

Janis Joplin and the Sexual Revolution



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Introduction

This free course, *Janis Joplin and the Sexual Revolution*, will introduce you to issues around the sexual revolution and how this, alongside other contemporary social revolutions of the 1960s, impacted upon American female rock musician Janis Joplin (1943-1970). You will investigate the extent to which the contemporary sexual revolution brought about greater gender equality for female popular musicians such as Janis Joplin, and consider whether it might be more accurate to view this as a superficial revolution which masked the reality of continued sexual conservatism. You do not need to play an instrument, to sing, to read music or have any prior musical knowledge to be able to complete this course.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A113 Revolutions](#). It is one of four OpenLearn courses exploring the notion of the Sixties as a 'revolutionary' period. [Learn more about these OpenLearn courses here](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the notion of the academic study of popular music (sometimes referred to as **Popular Music Studies**)
- consider the extent to which the sexual revolution brought about greater equality of opportunities for female popular musicians, such as Janis Joplin
- situate the position of female American popular musicians, such as Janis Joplin, during the 1960s within the wider context of other social 'revolutions' taking place at the same time in the United States, including the Civil Rights Movement, the sexual revolution, and development of the counterculture
- develop your skills in close listening to music.

1 The academic study of popular music

The academic study of popular music (**Popular Music Studies**) is a relatively recent development within music. Up until a few decades ago (roughly the 1980s), the academic study of music (at school, university or conservatoire) focused upon Western classical music. This has broadened out considerably since the 1990s, and popular music is now a staple part of the academic study of music. Popular Music Studies often pays considerable attention to the social, cultural, and political contexts within which popular music is produced and consumed, rather than necessarily focusing upon the musical notes themselves. This course follows this approach. Its central question is not whether the musical grammar of 1960s American popular music was in itself revolutionary, but rather the impact of a period of apparent social revolution on the ways in which popular music was produced and consumed.

2 The position of women in popular music

Many different genres of popular music flourished in the US during the 1960s. Rock developed rapidly, **girl groups** had a huge impact (particularly during the first half of the decade), **Motown** and soul were massively popular, folk music had a large following, and jazz continued to develop throughout the decade. The **British Invasion** – which is generally considered to have begun with The Beatles' first US tour in 1964 – also had a huge impact on American popular music. Many of these popular music genres were intimately associated with the developing **counterculture**. The marginalised roles which had been ascribed to women within popular music in the 1950s continued throughout the 1960s, however. As musicologist Sheila Whiteley has noted, 'both the counterculture and progressive rock were largely dominated by men who were reactionary in their attitude towards women' (Whiteley, 2000, p. 51). This is well exemplified through Janis Joplin's career.

Popular music became one of the most important forms of cultural expression in 1960s America. Beginning in the 1950s, post-war financial affluence created a generation of teenagers with disposable income to spend on records. Improvements in recording technology around the same time also made these easier and cheaper to produce. Developments in electronic instruments and mass production, meanwhile, made electric guitars and amplifiers attainable for teenagers, and electric guitar bands quickly became fashionable. Rock 'n' roll (or rock as it is often shortened to) was embraced with enthusiasm by American youth, and musicians such as Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, Bill Haley and the Comets, and Chuck Berry became household names.

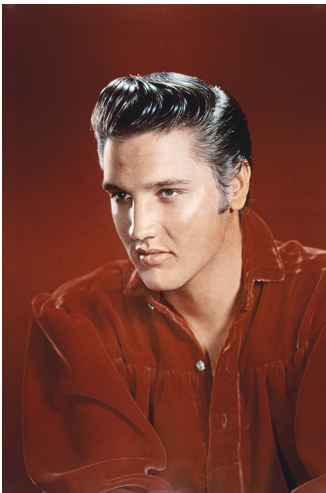


Figure 1 Elvis Presley, c.1956

Right from the beginning, however, rock 'n' roll was very much male-dominated. As a genre, rock spoke directly to youth culture and became strongly associated with teenage rebellion. The profusion of male musicians within the genre has prompted Julie C. Dunbar to assert that: 'Rock was more than music; it was a form of rebellion that spoke of sexuality from a male perspective' (Dunbar, 2011, p. 177). She has further commented that the amplified, electric guitar-based, mainly male rock 'n' roll bands created:

A strong perceived connection between technology, electricity, and the male sphere [...] most rock performers who were visible to the public were men who manipulated electronic instruments and equipment. Behind the scenes was a

male-dominated industry of producers, songwriters, publishers, and recording engineers.

