

What Was She Like?

A trip to see Janis Joplin

Jim Cory

A few years back I'm at a party chatting with Paul, poet and fervid music fan, when the topic defaults to Memorable Concert Experiences.

"You *saw* Janis?" he asks.

"Uh, yeah."

"What was she like?"

I had to think about it. Any answer would be somewhat complicated by the fact of my having been, at the time, cruising "comfortably in the neighborhood of 70,000 feet off the ground," to quote "Everything you could ever want to know about flying the U-2 spy plane." You know, the one the Russians shot down in 1962, capturing the pilot, Gary Powers, and nearly precipitating a diplomatic rupture?

Seventy thousand feet is thirteen miles up, and at various points in the course of that day, August 5, 1970, the day Janis Joplin performed at the Ravinia Theater in Highland Park, IL, it felt like I was tuning in from the stratosphere.

Drugs can do that. A friend and I once climbed a tower some Explorer Scouts had built in the woods. Solidly constructed of cut branches, fastened with nails, the joints reinforced with twine, it rose about forty feet. We didn't ask ourselves why it was there. It just was, and since it was and since we were fifteen at the time, it seemed like a hashish picnic on the platform at the top was called for.

One problem. Once we were wasted we had no idea how to get down.

We sat there for a few hashish minutes, staring at the ground, which appeared at least as far away as Siberia must've looked to Gary Powers.

"We're fucked!" I said at last.

Kevin nodded, wide-eyed. He made to speak. A broken syllable, a grunt that wanted to be a word and changed its mind, came out.

Being in a problematic situation is one thing but having to manage someone seriously scared can make it really fraught. Add to this a substantial dose of cannabis paranoia. What if the fasteners separate and the tower falls apart? What if Kevin panics and jumps? What if, after sundown, searchlights begin combing the dark from police car windows? What if the wind accelerates and bends the tower far enough over so that it...

Each of these thoughts made the ground seem that much farther away and, as if cued to that last one, the wind intensified. It was early spring and a cold wind, strong enough so that branches were bending and waving.

Waiting is rarely the choice made when there're options, but ultimately we concluded that we could only get down by coming down, which happened a few hours later.

It's easy to get to an altered state, it's not so easy to manage one. You find yourself transformed into the plaything of whatever happens to happen. You climbed to the top, then forgot how to climb down. It was like smoking a chunk of dementia.

So the answer to the question—*What was she like?*—is not necessarily a straightforward one. At Janis's concert, altered states were the order of the day.

Five of us sit on the grass. What looks like a white twig, moist at the mouth end, an ember at the other, makes the rounds.

It's early afternoon on a weekday in July 1970, in Lake Ellyn Park, IL. Brian has the floor.

Brian's the youngest in our high school pothead intelligentsia band. He's also the most political, the most culturally attuned. He quotes Allen Ginsberg, Nietzsche, Joyce, and William Carlos Williams, usually without attribution. He despises buckskin, bangs, and bellbottoms, the hippie accouterment of the moment. He combs his black hair straight back from the hairline and wears shoes with about two-dozen eyelets for laces. The shoes somehow curl upward at the tips, like clogs, which works with the big, baggy trousers he refers to

as his “pimp pants.”

Wherever we go, people look.

Brian holds forth on “pigs,” pot deals, arson as a necessary and legitimate political tactic, and on the book he’s reading. The book is on the ground beside him: *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*. Today he’s saving the best for last.

“I’ve got acid,” he says, taking as big a pull as lungs permit and holding it.

His eyes get huge.

“And... “ releasing the bluish vapor into summer’s torpid air, “... Janis is coming.”

Stoned expressions become startled ones.

“What?”

“Janis?”

“Did Brian say ‘Janis’?”

“Yeah, Janis.”

“Far out, man,” says Far Out. He nods, grinning.

Far Out is the anomaly here. Rolling beard, shoulder-length hair, maybe eight years older than the rest of us. No one knows where he’s from or, for that matter, what his given name is, except Brian, who met him buying drugs in Wheaton, one town over, and Brian pretends not to know.

“Where?” Lev asks.

Brian passes Peggy the joint and inserts a plastic fork into a box packed with pork fried rice.

“Ravinia.”

“Far out,” says Far Out.

Located twenty-five miles north of the Loop, Ravinia Park, a thirty-six-acre wooded tract that includes a performance space, is just that for five people without a car. How to get there?

