Janis Joplin <http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/janis-joplin>

**Induction Year**: 1995

"Inductee: Janis Joplin (vocals; born January 19, 1943, died October 4, 1970)

Janis Joplin brought her powerful, bluesy voice from Texas to San Francisco’s psychedelic scene, where she went from drifter to superstar. She has been called “the greatest white urban blues and soul singer of her generation.” Joplin’s vocal intensity proved a perfect match for the high-energy music of Big Brother and the Holding Company, resulting in a mix of blues, folk and psychedelic rock. Joplin’s tenure with Big Brother may have been brief, lasting only from 1966 to 1968, but it yielded a pair of albums that included the milestone *Cheap Thrills*. Moreover, her performance with Big Brother at 1967’s Monterey International Pop Festival, a highlight of the film documentary *Monterey Pop*, is among the great performances in rock history.

In the words of biographer Myra Friedman, “It wasn’t only her voice that thrilled, with its amazing range and strength and awesome wails. To see her was to be sucked into a maelstrom of feeling that words can barely suggest.” She was a dynamic singer who shred her vocal cords on driving psychedelic rockers like “Combination of the Two” and then deliver a delicate, empathetic reading of George Gershwin’s “Summertime.”

Joplin was born in 1943 in Port Arthur, Texas, an oil-refining town on the coast. Growing up, she was a social outcast who found an outlet in music. Joplin was drawn to blues (Odetta, [Leadbelly](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/lead-belly) and [Bessie Smith](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/bessie-smith)) and soul ([Otis Redding](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/otis-redding), Tina Turner and [Etta James](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/etta-james)). She performed folk blues on the coffeehouse circuit in Texas and San Francisco before hooking up with Big Brother - guitarists James Gurley and Sam Andrew, bassist Peter Albin and drummer David Getz - at the suggestion of Chet Helms, a hip entrepreneur and fellow Texan. The chemistry came as a revelation even to Joplin: “All of a sudden, someone threw me in front of this rock and roll band,” she said. “And I decided then and there that was it. I never wanted to do anything else.”

Big Brother were loud, explosive and somewhat deliberately crude in their melange of blues and psychedelia. Helms, one of a group of event organizers who called themselves the Family Dog, booked the group on some of the earliest bills on the nascent San Francisco scene. Big Brother became regulars at Helm’s Avalon Ballroom in the mid-to-late Sixties. It was at the Avalon where much of *Cheap Thrills* - an album that topped the album charts for eight weeks in 1968 - was recorded. That explosive showcase of psychedelic soul featured Joplin’s raw, impassioned readings of Willie Mae Thornton’s “Ball and Chain” and “Piece of My Heart.” The latter song, which had been a Top Ten R&B hit in 1967 for Erma Franklin (Aretha’s younger sister), was co-written by Jerry Ragavoy, a favorite songwriter of Joplin’s. As a solo artist, she’d record other songs of his, including “Cry Baby,” “Get It While You Can” and “Try (Just a Little Bit Harder).”

Joplin left Big Brother in December 1968, taking guitarist Sam Andrew with her. Her first solo album, *I’ve Got Dem Ol’ Kozmic Blues Again Mama!*, appeared in 1969, and she toured extensively with her Kozmic Blues Band. By mid-1970, however, she’d dissolved that outfit and formed a superb new one, Full-Tilt Boogie. They gelled over the course of several months of touring and entered the studio to record what would turn out to be Joplin’s swan song. Joplin had often sought refuge in drugs and alcohol, and she was found dead of a heroin overdose in a Hollywood hotel room on October 4, 1970. The posthumously released *Pearl* – the title was her nickname – comprised nine finished tracks and one instrumental to which she was supposed to have added vocals on the day she died. It was prophetically titled “Buried Alive in the Blues.”

*Pearl* became Joplin’s biggest seller, holding down the #1 position for nine weeks in 1971. It included “Me and Bobby McGee,” a song written for her by ex-lover Kris Kristofferson. A quixotic portrait of a countercultural love affair, sung by Joplin as an affectionate, road-weary country blues, “Me and Bobby McGee” perfectly captured the bohemian spirit of the times. The powerful performances on *Pearl*, including “Move Over,” “Half Moon” and “Get It While You Can,” hint at what might have come from Joplin had she not died at 27.

Janis Joplin has passed into the realm of legend: an outwardly brash yet inwardly vulnerable and troubled personality who possessed one of the most passionate voices in rock history. It could be argued that her legacy has as much to do with her persona as her singing. Music journalist Ellen Wills asserted that “Joplin belonged to that select group of pop figures who mattered as much for themselves as for their music. Among American rock performers, she was second only to [Bob Dylan](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/bob-dylan) in importance as a creator-recorder-embodiment of her generation’s mythology.”