(Dunbar, 2011, p. 177)

Male rock musicians, such as Jimi Hendrix (1942-1970), sang about love, sex, and relationships from positions of power and control, while the aggressive sound of the music, produced by amplified electric guitars, affirmed a dominating masculine sexuality. Women's position within rock music has been particularly fraught and they were generally pushed into marginal or hidden spaces.

2.1 Gendered music roles

Gender has had a strong influence on the roles which women have been assigned within popular music.

Activity 1

Allow approximately 30 minutes

Read the following two excerpts from Mavis Bayton's book *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (1998). Which popular music role has been most commonly assigned to women?

The world of popular music is highly structured in terms of gender. Traditionally, women have been positioned as consumers and fans, and in supportive roles (wife, mother, girlfriend) rather than as active producers of music: musicians. When they have been on stage, on TV, on record, it has nearly always been as singers. They have sometimes written their own lyrics, rarely their own music, and there are very few women playing instruments. Currently, women's lives are accompanied by a male sound-track. This has important implications, for popular music permeates modern life and helps to make us the people we are, both reflecting gender differences and also actively helping to construct them.

(Bayton, 1998, p. 1)

The role of singer in popular music-making has been the obvious one for women who have, indeed, a special (rare) space in the professional world [...] Nevertheless, this only serves to underline their structural exclusion as instrumentalists. Moreover, with female singers, traditionally, there has been an emphasis on appearance, image, and visual performance and a relative absence of analysis and discussion of vocal techniques and the voice-as-instrument.

Within popular music [...] singing is seen as 'natural' or innate and women are believed to be naturally better singers. Women's singing is seen in contrast with the learnt skills of playing an instrument, a kind of direct female emotional expression, rather than as a set of refined techniques [...] an assumption which reinforces essentialist notions of biological difference between men and women. Thus it is that the girl vocal group tradition, from

the Shirelles in the 1950s to Eternal, Shampoo, and the Spice Girls of the 1990s, has been undervalued.

(Bayton, 1998, p. 12-13)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The persistent cultural assumption that singing is a natural musical ability for women, which has led to the rare privileged position which female singers have been able to hold within popular music is illustrated by Janis Joplin being a singer. The 'emphasis on appearance, image, and visual performance' which Bayton highlights in the case of women singers also affected each of them.

Even more commonly, women have been expected to take supportive roles, as the groupies, girlfriends or wives of male musicians. They have also been inspiration for popular songs.

Singing is the popular music role which has been most commonly assigned to women.

Read the lyrics for the Beach Boys' 'Don't Worry Baby' (1964), and then listen to the song at least twice (there's a YouTube link below the lyrics). The Beach Boys were one of the most popular American male bands of the 1960s. What kind of role is being ascribed to the girl being addressed in the song? Is this a traditional role for girls and women?

The Beach Boys' 'Don't Worry Baby' (1964)

[Verse 1]

Well, it's been building up inside of me for

Oh, I don't know how long

I don't know why, but I keep thinking

Something's bound to go wrong

But she looks in my eyes

And makes me realize

[Chorus]

And she says (Don't worry baby)

"Don't worry baby

(Don't worry baby)

Everything will turn out alright"

(Don't worry baby)

Don't worry baby

(Don't worry baby)

[Verse 2]

I guess I should've kept my mouth shut

When I started to brag about my car
But I can't back down now because
I pushed the other guys too far
She makes me come alive
And makes me wanna drive

[Chorus]

When she says (Don't worry baby)

"Don't worry baby

(Don't worry baby)

Everything will turn out alright"

(Don't worry baby)

Don't worry baby

(Don't worry baby)

[Verse 3]

She told me "Baby, when you race today

Just take along my love with you

And if you knew how much I loved you

Baby, nothing could go wrong with you"

Oh, what she does to me

When she makes love to me

[Chorus]

And she says (Don't worry baby)

"Don't worry baby

(Don't worry baby)

Everything will turn out alright"

(Don't worry baby)

Don't worry baby

(Don't worry baby)

"She makes me come alive

And makes me wanna drive

[Chorus]

When she says (Don't worry baby)

"Don't worry baby"

Source: <https://genius.com/The-beach-boys-dont-worry-baby-lyrics>

[Now listen to the song on YouTube.](#)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

The girl being addressed in the song is placed in a supporting role. The lyrics suggest that her job is to assure the singer (presumably her boyfriend) 'don't worry baby' and that 'everything will turn out alright'. This type of nurturing (maternalistic) role is a traditional one for girls and women. For young girls listening to this song, it enforces the cultural message that their role is to stand by, support, nurture, and comfort their man. The lines 'She makes me come alive, And makes me wanna drive' suggest that the girl's sexuality excites the singer and causes him to drive too fast, implying this has caused him impetuously to challenge the other boys to race, rather than this being something that he has done himself, of his own agency, to impress her. Popular songs often perpetuate the cultural myth that female sexuality is dangerous and drives men to do crazy things. Women and girls are often the sources of inspiration for popular songs.