It must be done. This is *Janis*. Janis Joplin. In addition to the pleasures certain to accrue from her performance, just being there comes with considerable countercultural cachet.

Still, the challenges appear formidable. Besides transportation,

there's money. Peggy and Lev will be at Grinnell College in two weeks. They're not working. Far Out deals weed, but he's somehow always broke.

A seed pops.

"I've always wanted to see her," Peggy gasps, passing the joint to Lev.

In the distance, a commuter train rumbles past.

"It could be...interesting," Lev says, studying the object as if we were all anthropologists on a dig and he lucked on a pottery shard.

"When is that?" says Far Out.

"When is what?" everyone at the same time asks.

Far Out's expression is that of someone forced to switch languages in mid-conversation. It takes him thirty seconds to relocate the trail.

"When is she coming?" he says.

"First week, next month," Brian says. "The fifth." He clamps the roach between bobby pin tips.

"Wow," says Far Out. "That's *too* fucking far out."

Strategies are formulated, plans laid. Peggy lines up her father's car. I take a two-week job washing dishes in a pizza joint to help finance admission and the bottle of whiskey Brian insists we bring. With our pooled funds Lev buys the tickets, negotiating for cheap seats on Ravinia's lawn. Brian's contribution is the vaunted acid stash.

The evening starts at 8 o'clock. We'll meet at "the commune," a house in Wheaton Far Out shares with a half dozen other hippies.

Since Peggy's driving, we all agree she shouldn't trip, which is fine with her. She regards the counterculture scene with bemused detachment. So, in his way, does Brian. His oft-expressed distaste is rebellion for its own sake, a defiant nihilism. Lev? His first interest is philosophy, his second, politics, his third art and music. He's the resident Spinoza, more interested in the Isaac Deutscher biography of Trotsky he's reading than in Rock & Roll, though Janis's Bad Girl image and hippie celebrity definitely intrigue.

And Far Out?

A soul in druggy free fall.

Two weeks elapse. Invariably, complications arise. Janis is advertised in the papers. DJs are talking about her on the radio. But in the summer of 1970, things have a way of changing, suddenly and for the worse. Politicians and the press raise concerns and make threatening noises. By late July, the prospect of her appearance arouses controversy. She'll whip up a drug-fueled frenzy. The hippies will burn Ravinia down.

Not likely. Janis occasionally appears, for free, at concerts to raise money for the peace movement. Mother Bloor, she's not. She's a blues singer who is usually introducing the next song when she's not singing, though she sometimes delivers a quasi-political rap from the stage. Her concerts are all about inspiring the audience to get loose, party, and dance.

Then, a little more than two weeks before her gig, a free concert by Sly and the Family Stone, in downtown Chicago, becomes a melee. The Grant Park audience swarms the stage and can't be persuaded to leave. Sly refuses to go on. Furious, the crowd streams onto Michigan Avenue. Rocks and bottles fly. More than a hundred people are treated for injuries, at least 150 arrested. "Several thousand Negro and white youths, hurling rocks, battled the police for more than six hours tonight," reports *The New York Times*. "They roamed into the Loop business district and smashed windows."

A rumor makes the rounds that Janis will cancel her Ravinia gig. Another has it that Ravinia will cancel Janis. Highland Park's police chief, Michael Bonamarte, tells the *Chicago Tribune* he is "waiting for a riot."

"They'll be patting people down on the way in," Lev says.

We're back in Lake Ellyn Park, passing a joint, pooling cash for a run to Luck Chow House.

"The motherfuckers wouldn't dare," Brian says.

The rest of us aren't so sure. A month earlier, at a Traffic concert at the Aragon Ballroom in Uptown, word spread that the

cops were waiting outside to frisk all upon exit. “Pigs are busting people,” the guy next to me shouted, handing me a half empty bottle of red wine. I tilted it back—*glug, glug*—passed it to the stranger on my right and fished in my back pocket for the dime bag of weed I’d brought.

*Dear Mr. Fantasy, play us a tune
Something to make us all happy*

When the last sounds faded and the lights came up, baggies and prescription bottles littered the floor.

“Are you feeling it?”

Lev asks this question as if he were talking to one person instead of a roomful. He’s not putting us on. If anything, he’s being earnest, in the manner of scientific inquiry.