Rock critic Lillian Roxon summed up her influence with these words: “[Janis Joplin] perfectly expressed the feelings and yearnings of the girls of the electric generation – to be all woman, yet equal with men; to be free, yet a slave to real love; to [reject] every outdated convention, and yet get back to the basics of life.”

**TIMELINE**

**January 19, 1943**: Janis Joplin is born in Port Arthur, Texas.

**June 11, 1965**: Janis Joplin debuts with Big Brother and the Holding Company at San Francisco’s Avalon Ballroom, where they become the house band.

**January 21-23, 1966**: The Trips Festival, a multimedia event featuring performances by [the Grateful Dead](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/the-grateful-dead), [Jefferson Airplane](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/jefferson-airplane) and Big Brother and the Holding Company, is held at Longshoreman’s Hall in San Francisco.

**February 1, 1966:** Big Brother and the Holding Company and the [Jefferson Airplane](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/jefferson-airplane) headline the First Annual Tribal Stomp at San Francisco’s Avalon Ballroom.

**February 19, 1966**: Janis Joplin makes her debut as the lead singer of Big Brother and the Holding Company.

**June 17, 1967**: Big Brother and the Holding Company perform a show-stopping set on the second day of the Monterey International Pop Festival. Vocalist Janis Joplin becomes an overnight sensation.

**August 12, 1967**: The self-titled debut album by Big Brother and the Holding Company is released on Mainstream Records. It reaches #60.

**1968**: By 1968, the hippie movement was spreading across the U.S. and Europe, even though the political landscape hardly reflected the ethos of peace and love. Rock and roll was becoming a business, and bands continued to proliferate. Quicksilver and the Steve Miller Band both issued their debut albums, and [the Grateful Dead](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/the-grateful-dead) released ‘Anthem of the Sun,’ a record that attempted to sonically re-create an LSD trip. The [Jefferson Airplane](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/jefferson-airplane) hit the Top Ten with ‘Crown of Creation,’ the Big Brother and the Holding Company went all the way to Number One with ‘Cheap Thrills.’

**August 12, 1968**: ‘Cheap Thrills,’ by Big Brother and the Holding Company, is released on Columbia Records. It tops the chart for seven weeks.

**September 29, 1968**: “Piece of My Heart,” the lone Top Forty hit by Big Brother and the Holding Company, enters the charts. It reaches #12.

**December 7, 1968**: Janis Joplin performs for the last time as a member of Big Brother and the Holding Company. Two weeks later, she debuts her new group, the Kozmic Blues Band.

**August 15-17, 1969**: The year 1969 was the year of the rock festival. The largest was the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, held on the weekend of August 15-17 in the tiny town of Bethel, in upstate New York. An estimated crowd of 450,000 attended the event, which featured everyone from [Jimi Hendrix](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/the-jimi-hendrix-experience) and Joe Cocker, to Arlo Guthrie, the [Jefferson Airplane](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/jefferson-airplane), [the Who](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/the-who), Janis Joplin, [Sly and the Family Stone](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/sly-and-the-family-stone), Ravi Shankar and Country Joe McDonald. If Woodstock marked the apex of the hippie movement in America, the Rolling Stones’ free concert in Hyde Park did the same for England. Held on July 5, the show drew nearly 300,000 people, the largest gathering in England since V-E Day.

**September 18, 1969**: Janis Joplin’s first solo album, ‘I Got Dem Ol’ Kozmic Blues Again (Mama),’ is released.

**June 12, 1970**: Janis Joplin debuts a new band, Full-Tilt Boogie, at Freedom Hall in Louisville, Kentucky.

**August 8, 1970**: Janis Joplin provides a headstone for the grave of [Bessie Smith](http://www.rockhall.com/inductee/bessie-smith), her primary influence, who is buried in Philadelphia’s Mount Lawn cemetery.

**October 4, 1970**: Janis Joplin is found dead in her room at the Landmark Hotel in Hollywood, California. The official cause is accidental heroin overdose.

**February 27, 1971**: ‘Pearl,’ the album that Janis Joplin was making at the time of her death, hits #1 on the album charts, where it will stay for nine weeks.

**March 14, 1971**: “Me and Bobby McGee,” Janis Joplin’s only Top Forty hit, reaches #1. It tops Billboard’s pop singles chart for two weeks.

**July 14, 1973**: ‘Janis Joplin’s Greatest Hits’ enters the album charts. It will peak at #22 and sell more than 2 million copies.

**October 10, 1979**: ‘The Rose,’ a hit film loosely based on the life of Janis Joplin, premieres in Los Angeles. Bette Midler stars in the lead role.

**January 12, 1995**: Janis Joplin is inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at the tenth annual induction dinner. Melissa Etheridge is her presenter.

**April 22, 2001**: ‘Love, Janis,’ a musical play based on actual letters sent to family members by Janis Joplin, opens off-Broadway at New York’s Village Theater.