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The 1970s Counter-Culture through the Lyrics of Janis Joplin

Today's music tends to have the main goal of entertaining instead of spreading a message; the music created, performed, and shared during the 1970s carried with it ideas and new ways of thinking. People could not only "jam" to the beats created by singers such as Jimmi Hendrix, The Beatles, and Janis Joplin, but they could also connect and identify with the words that they sang; Songs such as "Let It Be" by the Beatles is a prime example of this type of music. The 1970s brought a decade of national malaise in the United States, as well as a young adult backlash to the teachings of their parents. Young Americans were not only consumed with their own life in high school but also with protesting against the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and rejecting the lifestyles that their parents had imbedded in them since birth. Through the music of Joplin and the works of Joplin's contemporaries an idea came about that the young adults who lived during the counter-culture era were fighting to find meaning in their everyday lives. The counter-culture has the reputation for being large amounts of rebellious kids who held crazy parties, were drunks and drug users, wasting away their lives; while these items were used by young Americans involved in the counter-culture movement, it was not their main goal. The young people in the 1970s rebelled in order to find the real meaning of life and to fight for what they believed was right. The real movement behind the façade of the

counter-culture of the 1960s and 70s was expressed through the mode of music, more expressly, through Janis Joplin's songs.

The young adults during the 1970s counter-culture fought to find meaning in their lives aside from the ideals that their parents had instilled in them such as the white picket fence, children, and a nice paying job. The "old school values" represented security, stability, and a sense of living the ideal American dream. These young people were born during the 1950s, a time of high materialism and for a while that satisfied them, but as they grew older and experienced the injustices in their local towns, they sought to find the real truth, instead of the masked truth that their parents had provided. This sense of the real truth came most clearly through the protests of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps the reason for these young Americans quest to find the truth was because the threat of an atomic bomb was always looming over their heads. Throughout grade school they were routinely practicing bomb procedures such as hiding underneath their desks, even though it was common knowledge that a wooden desk could not protect against radiation. Constantly fearing death made these young people question what the true meaning of life was if theirs was going to be cut so short.

These young people saw that the way that their parents lived and believed did not promote equality, truth, or reality. Many young Americans saw their fathers cheat on their mothers, business owners scam customers, or many other dishonest things but were told to just forget about it as if those actions were acceptable and commonplace. It was time that the youth stood for what they believed to be right and they were able to do so for a variety of reasons; "The youth culture, as well as the booming economy, encouraged them to be risk

takers in ways that their security-orientated parents found unthinkable.”¹The counter-culture of the 1970s did not include every young American, which would be quite far from the truth. Many young adults during the 1970s would be quite fine with living the same lives in which their parents did, these people were usually part of the “in” crowd during high school. The youth, during the counter-culture, who sought to make sense of the world were those who did not conventionally fit in; this is where Janis Joplin’s own life comes in.

“Time keeps moving on. Friends they turn away. I keep moving on. But I never find out why...but it don’t make no difference and I know that I can always try”². This is an excerpt from Joplin’s song, “Kozmic Blues”, and it sums up the way that she felt about her own life. Through this original song of Joplin’s, she depicts how depressed she was throughout her life. She had had one close girlfriend while she was growing up until she decided to belong to an all guy group. She carefully watched friendships in her own high school and saw relationships come and go all of the time. Joplin was born in a small Texas town in 1943. She was raised by parents who encouraged her to question the things around her and find out who she was, although they never expected her to openly react against the things happening. Joplin had a small group of intellectual friends who eventually became obsessed with the lifestyles of the “beats”. The Beat generation was created by Jack Kerouac, who published a book by the title of *On the Road*. Kerouac’s novel details the life of different characters who live lives surrounded by drugs, jazz, and poetry. “The Beats reduced life to its essentials in order to feel alive again. They romanticized poverty and those living in that divine state of grace, most notably the black male jazz musician. They looked for leadership in his [black male musician’s] balance between

¹ Elaine Tyler May. *Homeward Bound*. Page 198.

² Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 85.

humility and freedom. The Beats dressed to show their contempt for society and its values”³. Joplin lived out the Beat life through her college years and even afterwards. She moved out to California a few years after she graduated high school to live in Venice Beach where the Beat scene was old news. She lived in a ram shackled apartment among drug users. Joplin was never afraid to live among random people and in random places, she felt that it better connected her to the people who understood her the best. She continued this style of living even when she returned back to Texas to attend the University of Texas in Austin. In Austin, Joplin lived in a series of connected apartments which were called the “ghetto”. She and her friends threw parties regularly and welcomed any sort of alcohol and drug use. The “ghetto” was completely torn apart but it added to the artistic value that the Beat generation envied.