There’s a pause—that split second before a bomb goes off—and the room breaks up.

I guess we are. Feeling it.

Imagine having a car battery wired to your hippocampus for eight hours. There are other dimensions to LSD but the first is a kind of internal glow, as if someone had switched on some unknown energy source, purring away without a governor switch.

You can be tripping and appear mentally intact, even while on the cusp of full-on hysteria. It’s a state of mind some learn to love.

I had a friend who would drop acid in the morning and wander around Philadelphia looking at things all day.

“What did you see?” I’d ask.

“Swan champagne,” he’d say, grinning maniacally.

“Really?”

Had some chic new beverage hit the market? Had ornithologists discovered a new species of swan somewhere and broken out the bubbly?

A few months later it occurred to me he was describing the fountain in Logan Circle, where patinaed cygnets joyously spout.

Two points: 1) on acid the mind defaults to absurdity at the first invitation, and, 2) acidified brains move in sync like murmuring starlings.

Imagine reading aloud to a room full of people, as if sacred text, the instruction booklet for assembling a stereo.

Someone claps.

Now the whole room's laughing and applauding.

Triggers come out of nowhere. Why, I think, as we sit in Far Out's living room, are Lev's socks blue? Shouldn't they be...yellow? Or red? Why not yellow *and* red? What is the point of socks at all?

"Lev," I say. "Why are there socks?"

Lev smiles one of those rare smiles that could genuinely be called 'beatific.' It's as if he knows the reason but because it's rooted in some incredibly detailed historical explanation having to do with the invention of sandals, then shoes, then boots, with a detour, maybe, for mukluks, and for the very reason that it's just too complicated and none other, he will do me the favor of declining to respond.

It's two in the afternoon. The acid kicked in half an hour ago. I've tripped a dozen times but never in daytime and never quite like this.

How high are we?

Think Gary Powers.

Furniture breathes. Voices cast shadows and the shadows dissolve at a touch.

On the other side of the room, Brian scowls, reading book titles.

"What are you looking at?" Peggy asks.

"*One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*," Brian, glancing up, replies. HAHAHAHAHAHA

"Far out," says Far Out, when, a quarter hour later, it all stops.

We're spread out on two or three cat-clawed sofas and chairs, staring at the ceiling or gazing outside. An old rag rug lies in the center of the floor. Is it purple or gray? Are they the same? Suddenly, we're all leaning forward at once, keen to catch the sounds everyone's just noticing, which is Joplin's *Kozmic Blues* spinning on the turntable:

*Time keeps movin' on
Friends they turn away
I keep movin' on
But I never found out why*

Why? I think. What an odd word. Why is the room shaped like a rectangle when a triangle would work just as well? Maybe better. Fewer corners. Why is...

THUNK.

A strange noise.

Where?

Heads turn right to left.

What made that sound?

Brian vaults from a sofa. The screen door bangs shut. He returns, strips the green rubber band away and drops the *Chicago Tribune's* afternoon edition, open, onto the rug.

RFK Jr. BUSTED FOR POT

"Far out."

Once triggered, the laughter has no end point. It leaps body-to-body, some crazy contagion for which there is no vaccine, its symptoms this blubbling, rib-clutching, head-shaking seizure, complete with back-and-forth, up-and-down rocking motions. It's a laughter that paralyzes all functions so that you can't do anything but huff, pant, bawl and finally cry. Any stranger entering the room would've immediately phoned for a priest. Only Peggy holds back, a DaVinci-esque smile while the rest of us gasp and shriek from halfway inside some other dimension. Was she regretting her decision not to trip, or congratulating herself for avoiding this Kodachrome squalor?

Brian looks down at the turntable and the motionless record. Where did this silence come from?

"Who's hungry?" he says.

The Dairy Queen's Lev's idea. We push and tumble past the door, yipping like spring coyotes.

Lev wants a banana split. No one asks why, fearing an extended dissertation on fruit farming in Honduras or a discourse on the evolution of human taste buds.

The glitzy franchise is take-out, mostly, with four black tables set against glass walls. Two cash registers are mounted on the counter and a few feet behind it a stainless steel thing like a Strong Box as big as a refrigerator, complete with some weird gearshift, flanked by stacks of ice cream cones. Over the counter floats a menu.