3 Popular music and the counterculture

The rock 'n' roll musical phenomenon of the 1950s was strongly associated with teenage rebellion. While the youthful fans of the rock 'n' roll bands of the 1950s might have been largely 'rebels without a cause', the fans of 1960s rock music – many of whom identified with the counterculture – definitely did have one. Although it would be incorrect to think of the counterculture which developed in 1960s America as a unified movement, those connected to the movement were often concerned with, or involved in, the Anti-Vietnam War and Civil Rights Movements. The counterculture challenged the social mores and structures of the older generation. Student protests (which peaked in 1968) and the sexual revolution were significant expressions of this. Music and musical taste became extremely important to the counterculture. In particular, rock and folk music became its soundtrack.



Figure 2 Women's Liberation Parade on 5th Avenue, New York, 16 August 1971

3.1 Authenticity

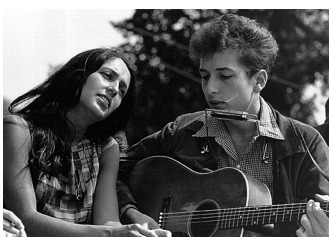


Figure 3 Folk singers Joan Baez and Bob Dylan performing during a civil rights rally in Washington D.C. 28 August 1963

The musical genres most prized by the counterculture were seen as championing their alternative values, providing the people who associated with it with a sense of identity. Rock and folk music were often celebrated by their fans for their sincerity and **authenticity**. Authenticity, however, has become one of the most contested terms within Popular Music Studies. On this issue, David Beard and Kenneth Gloag have commented that:

[...] popular music and its study resonate with issues of truth, integrity and sincerity and therefore directly raise issues of authenticity. Clearly, the relationship between popular musician and fan can form an identity around a certain truth, and the intensity and the expression of the popular music experience is often one of sincerity. This is most clearly evident in the role of singer-songwriter, within which we hear and feel a direct line of communication from songwriter through performance or recording to listener. This is clearly defined in the music of Bob Dylan, for example. The raw intensity of the voice indicates a personal experience and a depth of meaning that conveys an aura of authenticity.

(Beard and Gloag, 2005, p. 19)

Beard and Gloag also identify another key aspect of 'authenticity' as it is commonly applied to popular music; that is, that authentic genres of popular music 'usually involve the performance of original material' (Beard and Gloag, 2005, p. 20). The counterculture celebrated these so-called 'authentic' values of rock and folk music: sincerity, integrity, identity with their particular version of the truth, raw intensity, and originality of expression. These values have been used to construct a **genre** hierarchy between rock and folk music, which is seen as 'authentic', and pop music, which is seen as 'commercialised'. Pop's particular evils have often been understood as its overtly commercialised nature and the fact that most pop artists (such as the girl groups of the 1960s, such as the Shirelles or the Supremes) performed music composed for them by professional songwriters, rather than writing and performing their own original material. On the genre hierarchy between pop and rock, Stuart Borthwick and Ron Moy have commented that:

Rock, as a term, was coined to differentiate the music and attitudes of both performer and audience from the 'pop' and 'commercial' form. This rock/pop binarism can be viewed as a false bifurcation on a number of levels (how can an act that sells millions of albums be considered 'uncommercial'?) However, it did serve to reflect the growing fragmentation of the audience for popular music into what we might term 'taste hierarchies'

(Borthwick and Moy, 2004, p. 61-2)

Any attempt to regard rock and folk music as non-commercial, however, will, as Borthwick and Moy note, inevitably fail. Although marketed to their fan bases as raw expressions of musical truth and sincerity communicated directly from artist to fan, in truth rock and folk are also propped up by the massively commercialised popular music industry, which mediates songs as cultural products between musicians and their audiences. Beard and Gloag caution that, despite the apparent 'raw intensity' of Dylan's recordings, 'the fact that Dylan's music is contained within a culture industry and is marketed as a consumer commodity simultaneously questions this aura' (Beard and Gloag, 2005, p. 19). Just as the perceived value of rock and folk music can be seen as problematic, the position of

women – including women musicians – within the counterculture can be interpreted as deeply troubling.

