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JOPLIN, IN HER OWN WORDS

Sam Hurwitt

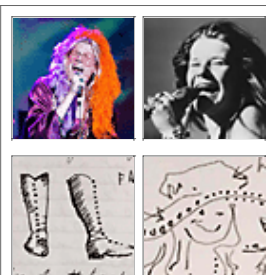
Sunday, July 9, 2006

Janis Joplin has been away a long time. Having helped define the sound of the late '60s with a voice like a hurricane hurling steamrollers, the powerhouse hippie-blues singer died in October 1970 of a heroin overdose at age 27. But the piece of her heart Joplin left in San Francisco finally came home this week as the touring musical "Love, Janis" started previews Friday at Marines Memorial Theatre.

[Podcast: [Leba Hertz shares excerpts from some of Joplin's hits](#)]

This play has been kicking around the country since it premiered at the Denver Center in 1994, playing off-Broadway for two years and just finishing up a run in Aspen before coming here. It's strange that it's taken a dozen years for it to get to San Francisco, because this is where the story is set, and where the Port Arthur, Texas, singer finally came into her own. Told entirely in Janis' own words -- from letters, interviews and songs -- the show picks up in 1966, when she first arrived in San Francisco and joined Big Brother and the Holding Company, and runs through her death a mere four years later.

"At the end of her very first interview, the guy said,



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'How do you like San Francisco so far?' " says Randal Myler, the show's adapter and director. "She said, 'You kidding? Thank God I'm not alone.' They may have thought she was a total freak in Port Arthur, but when she got to San Francisco, she had to hustle to catch up with the real freaks."

Myler was recruited by Laura Joplin, who had run across a cache of letters her sister had written to their parents. Janis' junior by six years, Laura had spent four years traveling around to talk to her sister's friends for a more complete picture of the Janis they knew and what had become of her. Her quest resulted in a 1992 biography, also called "Love, Janis," which was rereleased last year in an updated paperback edition with more letters that had surfaced.

"Janis was a lengthy letter writer," Laura says. "One of them is like a 28-pager, talking about the drug problems she'd had, questions she had, what her dreams were for herself. I was curious about the girl who read me 'Alice in Wonderland' and the Oz books. Was that the same girl that her friends knew? And certainly there were different experiences that they went through, but they knew the same wit and intelligence and questioning."

Somewhere along the way Laura Joplin decided someone should write a play about her sister. After a lot of looking around and several false starts, she ran across Myler's previous biographical work, "Hank Williams: Lost Highway," and called him up.

"I grew up in Sonoma County, and I remember seeing Janis perform up at Sonoma County Fairgrounds and just seeing her around town," Myler says. "But I remember saying to Laura at the time, 'I don't think I want to do another womb-to-tomb biography,' which is what the Hank Williams play was. And Laura said to me, 'Well, before you say no, there's this batch of letters.' It was the letters that provided not just the backbone of the piece, but much of its heart and flesh as well.

"I was interested in what would Janis Joplin write home to her family," Myler says. "From the Janis we saw onstage, I thought it would be like a postcard with expletives. But then I got this batch of letters, and they're so funny and intelligent and wise and sophisticated. Then with the interviews, I realized, hey, I could put together a theater piece with all Janis Joplin's words."

That sense of the public persona versus private pensiveness led Myler to create a show with two Janises, the performer and the prodigal daughter writing home to Mom.

"Without meaning to, suddenly it became a one-woman show done by two women," Myler says.

Make that three women. The muscle of the show has to be the singing, which is such heavy lifting that it requires not only separate Janises for singing and speaking, but two singing Janises who perform on alternating nights. Here they are Katrina Chester and Cathy Richardson, with Morgan Hallett as the private Janis. All three have played the roles before, albeit in different productions.

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Big Brother and the Holding Company's Sam Andrew came aboard as musical director in 1999 after he and Chet Helms came to see the show in Austin. The show's first music director had been Jerry Ragovoy, who wrote or co-wrote many of the songs Janis Joplin recorded, but not originally for her. Andrew has hired the musicians and overseen the music for every production ever since, and Myler has directed them all.

"I said, man, if anyone should be musical director on this, it should be me," Andrew says. "I played with Janis Joplin more nights than anyone else in her life, wrote some of these songs and arranged all of them."

For the songs, which are drawn from the time when the letters were written and the interviews were given, Andrew strives for as much authenticity as possible.

"I try to match the music to that period," he says. "Back then we smoked a lot of pot and rehearsed like eight hours a day, so we'd do these really elaborate arrangements, and now I'm being punished. I'm having to revisit them."

Of course, the arrangements aren't all Andrew is revisiting. After all, he would be a key part of the show even if he'd never heard of it.

"It's really something to see your private life put that way," he says. "There's not a word in the play that Janis didn't actually write, so she says, 'If I'm any kind of musician at all I have to leave Big Brother,' and I have to hear that every night. And she says, 'I'm not going to be doing 'Down on Me' when I'm 85 years old,' and I think, well, I probably am."

Andrew still tours with Big Brother, employing a steady stream of different singers, but unlike in "Love, Janis," the band doesn't play the way it played 40 years ago.

"In Big Brother, we don't want a Janis," Andrew says. "We once held auditions, and if someone had bracelets and hippie dresses, we'd cross her off the list immediately because we didn't want to do a 'Beatlemania.' In the play, they're trying to embody her force, but doing Janis is like doing Judy Garland or Billie Holiday. They were unique; that's why they're great."

What they look for is a powerhouse performer reminiscent of Joplin, not someone who tries to mimic her.

"We're not trying to do a look-alike, sound-alike impression," Myler says. "That would be like a wax museum. If the actor is able to go out there and give a piece of her heart every night, then she deserves to be onstage. We've had Janises who were 300 pounds, all different types."

As personal as the show is for bandmate Andrew and Myler, a childhood fan (whose wife, Catherine Curtin, played the private Janis off-Broadway), it's been a labor of love for Laura Joplin.

"The most wonderful thing that Randy has done is

that he's allowed Janis to tell her own story," she says. "So for someone who knew her, it's like finally there's the voice. There's that sense of humor, the way she connects things. The first time I saw it I was stunned, because I felt like I was coming home to visit with someone that I've missed for a long time."

"Love, Janis" is in previews, opens Fri. and runs through Sept. 3 at Marines Memorial Theatre, 609 Sutter St., San Francisco. \$30-\$67. (415) 771-6900, www.ticketmaster.com.

Sam Hurwitt is a freelance writer.

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