A kid no older than us, white smock, leans forward on the counter. We stand, staring. I hear him clear his throat.

Now someone with a salt-and-pepper brush cut, pencil wedged behind the ear, steps out from around back. Same mad scientist smock, which must be the reigning drag here, except that his has *General Manager* embroidered in red above the pocket.

His eyes take us in. It's the old up-and-down, the Fuck You look-over that starts at the feet and inches upwards, pausing at a missed belt loop, a grease stain, last week's unhealed zit.

In old age you view youth as just another opportunity lost along a long trail fairly littered with them. You might even sympathize with its follies. Middle age is another matter. What does *General Manager* see in a pack of longhairs, loud and crazed, pupils dark and blazing?

The eyes move up and over Brian first, the most obvious spectacle, then Lev, with his *Out Now!* and *Stop The War* buttons, craggy Semitic nose, red-blond goatee. They widen at the sight of Far Out, a werewolf in search of adulthood, and finally alight on me. When you're a teenager in the closet, all scrutiny comes with its own dose of fear. If your friends carefully steer all conversation away from the subject of homosexuality, that says they know.

Only Peggy, the calmest person in the room, is spared.

"*What do you want?*" General Manager hisses.

We look at each other. It's not like we're touring the Vatican. It's a fucking *Dairy Queen*, for Christ's sakes. We're trying to read the overhead menu board. Lev giggles.

"I'll have a Dilly Bar," Peggy says to the kid at the counter.

She's getting the ducklings in line, trying to guide us back to the safety of the pond.

"That it?"

She nods. And just when things seem to have settled down, Brian turns to the group and asks, in his most mock-innocent: "Who's Mr. Misty?"

Everyone—the kid, General Manager, us—looks at Brian as if he'd just materialized out of thin air into our midst. His eyes gleam. The energy rolls off him in waves. He's all lit up like a casino.

"Is Mr. Misty the owner?" Lev asks, picking up the thread, but it's not a put-on, he's just that blitzed and seriously trying to get his mind around it, the source of this name.

Peggy shakes her head.

"Brian, what flavor do you want?" she asks, firmly.

"Lime."

"Far out."

Far Out also wants a Dilly Bar.

"I'll have a banana split," Lev announces, remembering why we're there.

The minion peels a banana, slices it in long halves, sets the halves on opposite sides of a black plastic dish and—*splut! splut! splut!*—releases from that big churning Strong Box three twisty dollops of soft serve on each of which he ladles separate syrupy toppings. General Manager, arms crossed, watches. The pineapple chunks look like a fistful of melting yellow dice. The chocolate I can taste just by looking at it.

Now that tongue-twisting Mister Misty mixer slams into action. It sounds like a chipper shredder eating a skyscraper, grinding ice, mixing it with sugar and dye, whipping it into a frosty green blend in a tall paper cup. Brian stares into his, as if waiting for the face inside to say something.

The parfait I've ordered is a curious thing, like valentines slathered in frozen cream tucked in a triangular glass.

We carry it all to a table.

Lev spears a strawberry, peers, pops it in his mouth.
“Far out,” says Far Out
Far Out lifts his Dilly Bar like a scepter for us to admire.
I feel a gut-buster start up inside. It’s working its way forward,
one ticklish inch at a time.
Out of nowhere, General Manager looms tableside.
“*What the fuck’s going on here?*” he says.
Silence for thirty seconds or so until Peggy says:
“We’re on our way to a concert.”
It’s not the answer he’s expecting because he’s not expecting
any answer.
That trick again.
“It’s Janis Joplin,” Lev says, as if he’s introducing her onstage.
A titter. A cackle. Now it’s impossible to stop. We’re roaring.
The table shakes.
“GET OUT OR I’M CALLING THE COPS!!”
General Manager turns. He disappears behind the counter.
Ten minutes later, from a broken sofa on Far Out’s front porch,
we watch a cop car speed toward downtown Wheaton, lights flashing.

Of course it’d be far easier to describe what Janis was like
at Ravinia if we’d been in the box seats, near the stage, me with
notebook in hand, listening with unimpeded concentration. On the
contrary, we were, as they say, ripped to the tits—all except Peggy—
and comorting on some blankets she’d had the good sense to bring.
Maybe 200 feet from the stage, we wait: Peggy vigilant, Lev curious,
Far Out buzzing like a transformer, Brian and I banging back Jim
Beam. Concentration was compromised that evening, so if it’s analogy
you’re after, an image in the form of quick and painless comparison,
she was like a fire seen burning at some great distance.