3.2 Women musicians and the counterculture

While superficially renouncing monogamy, marriage, and the two-parent nuclear family, the counterculture reproduced traditional (even conservative) positions for women, as their roles – like their mothers and grandmothers before them – were to provide unpaid domestic and sexual labour: cooking, cleaning, caring for the children, and sleeping with the men. As such, men set the agenda of the counterculture, while women tended to occupy more supportive roles, such as accompanying protest marches or distributing leaflets. The marginalised position of women rock and folk musicians mirrors the wider side-lined position of women within the counterculture more generally. As Sheila Whiteley has observed:

The counter culture's marginalisation of women in rock is [...] particularly disturbing. Apart from biting social and political commentaries from such performers as Joan Baez, Buffy St Marie and Peter, Paul and Mary, and the success of such frontline performers as Mama Cass (The Mamas and the Papas), Grace Slick (Jefferson Airplane) and Janis Joplin (albeit at a cost, with Joplin dying in 1970 and Cass Elliott [Mama Cass] in 1974), both the lifestyle and the musical ethos of the period undermined the role of women, positioning them as either romanticised fantasy figures, subservient earth mothers or easy lays.

(Whiteley, 2000, p. 23)

'Romanticised fantasy figures' were a familiar characteristic of 1960s popular songs by male groups and artists. Well-known examples include The Beach Boys' 'Good Vibrations' (1966) and The Beatles' 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' (1967). Navigating the image of the female popular musician as an 'easy lay' was a particular issue for the woman who will now be considered in depth: Janis Joplin.

4 Women in rock: Janis Joplin

Janis Joplin (1943–70) came from a middle-class background in Port Arthur, Texas. As an overweight, acne-afflicted teenager who loved the blues (a black music genre) in the deeply segregated South, Joplin was bullied at high school. This sense of being an outsider never left her, and she still recalled her experiences as a troubled and ostracised teenager in interviews given at the height of her fame over a decade later. Following her high school graduation in 1960, she attended the University of Texas at Austin during the early 1960s, although she did not complete her college studies. She began her career singing in bars in Texas and California. Attracted by the Haight-Ashbury hippie scene, she moved to San Francisco in 1966 and joined the rock band, Big Brother & the Holding Company. With Janis as vocalist, Big Brother & the Holding Company released two albums: *Big Brother & the Holding Company* (1967) and *Cheap Thrills* (1968). Although collaboration marked the early period of Big Brother & the Holding Company (whose members lived communally), after they performed at the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967, Joplin began to attract considerable attention as a star singer. Searching for individual stardom, she left Big Brother & the Holding Company and formed The Kozmic Blues Band (from professional **session musicians**) in 1968. Despite recording *I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama!* (1969), The Kozmic Blues Band failed to come together; so she formed The Full Tilt Boogie Band in 1970. A heavy drinker and drug user who enjoyed relationships with many men and several women, Joplin was as known for her rock 'n' roll lifestyle as she was for her musicianship. She died of a heroin overdose in a hotel room in Los Angeles in 1970. She was 27 years old. Her final album, *Pearl*, was released posthumously in January 1971.



Figure 4 Janis Joplin c.1965–70

5 Joplin's singing style

Unlike most high-profile contemporary male rock musicians, who tended, like Hendrix, to be guitarists and songwriters, as well as singers, Joplin's fame rested entirely on her role as singer. As you have learnt, women have – exceptionally – been accorded star status within popular music as singers, while their prowess in other musical fields (including songwriting and instrumental performance) has often been downplayed. Unlike other white female singers of her generation, such as Joni Mitchell, who often took a folk-influenced approach to vocals, Joplin's style was heavily influenced by older black blues singers, such as Ma Rainey (1886-1939) and Bessie Smith (1894-1937), and her contemporaries, Aretha Franklin (1942-2018) and Otis Redding (1941-1967). Intriguingly, despite performing one's own material being regarded as a key component of the 'authentic' rock music experience, Joplin's best-known recordings, such as 'Ball and Chain', 'Me and Bobby McGee', and 'Piece of My Heart', are all covers.

