and the war effort, but there was more to Trumbo and his adherence to the CP than that. His 1939 novel, *Johnny Got His Gun*, about a shell-shocked World War I veteran, was a quite ferocious attack on imperialist war and its horrors. In any case, *Trumbo* is a weak effort.

More should also be said in the future about Terence Davies' *Sunset Song*, based on the well-known 1932 Scottish novel by Lewis Grassic Gibbon. Davies (*The Long Day Closes, The House of Mirth, Of Time and the City*) is an immensely sensitive filmmaker, but his adaptation of the novel is oddly dissatisfying.

The story, set in the early 20th century, involves a farming family eking out an existence in northeast Scotland. The patriarch (Peter Mullan) is as hard and unsympathetic as a closed fist. His wife, worn out by painful births, eventually takes her own life and those of her two youngest children. Chris Guthrie (Agyness Deyn), the eldest daughter in the family, is deserted by her beloved brother, the victim of their father's brutality, who takes off for greener pastures in Canada.

After her father's death, Chris marries Ewan Tavendale, a young farmer, and the pair spend some happy time together. However, the shadow of World War I falls across this isolated region too. Under the pressure of public opinion and against his better judgment, Ewan enlists and is sent off to France, where he experiences the horrors of trench warfare. When he comes home on leave, he is a transformed human being. One tragedy follows the other. *Sunset Song* is a lovely film, but its focus and center are not at all clear. The first line of the film, spoken by Chris to a school-friend, is this: "Is your father a socialist?" And a discussion of equality and the French Revolution soon takes place. However, much of the film is devoted to the sadism of Mullan's character, which the actor, frankly, overdoes and which becomes a bit tedious.

World War I, a central fact of the story (and the period!), one would think, comes in rather late—almost as an afterthought. When a WSWS reporter asked Davies, who seemed somewhat demoralized by the state of the world, at a public screening whether his film was intended to be taken as an "anti-war" statement, the filmmaker looked bemused and replied, no, no, it was merely about "forgiveness" and such. Something is muddled.

To be continued