Whiskey and acid might sound like a recipe for epic social
disaster, but combining them, I discovered, contains a certain logic.
The booze has little or no visible effect—no staggering, stumbling,
slurring—except to keep the acid from reaching the flat-out cuckoo

stage. It's like pouring water on moving lava. Meanwhile LSD's inherent caution, that sense of setting foot on a strange planet for the first time, puts a brake on the jackass behavior typically associated with whiskey. It works.

Good enough, since Ravinia, once we step past the gates, is alive with blue. Four or five cops gathered anywhere you look. Meanwhile somewhere around 20,000 fans have assembled and, assuming safety in numbers, a few light up joints while the cops look the other way.

A country rock band from Indiana, called Mason Proffitt, in buckskin, fringe and round Mountie hats, opens and is off soon enough. Figures appear, yank cords, lift equipment. It's Janis's crew, setting up for her band, Full Tilt Boogie. A frenzy takes hold. The congregation awaits its priestess.

The night we went to see Janis at Ravinia, my—to date—half-century of active concert-going was in its infant stages. I discovered music the way I discovered sex: something that starts out as one of life's fringe benefits and goes on to become almost a defining purpose.

For those who love it, music becomes a kind of timeline for life. The great performances we were lucky enough to be at, or the albums we played several times a day every day for six months, the single we absolutely loathed on the radio that came to be a favorite song, these pin experience to a time and place, creating small monuments within memory. The end of 1968, for instance, was when the Beatles' *White Album* came out. Someone bought a copy—there was a line at the store, and it sold out in minutes—brought it back to some den in which ten teenagers waited, unwrapped it and gingerly set the first disk on the turntable. It was like receiving a telegram from the divine.

That was an early moment. Another is from 1973, the year Seiji Ozawa conducted the New Japan Philharmonic in Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique* in a tour that included Penn State, where I heard the ensemble with no small enthusiasm. Later that same night, quite by chance, I encountered the Maestro in a State College bistro seated alone with a glass of wine. I complimented him on the concert. He seemed surprised to be recognized and invited me to join him. We

ended up talking for an hour and a half about Berlioz and French music.

Ravinia that night was another lucky accident. Who knew she had two months to live? I owned her three albums and played *Cheap Thrills* till my mother got annoyed enough to question my sanity. (“Turn that goddamn thing down! Are you crazy?”) So on the night I went to hear Janis, the only basis I had for evaluating what she did or how well she was doing it were those records. I could only compare Janis to Janis. And Janis in concert neither expected nor wanted her audience to sit in deepest concentration. She wanted the crowd on its feet, dancing. That was clear from the moment she arrived.

There are various ways for a star to make an appearance. Sun Ra’s band would take the stage, launch into a number with multiple percussion instruments and all sorts of overlaid horns, while the keyboard bench stood empty. Sooner or later you’d think: where’s Ra? And right about then he’d appear in the wings, discreetly make his way through and around people, instruments, and amplifiers to the piano, so that the effect of his first chords, struck in a way that seemed tentative, as if the thought behind them was still being worked out even as the sound was being made, was electric.

Janis is the opposite. Her entrance is unsubtle, unstoppable and unforgettable. She takes the stage whooping, hollering, and waving her microphone, which looked like a light sword, before there was such a thing. Feathers appear and disappear in the Kliegs, an effect lysergic acid renders numinous. No matter how far out you’d traveled, there’s no ignoring this arrival, which affirms that her presence is the entire point of the evening.

Full Tilt Boogie kicks up. Janis grabs the mike stand and rocks back and forth. She stomps. She stamps. Her beads swing. Her passion and fury put me in mind of someone indignantly resisting arrest.

Given that I’d subjected my brain to relentless levels of uninvited stimuli over the previous, uh, eight or so hours, and that yet more stimulation would be forthcoming as the night wore on, it’s probably no surprise that Janis, onstage, is recollected in mostly general terms

with specifics coming in and out of focus as the trip wears down.

Meanwhile the lousy sound system is making things difficult.

“Can you hear me out there?” Janis yells.

“NO!”

The sound blares, wobbles, fades and blares again but it isn’t anything anyone’s going to riot about.