Activity 2

Allow approximately 10 minutes

David Brackett has asserted that 'Joplin conveys an emotionalism more extreme than that of her models, giving the illusion of abandoning any vestiges of vocal control, especially in live performances' (Brackett, 2001). Watch this footage of Joplin performing 'Ball and Chain' with Big Brother & the Holding Company at the Monterey Park Pop Festival in 1967 with this description of her vocal style in mind. Does Brackett's description adequately reflect this performance? Although 'Ball and Chain' was originally written by Big Mama Thornton (1926-1984), it was Big Brother & the Holding Company's cover version which became well known.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1 Janis Joplin: Ball and chain](#)



Provide your answer...

Discussion

This performance by Joplin does convey the 'extreme emotionalism' which Brackett identifies. With her eyes closed at several points, she appears to be totally absorbed by her performance. Although at points it does sound as though her singing almost becomes screaming – which is what Brackett means by 'abandoning vocal control' – it could be argued that this is motivated by a desire to express the song that she is singing as fully as possible, rather than a result of poor technique. Other moments in the performance – particularly the range and shifts of the dynamics (how loud or soft she is singing) and her articulation of the words – sound very controlled. Her performance style seems driven by a desire to connect with her audience and communicate a raw intensity of expression as directly as possible. The wider movements of her body (the kicks with her legs and gestures with her arms) and even the way she uses the microphone (holding it and singing as closely to it as possible) all seem to be part of this.

6 Joplin's image and reception

Joplin's career illustrates many of the issues faced by female musicians working within the male-dominated world of rock. Firstly, as Whiteley has commented, as frontwomen of rock bands, female singers are 'the focus of audience attention not simply for what they sing, but for how they look' (Whiteley, 2000, p. 52). With her untamed hair and acne-scarred skin, many commentators have noted that Joplin was, as Whitley expresses it, 'conventionally unattractive in terms of traditional representations of feminine beauty' (Whiteley, 2000, p. 51). Negative views of her looks had troubled Joplin since she was nominated as the 'ugliest man on campus' while at the University of Texas at Austin in 1962 (which, although she did not win, deeply hurt her). Contrary to this, Joplin was also celebrated and desired as 'the first pin-up hippie girl' and 'first major girl sex symbol in rock' (O'Brien, 2012, p. 87). Whatever others might have thought of her looks, Joplin cultivated a flamboyant image. The many photographs taken of her at the height of her career show a long-haired woman in flowing layers of hippie-influenced clothes, dripping with fashion jewellery and glitzy accessories.

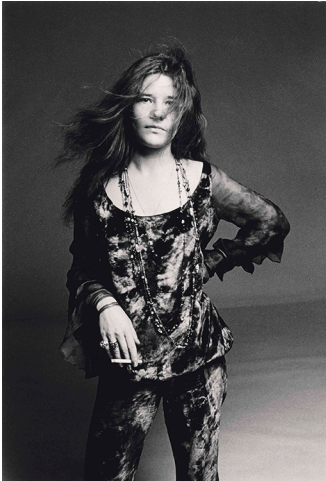


Figure 5 Janis Joplin, 1969, gelatin silver print, 47 × 32 cm. Photographed by Francesco Scavullo.

7 The 'other' and Joplin

Joplin's extravagant image and intense performing style led several commentators to describe her as 'erratic', 'crazed', or 'hysterical'. The activity below will enable you to explore how critics responded to Joplin.

Activity 3

Allow approximately 10 minutes

Consider the extract from Jack Shadoian's review of *Pearl*. This appeared in the American popular music magazine *Rolling Stone* in February 1971. As *Pearl* was released posthumously, this review also served as quasi-obituary for her. How does Shadoian describe Joplin's voice? Why was he disappointed with *Kozmic Blues* and why did he find *Pearl* to be a more satisfying album?

She [Joplin] was a remarkable, if erratic, singer, and she proved it, live and on record [...] With Big Brother, Janis was free to leap and range; the band was always there to break any falls [...] 'Kozmic Blues' was bound to be a disappointment [...]

Janis seemed displaced. The new band didn't help much and her voice, subjected to studio clarity, sounded more strained than expressive. Her style, too, transplanted to a tighter setting, seemed overblown and uncontrolled [...] Full Tilt Boogie, the band that backs her on *Pearl* [...] are simply a better band and more congenial to Janis, which is a big reason why *Pearl* is more satisfying [...]

