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Summary Article: **Janis Joplin**

from *The Faber Companion to 20th Century Popular Music*

The finest white blues and soul singer of her generation, Janis Joplin was a central figure of San Francisco rock in the late sixties.

Her first musical inspiration came from Leadbelly and Bessie Smith albums and in 1961 she left Port Arthur to study at the University of Texas in Austin. There she played in a bluegrass group at Threadgill's Club and, dropping out of college, spent the next few years on the folk scenes of Austin and San Francisco. In 1966 she settled in the latter and joined a blues band, Big Brother and the Holding Company. With bassist Peter Albin, guitarists Sam Andrews and James Gurley and drummer David Getz, Joplin recorded a poorly produced but nonetheless exciting eponymous album for Bob Shad's Chicago label Mainstream.

Their performance at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, with Joplin's raw, almost uncontrolled interpretation of Big Mama Thornton's '*Ball and Chain*' made them instant stars. With Albert Grossman as their manager, the group was signed by Columbia's Clive Davis, who was in the Monterey audience. The following year both *Cheap Thrills* and Joplin's reading of Erma Franklin's 1967 Shout recording '*Piece of My Heart*' were big hits. Produced by John Simon, the album, which included George Gershwin's '*Summertime*', was criticized for the sometimes ragged character of the instrumental backing.

Shortly after the album's release, Joplin determined to launch a solo career, while Big Brother made two further Columbia albums, *Bee a Brother* (1970) and *How Hard It Is* (1971). With Sam Andrews and other San Francisco musicians, Joplin formed a soul-styled backing group which performed on the uneven but commercially successful *I Got Dem Old Kozmic Blues Again, Mama!*

In 1970 she formed the Full Tilt Boogie Band with John Till (guitar) and Brad Campbell (bass), from the *Kozmic Blues* session group, plus Clark Pierson (drums) and former Ronnie Hawkins pianist Richard Bell. Her finest backing group, it provided sympathetic accompaniment for the disciplined yet passionate vocals on *Pearl* (1971), produced by Paul Rothchild. Appearing shortly after Joplin's sudden death, both the album and her intense version of Kris Kristofferson's '*Me and Bobby McGee*' were No. 1 hits. *Pearl*'s other highlights were the chuckling, *a cappella* '*Mercedes Benz*' and a majestic reading of Dan Penn's and Spooner Oldham's '*A Woman Left Lonely*'. By far Joplin's most accomplished recording, the album's impact made her death from a drugs overdose more poignant, despite the fact that it seemed to fit a romantic notion of the artist living life to excess.

In 1972 Columbia released *Janis Joplin in Concert*, which contained recordings from a number of live performances, while the 1974 documentary film *Janis* contained rare footage of her Austin folk-club days. In 1993 Sony released a comprehensive career retrospective, also titled *Janis*. The mythologizing of Joplin's career was complete in 1979 when Bette Midler starred in *The Rose*, a fictional film loosely based on Joplin's life and death. In 1973 Myra Friedman, a former Grossman staff member, published *Buried Alive*, the best of several biographies of Joplin. *Live at Winterland '68* (1998) was an archive set, while *The Ultimate Collection* (1998) was the definitive retrospective.

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