That we got there and that the evening even happened at all seems a kind of victory, as any undertaking we’d never think twice about seems triumphant under the influence of substances. She’s here, we’re here, and—as the sun goes down—there appear, briefly and everywhere amidst clouds of marijuana smoke, fireflies timidly signaling about a foot off the ground to potential mates, Nature’s assertion of its place in all this human vanity.

The thought of what this might look like in retrospect isn’t even there. Who at sixteen thinks of posterity? What does that word even mean then? You can’t get your mind around the idea in any real way because if you did, that would indicate you understood what it’s like not to exist anymore, to be dead, or at least old, which for many under twenty amounts to the same thing. It’s way too much for the average teenage imagination to engage.

What was she like? Well, if I’d been expecting a reprise of *Cheap Thrills*, ostensibly a live album that was studio-recorded except for one track, with the live effects (applause, catcalls, etc.) dubbed in later, it was not that. At another point in time, when I became a fan of symphonic music, I realized that when you go to hear an orchestra, the point of the performance is that it should resemble all others. Standardization is the aim. With Janis, on the other hand, this instigator of Dionysian revels, everything is adjustable and anything could happen.

Her set mixes Janis standards with songs we’ve never heard, since they’re on an album—*Pearl*—scheduled for release in two months. In fact, once she and her band get started, it’s clear that Full Tilt Boogie’s arrangements of Joplin hits don’t sound like Big Brother’s except (“Piece of My Heart”) when they need to. The arrangements are more polished, more rhythm-driven than anything

she recorded in her acid rock days. They work with what she does, which is to stand behind a microphone and beg, shriek, wail, croon and plead in a vocal tone that registers as both playful and hard at the same time—a feat—and is dominated and defined by its gritty East Texas twang.

We're lying there listening and here comes that seventeen-note figure on electric guitar, which anyone alive and over the age of twelve in 1968 would recognize immediately (#12 on the pop chart) as the opening of Jerry Ragovoy and Bert Berns' "Piece of My Heart," a song since recorded by everybody from Dusty Springfield to Bryan Ferry and Melissa Etheridge:

"Didn't I make you feel
That you were the only man, yeah"

We're on our feet. Even Brian, the perennial non-participant in group displays of countercultural solidarity, even Brian stands, face transfixed, sweeping his black hair back with the hand that isn't holding the Beam bottle.

Janis singing "Piece of My Heart," then and now, makes me think of the last stages of an impassioned argument between lovers, an argument that finally comes down to whether or not the love should exist at all. And if what she sings moves us it's because it reminds us that love never was or ever will be easy. She puts her own insistent spin on the song's blatant masochism, somehow transforming obeisance into defiance.

So we're grooving high, temperature right about 70, zero precip. We've been pulled wholly and unthinkingly into the spell. Whatever you may have heard about the limits of her talent or of that talent having nowhere near enough time to mature, her act was as much presence as anything else, a force in whatever space she happened to occupy.

At some point—was it an encore?—Janis is talking about someone named "Bobby McGee."

Lev wants to know who this is.

“She says it’s a new song,” Peggy says. “On her next album.”

This song seems different from the rest of the set. It’s not a plea like “Piece of My Heart,” or a romp like “Move On,” but a reminiscence. It’s also a showstopper. Or am I only remembering that because of the mega-hit it became? No one’s dancing. Everyone’s listening.

A month or so after Ravinia, I got a job at a supermarket. When there were lines at checkout, I bagged. When there weren’t, I collected carts.

The parking area sloped just enough that every few minutes one of those wire cages on wheels would suddenly go rolling toward the bottom of the lot, picking up speed as it went and—WHAM!—slam into someone’s Cadillac. The carts always made for the expensive cars, never the clunkers, so that the owners would storm back into the store yelling and threatening suit.

I’m out there one Sunday. It’s about 3:30 in the afternoon and cool enough for a jacket. I chased a cart and snagged it. I jammed another cart inside it and grabbed a third. Six was as many as I could push back up the hill and into the store. On the baby seat of the last one someone had left an afternoon tabloid. Her picture filled the cover of the paper.