It is also clear that Paul Rothchild [sic, the producer who worked with Joplin on *Pearl*] was working hard to find the right material and the right context for Janis, to shape her gifts and give them direction and balance [...] Her urge for drama, sometimes too hasty and spurting – not developed and sustained – is controlled by the solid foundation Full Tilt Boogie provides. She stays in control, and invitations to hysteria notwithstanding, gives a fantastic performance.

(Shadoian, 1971)

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Shadoian describes Joplin as an 'erratic' (though admittedly also a 'remarkable') singer. He claims that *Kozmic Blues* (*I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama!*) was disappointing as it subjected Joplin's voice to 'studio clarity', which resulted in her sounding 'strained' rather than 'expressive' and in her style coming across as 'overblown and uncontrolled'. He asserts that she has an 'urge for drama' which is 'sometimes too hasty and spurting', and that this can lead to 'invitations to hysteria'. He claims that both the better backing band (Full Tilt Boogie) and Paul Rothchild's (1935-1995) input as producer were major contributing factors in making *Pearl* a more satisfying album.

Like many male commentators on female musicians, Shadoian associates Joplin's creativity with mental illness, often crudely labelled, as in this review, as 'hysteria'. In the case of women musicians, 'Female madness [...] has long been condemned within Western rhetoric as a signifier of instability, dangerousness and sickness. Madness in women has not marked them as creative geniuses, but has served as a strong device to cast them as Other' (Hamer, 2019, p. 276). **The 'Other'** is a concept widely drawn upon in Popular Music Studies, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies more widely. It is used to demarcate one (often supposedly minority) group as being in some way(s) different to the majority group. Othering frequently has negative associations, as it has been used to portray the minority group as deviant from the majority group. When women have been othered, it has been to portray them as deviant from men.



Figure 6 Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Company (Studio Brass Section) c.1967

Marion Leonard has noted that rock journalists have used 'the notion of mental torment [...] in reviews of male musicians to construct a profile of the tortured romantic artist' yet 'associations with mental ill health are called upon by journalists to dismiss or "other" female performers' (Leonard, 2007, p. 69-70). Shadoian's review casts Joplin in the role of erratic female 'Other'. It implies that her instinctive musicality as a singer (which, as we have seen, has been constructed as natural and innate for women) needed to be reined in and controlled by the skilful male backing bands and producers with whom she worked.

8 The sexual revolution and Joplin

In Joplin's case, her so-called erratic performance style was also linked to her well-documented love of sex and multiplicity of partners. The sexual revolution posed a significant problem for Joplin, as for other women of her generation. O'Brien has commented:

She [Joplin] expressed the confusion of a woman raised with the repressive sexual codes of the 50s, yet embracing the bewildering lack of boundaries that came with 60s hippie counterculture. Before the supposed sexual liberation of the 60s, 'good girls' didn't, and 'bad girls' did. Joplin tested this dichotomy, not just in her sexuality, but through her music and the way she lived her life on the cusp of a regressive era and a youth revolution.

(O'Brien, 2012, p. 87)

Activity 4

Allow approximately 15 minutes

Now explore how Joplin tested this sexual dichotomy musically by considering one of her most well-known recordings, 'Piece of My Heart'. Originally recorded by Erma Franklin (1938-2002, sister of one of Joplin's great musical heroes, Aretha Franklin), Big Brother & the Holding Company covered the song on *Cheap Thrills*. The sound of one of Joplin's other great black musical influences, Otis Redding, can also be heard on this recording. His famous proclamation that you've 'gotta, gotta, try a little tenderness' clearly influences her grainy delivery of 'come on, come on, come on, come on'. Read through the lyrics. Do you think that, ultimately, both the lyrics and Joplin's performance suggest an empowered or a submissive position? Do they perhaps suggest two, rather different, messages?

'Piece of My Heart', Jerry Ragovoy and Bert Berns (1967)

[Intro]

Oh, come on, come on, come on, come on

[Verse 1]

Didn't I make you feel like you were the only man? Yeah

An' didn't I give you nearly everything that a woman possibly can?

