

Janis: Little Girl Blue—Amy Berg’s valuable documentary about singer Janis Joplin

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Janis: Little Girl Blue, the documentary about rock and roll singer Janis Joplin (1943-1970) is currently playing in New York City and Los Angeles. It will have a digital and television premiere on PBS’s American Masters early in 2016. We wrote about the film when it was shown at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.

Written and directed by Amy Berg

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 rock and roll 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 band. She continued to use serious drugs. A friend says blithely, “We shot heroin for fun.” She eventually took off for Brazil to clean herself up, where she fell in love with an American traveler.

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 at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2015. 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 daughter's death, reading a letter from one of Janis' admirers explaining how the singer had affected her life, is also very moving.

The final and perhaps 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."



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