That winter, “Me and Bobby McGee” became a Number One hit. Her first. On the radio, Janis’s reading of Kris Kristofferson’s tale of two drifters and their lost love felt like a valedictory:

*Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waitin’ for a train
And I’s feelin’ near as faded as my jeans*

Artists, especially entertainers, rarely go out on a note of triumph. Often they falter, fail, or die some grisly public death that leaves the Philistines tsk-tsking. Why would people expend so much time, energy and anguish to risk ending up like that?

One reason, I think, is that artists, of every kind, are out to show us, in the beauty they create, the beautiful thing they know

themselves to be, or contain. When they succeed, the attention that results sometimes feeds a maniacal need for more. Artists want to be loved not just by one person, or a loyal handful, but by everybody. What they make is the product of discipline's ability to bring the power of imagination momentarily under control. Still, we're drawn to this glamorous sorcery. We become a necessary part of it, the audience part, precisely because it allows us to imagine the chaos of our own inner worlds somehow tamed. We indulge in the fantasy that we could paint as well as Degas, write stories as brilliant as Chekhov's or sing about the love we want and need but aren't getting with the same convincing intonation as Janis Joplin. The power to do that, however, comes with a certain risk.

In March of 1991 I went to hear trumpet player Red Rodney—AKA Robert Chudnik—at the Jazz Showcase in Chicago. Red Rodney's appearance at that esteemed venue followed by maybe a year the release of a bio-pic on Charlie Parker called *Bird*. The film features a Red Rodney character, played by Michael Zelniker.

Red Rodney had been famous enough in his time. He toured with one of Parker's quintets, the only white musician in the ensemble, where he went by the name Albino Red and where this kid from Philly—his first trumpet a Bar Mitzvah gift—got seriously strung out on junk. Decades later he landed in a pit band in Vegas, suffering the kind of medical problems which in America quickly translate to bankruptcy. At one point in the '60s, he was jailed for passing bad checks.

After seeing *Bird*, I assumed Red Rodney was Dead Rodney. Then I noticed that he was on the bill at the Jazz Showcase. I went imagining a shell of a man blowing hackneyed solos while a polite crowd downs drinks.

Nothing immediately displaced these expectations. At the mike stands a guy who could be the grandfather of anyone else onstage, except that he's white. He's also short and wide, and his head sports the reddest thatch of hair this side of Lucille Ball. In blazer and slacks, he looks like a Miami Beach retiree.

Red Rodney lifted his flugelhorn and blew a single, dirge-like

note, courtesy of Cole Porter, about 12 seconds long into the microphone:

*Every time we say goodbye,
I die a little.*

You may've heard dozens of versions of that song. His was one you would not forget. By the second set, the place is standing room only.

Yet, even with the ability to turn in a performance at that level, who, a few decades later, remembers Red Rodney, except for a handful of jazz aficionados?

So why go through all that?

Red Rodney, it seems to me, had attained the satisfaction of knowing that he could do something no one else could: play that well, in that way, before people who knew how good it was.

I am a fan and fandom is a whole made of parts, the parts being aesthetic enjoyment, intellectual curiosity, peer pressure, where you're at in your life, and the obsessive collector's need to have it all, own it all, be it all, inhabit it all. Oh, and did I forget bragging rights?

It was bragging rights, as much as anything, that got me to Janis's concert. Not only to have the experience but to say I'd had the experience. At the time, of course, I couldn't imagine I'd be talking about it 50 years later. Who could know her brief career would engrave a permanent place in cultural memory? An overnight sensation in the arts is often forgotten in just about the same amount of time. Al Jolson, for instance, was once known as The World's Greatest Entertainer—an actual title bestowed on this Russian-born tap dancer in blackface—but, unless you're a film historian, would you spend more than ten minutes watching his movies?

We live in an age when audio and video reproductions are readily created and transmitted, so that if you really want to know "what she was like" you can watch the famous clip from the late D.A. Pennebaker's *Monterey Pop*. The June 1967 performance recorded there so dazzled the San Francisco rock aristocracy that the image

of Mama Cass's stunned mug has become at least as iconic as what she's watching, namely Janis's performance of "Ball and Chain."

A half-dozen videos of Janis on stage may convince you that in the three or so years she held our attention, she essentially reprised Monterey Pop again and again. But watching or listening to documents that record an experience is not the same thing as having the experience, even if, at the time you had it, you couldn't imagine you'd remember it at all a month or a half century later.