Honey, you know I did

[Pre-Chorus]

And, and each time I tell myself that I, well I think I've had enough

But I'm gonna, gonna show you baby, that a woman can be tough

I want you to come on, come on, come on, come on and take it

[Chorus]

Take another little piece of my heart now, baby

Oh, oh, break it

Break another little bit of my heart now, darling, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Oh, oh, have a

Have another little piece of my heart now, baby

Well you know you got it, if it makes you feel good

Oh, yes indeed

[Verse 2]

You're out on the streets looking good

And baby deep down in your heart I guess you know that it ain't right

Never, never, never, never, never, never hear me when I cry at night

Babe and I cry all the time

[Pre-Chorus]

But each time I tell myself that I, well I can't stand the pain

But when you hold me in your arms, I'll sing it once again

I'll say come on, come on, come on, come on and take it

[Chorus]

Take another little piece of my heart now, baby

Oh, oh, break it

Break another little bit of my heart now, darling, yeah

Oh, oh, have a

Have another little piece of my heart now, baby

Well you know you got it, child, if it makes you feel good

I need you to come on, come on, come on, come on and take it

Take another little piece of my heart now, baby

Oh, oh, break it

Break another little bit of my heart, now darling, yeah, c'mon now

Oh, oh, have a

Have another little piece of my heart now, baby

You know you got it -

Waaaaaah!

[Outro]

Take it, take another little piece of my heart now, baby

Oh, oh, break it

Break another little bit of my heart, now darling, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah

Oh, oh, have a

Have another little piece of my heart now, baby, hey

You know you got it, child, if it makes you feel good

Source for lyrics: <https://genius.com/Janis-joplin-piece-of-my-heart-lyrics>

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Although asserting that 'a woman can be tough', the woman in the song ostensibly sings from an entirely submissive and dependent position. Her power rests entirely in her sexuality: 'Didn't I make you feel like you were the only man?' She begs him to 'take another little piece of my heart' and 'break it'. Her desire to subjugate herself sexually to him is clear: 'come and take it'. It hints troublingly at an abusive and controlling relationship. Joplin's powerful, bluesy performance, however, deeply undermines the lyrical content and conveys a much more empowered message. Her aggressive, almost goading delivery of 'come on, come on, come on, come on' sounds defiant, rather than submissive.

The conflicted message of 'Piece of My Heart' echoes the wider position of women's sexuality within the counterculture, as liberation for them largely equated to availability. As Whiteley has commented:

With the counter culture defining freedom for women almost exclusively in terms of sexual freedom, the concept of sexual liberation had become charged with significance. At one level it signified a symbolic journey, from chastity to freedom of choice, a valorisation of female hedonism, the active female rather than the passive recipient. However, as sexual freedom continued to be defined by the male as availability, a woman who wholeheartedly embraced the dictum of unlimited f***** remained, essentially, submissive.

(Whiteley, 2000, p. 54)

9 'One of the guys'

Caught in the difficult position of female rock icon, Joplin appears to have reacted by trying to fit into the masculinised environment by attempting to be 'one of the guys': sexual promiscuity, swearing, drinking to excess, and taking drugs.

Activity 5

Allow approximately 15 minutes

Listen to this clip of an interviewer challenging Joplin about her sexual activity and not hiring other women to be in her bands. Please be warned that there is some swearing in this clip so carefully choose where you watch it so as not to cause offence to others. How does Joplin respond?

Video content is not available in this format.

Video 2 Janis Joplin: *Little Girl Blue* (2018)



Provide your answer...

Discussion

The interviewer challenges Joplin that some people – who he refers to as 'Women's Lib People' – are bothered that she is so up-front sexually. She responds by demanding 'How can they attack me [...] I'm just representing everything they want'. When he then challenges her that one woman has asked why she doesn't have any women in any of her groups, she first responds astutely with 'you show me a good drummer and I'll hire one', very possibly alluding to the scarcity of female drummers. Then she appears to become more flippant when she claims, 'why would I want a chick on the road with me [...] I've got enough competition [...] I like to be around men'. Could this actually mask insecurity?

While promising peace and love, the sexual revolution and the permissive society were not without their dangerous consequences. As Lucy O'Brien has noted:

In 1967, 50,000 young people [other sources state up to 100,000] passed through San Francisco, taking advantage of the free food and free housing provided by the Council for the Summer of Love. 'Free' became a buzzword, while love, sex, and peace seemed limitless. Haight, however, attracted not only 'free lovers' but hustlers, losers, and unhappy rejects seeking solace in drugs. With new psychedelic highs like STP giving people a three-day trip to hell, San Francisco General Hospital was treating 750 bad trips a month. The rate of venereal disease went up six-fold in one year. Then heroin invaded a sub-culture that was psychologically defenceless against it, because being cool was being high.

(O'Brien, 2012, p. 89)

10 Joplin's lasting reputation

For Joplin – as for many others, both famous and unknown – heroin addiction proved to be fatal. She died of an overdose on 4 October 1970, 16 days after Hendrix who choked to death on his own vomit while intoxicated with barbiturates (also dying at the age of 27).



Figure 7 Janis Joplin performing in the late 1960s

Activity 6

Allow approximately 15 minutes

Joplin's reception has been marked by an array of contradictory images, which Brackett has summed up:

Joplin's career was riddled with contradictions: she was labelled the first 'hippy poster girl', yet claimed by progressive writers as a proto-feminist for her assertive performing style, extrovert public persona and status as a bandleader. Another contradiction surfaces in the contrast between her 'one of the boys' image and that of Joplin as a 'victim', an image promoted by the tales of suffering outlined in many of her songs and by reports of her personal life.

(Brackett, 2001)

Which of these images do you think suits her best? You might think that a mixture – or perhaps even none at all – fit best.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Joplin's image was subjected to many different interpretations (both in her own lifetime and posthumously): from unattractive to 'hippy poster girl'; from 'one of the boys' to wholly woman; from 'victim' to empowered and liberated. Although there is certainly no single right answer to this question, what is clear is that her contradictory image reflects her difficult position as a rare woman in the male-dominated world of rock music.

Conclusion

In this free course you have learnt that women have tended to occupy passive, rather than active, roles within popular music. They have frequently occupied supportive positions as the groupies, girlfriends, and wives of male popular musicians. Girls and women have also served as the subject matter of popular songs, often as idealised or sexualised versions.

American popular music in the 1950s was largely dominated by male rock 'n' roll bands. Popular music assumed huge relevance to the counterculture which developed in America throughout the 1960s, especially rock and folk music. Women, however, had a problematic position within this. Men tended to drive the political agenda of the counterculture, with women being confined to marginalised positions and expected to provide unpaid domestic and sexual labour. The counterculture often defined liberation for women purely as sexual liberation, which can be viewed as sexual availability and even submission.

Pressured into acting like 'one of the guys', Janis Joplin joined in with swearing, sexual promiscuity, heavy drinking, and taking drugs; eventually dying of a heroin overdose in 1970. Joplin, as a woman in the heavily masculinised world of rock music, illustrates the difficult position which women rock musicians faced.

This free course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [A113 Revolutions](#) and is also one of four OpenLearn courses exploring the notion of the Sixties as a 'revolutionary' period. [Learn more about these OpenLearn courses.](#)

Glossary

Authenticity

One of the most contested terms within Popular Music Studies. It generally relates to a particular version of truth, intensity, and sincerity, which forms a seemingly shared sense of identity between popular musicians and their fans. Genres of popular music typically constructed as 'authentic' usually involve the performance of original material. The term 'authenticity' is also used more widely within Music Studies. It is also often applied to the performance of early music that has been informed by some sort of historical research intended to get as close as possible to the performance conventions of the time (such as the use of period instruments or consulting contemporary performance treatises).

British Invasion

Term used to refer to the great popularity of British popular musicians in the US in the mid-1960s. It is generally said to have commenced with The Beatles' first US tour in 1964.

Counterculture

OED Definition: A radical culture, esp. amongst the young, that rejects established social values and practices; a mode of life opposed to the conventional or dominant.

Genre

Within the arts in general, genre refers to the category of a specific work, such as a novel, play or symphony. Within Popular Music Studies, genre refers to the specific style of a piece of music; for example, pop, rock, folk or jazz. Many of these also have

specific sub-genres, where the genre refers to an umbrella category, such as rock, and the sub-genre to a particular style within this, such as psychedelic rock, glam rock, punk rock, etc.

Girl groups

Small ensembles of female vocalists.

Motown

An African-American record label that specialised in black musical genres such as soul, but which had a huge appeal to both black and white markets. Based in Detroit, Motown was founded by Berry Gordy in 1959.

The 'Other'

A concept widely drawn upon in Popular Music Studies, Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies more widely. It is used to demarcate one (often – supposedly – minority) group as being in some way(s) different to the majority group. Othering frequently has negative associations, as it has been used to portray the minority group as deviant from the majority group.

Popular Music Studies

The academic study of popular music. Popular Music Studies often pays considerable attention to the social, cultural, and political contexts within which popular music is produced and consumed, rather than necessarily focusing upon the notes themselves.

Session musician

A professional popular musician who is hired to perform on a specific studio recording or for a live event but who is not a permanent member of a particular band.

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Acknowledgements

This free course was written by Laura Hamer and prepared for OpenLearn by Emily Chambers.

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