Janis Joplin became that permanent place in cultural memory called Janis for a few reasons. One is that she happened to have, at the time of her accidental death, an album almost ready for release, and her death—mortality is the ultimate marketing bonanza—propelled it to huge sales. *Pearl* sold four million copies, compared with *Cheap Thrills*, which at 1 million copies was among the best-selling albums of 1968.

So there was a body of work. And there was, in addition, an image, a style, something emblematic—the bellbottoms, beads and boas—which more or less perfectly accorded with, and encoded for historical and media purposes, the brief Bohemian heyday in which her star was ascendant.

Death secured the legend, and the legend, naturally, spawned imitators, some subtle, some fervent. If you want to experience something approximating Janis at the microphone, you could take in an act called Mary Bridget Davis and the Joplinaires, who reprise her biggest hits on stage. Davis moves and inflects in the Joplin manner to a degree that feels creepy in the same way that watching Janis's final interview and TV performance on Dick Cavett's show feels creepy. It's impossible not to know the outcome.

In America, anything saleable sooner or later will be. One day long hair is a statement of social defiance, the next it's a Broadway musical and hit album.

And so, right around the time Janis checked out, rock and roll rolled into stadium-sized venues with louder and flashier performances for which audiences were charged twice or three times as much.

You paid, for instance, five bucks to get into the Aragon Ballroom on the north side of Chicago to hear three hours of music, including headliners such as Traffic or Jethro Tull. A year after Janis died, it costs twenty bucks to hear the same show in Philadelphia's Spectrum, capacity 20,000 (nicknamed by concert goers, The Rectum).

When I went to hear the great ladies of jazz, they were in the twilight of their careers. That brought urgency to the occasion. When I went to hear Sarah Vaughan at Philadelphia's Academy of Music, and most especially Ella Fitzgerald, at Radio City, in New York, there was the unspoken understanding that there might not (Sarah Vaughan) or definitely would not be (Ella) another opportunity to hear them again. In each case, I remember little about what happened before or after the performance, only the performance.

Sarah Vaughn, for instance, whose menacing energy sometimes approximates Krakatoa ready to blow, sipped daintily from a water glass on a stool between mopping away copious quantities of sweat with tissues from a Kleenex box. When she opened her mouth, every song became like the great aria you're waiting to hear in the middle of, say, a Verdi or a Donizetti opera, hoping that whoever has the role will not only animate it in the way you already know it can be, but show you something you haven't seen, felt or heard before.

No one in Radio City Music Hall knew quite what to expect when, in her final performance there, May 2, 1992, Ella Fitzgerald, having lost a leg to diabetes, appeared onstage, age 80, in a wheelchair. As things moved along, the evening's unspoken question was just how long the show could last, given these disabilities. She worked her way through two full sets and sounded pretty much "like" she sounds on *Ella in Berlin*.

Those great singers were old then, the end of life's timeline as visible to them and to us as the last stop on a subway map. They'd worked long enough and hard enough that the artist was inseparable from the person and, as a consequence, they could deliver nothing less than a satisfactory performance.

Janis at 27 had no map and a talent she was still sorting out, still looking for ways to manage. She'd climbed to that high place

with no idea that it might be hard getting back down.

What was she like? She was like the season's first snow, or a great lay, or seeing a bird you've never seen except in field guides, one you were sure you'd never see, appear on a branch ten feet away. There was something evanescent about her, something fleeting, that was discernable even then. Otherwise seeing her blown-up tabloid photo with the headline **JANIS JOPLIN DEAD** would've felt like a shock. It didn't.

Three years, even three years of stardom, is not a lot of time. She blew through it not so much as if she believed there'd always be more, but as if nothing but the moment mattered. That element of the Joplin persona was something she flaunted, her recklessness part of the attraction. But it wouldn't have mattered without the other part, which is harder to pin down. Pathos and yearning, all the desperation of the abandoned, were in her voice and on her face.

People love the singer they believe sings for them, about them, from knowledge of their pain, which reduces, finally, to an absence of love. You have to know that absence to sing about it with authority, to sing about it in a way that's not just believable but convincing. It's something Janis Joplin was able to pull off literally to the end, that is, to the last track on her last album, *Pearl*, in a song that, in the face of life's brevity, urges us to "gamble on a little sorrow," which states the case as simply and directly as it's possible to do and may as well have appeared on her tombstone: "Get It While You Can."