Joplin had always possessed a free spirit and since her parents allowed her to question her place in the world, she always had a sense that she did not fit in with the status quo. Joplin lived in Texas, part of the Deep South, through the most radical changes in race relations. The Joplin family lived in Port Arthur, Texas, which was a breadbasket of ethnicities because of the oil fields, so Joplin and her siblings grew up seeing African Americans as just another ethnicity. However, America, as a whole during this time, saw African Americans as completely different. In Joplin’s hometown, there were signs posted on water fountains and waiting rooms which indicated where each race should go. Joplin’s parents taught Janis and her siblings that racial discrimination was wrong but that there was nothing that they could do about it. Joplin accepted this but decided that there was something she could do about it. During her time in Texas, she was merely curious and not yet ready to go down the rebellious path. “She went

³ Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 61.

searching. She simply turned her head away from the prescribed path to face the layers of life that society had told her were not the proper ones for a young lady...With simplistic reasoning, she decided that if the good people weren't all good, then perhaps the supposedly bad people weren't all bad"⁴.

The world Joplin inhabited was complicated by issues of race, gender, and much more. Race relations in the 1960s and 1970s were coming to a head. For decades, there had been Jim Crow laws in place which were created because of how white society had already been treating African Americans. In 1954, *Brown v Board of Education* was decided on and overturned the ruling in *Plessy v Ferguson*, ruling that separate but equal was not constitutional. Since the Supreme Court has no police powers, it was rather difficult enforcing the ruling, especially in the South. There were incidents such as the Little Rock Nine where the governor of Arkansas ordered the National Guard to not allow nine African American students to enter the Little Rock high school. At this point, the national government had to intervene. Other monumental events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the various sit-ins took a toll on the country as well as young adults in the counter-culture. These white adults who joined in with African Americans were openly going against their parents and were willing to sacrifice their relationships, reputation, and even lives for the Civil Rights Movement. "This consistent rejection of center explains why the same disenchanted Americans gravitated from one inexplicable position to the other"⁵. While these young white Americans might not have seemingly much in common with African Americans who were

⁴ Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 51.

⁵ Bruce Shulman. *The Empire Strikes Back- the Conservative Response to Progressive Social Movements in the 1970s*.

fighting for equal treatment, the fact that they shared a common dissatisfaction linked them together and encouraged them to fight for one another.

Joplin showed her connection with the African American population through her music. Joplin did a recreation of an earlier song titled *Summertime* which had previously been performed by artists such as Ella Fitzgerald. Joplin was a soulful singer which is why she chose songs such as *Summertime* to perform and share her message. Not only did the song personify the way in which she felt about her own life, but also it also paid tribute to the work of African Americans. "One of these mornings, you're going to rise up singing. Then you'll spread your wings, and you'll take to the sky"⁶. Joplin had a deep and raspy tone of voice which set her apart from other modern day female singers. Her voice gave her the edge that she needed to succeed in the counter-culture era. Blues music was well suited for her voice and the messages in which she attempted to convey. Joplin was different than other female performers at the time because of her deep, raspy voice. Most other female artists were loved for their high pitched, sweet voices. Joplin had a far rougher voice and was not accepted in status quo musical circles, she was also out of the popular loop in social circles as well because of her personal beliefs. Other singers during this time such as Elvis Presley would take soulful music typically done by African Americans and perform it to a white audience which would then gain them fame. Joplin did not respect this type of doing, instead she sought to sing these soulful tunes in order to gain equality for their original singers, rather than taking attention away from them. One time Joplin even told one of her close friends that, "I wish I were black because black

⁶ Joplin, Janis. "Summertime".

people have more emotion”⁷. African Americans had a reason to sing behind their lyrics, whereas Joplin saw whites as singing just for fame.

Perhaps Joplin’s view that African Americans had more emotion came from her views that she received while living in a small, southern Texan town. Joplin was not the petite, clear faced, polite female that society expected her to be and she found her own way to deal with who she was. Joplin’s sister, Laura, remembers her in this way, “Janis was given a different female role model than most young Southern girls. Her mother was strong, independent, intelligent, ambitious, and assertive. Janis wasn’t raised to see women as passive or behind-the-scenes”⁸. Joplin was shown and taught from a young age that women can be just as strong as men, this was something that most other girls, her age were not learning at home from their mothers. Joplin ran around with a predominately male group and when they, at first, would not fully accept her into their top ring, she forced herself in despite it. She found a way to dominate every conversation, and she won the respect of her male and female friends. Joplin’s experience was unique because during this era, it was commonplace for young adult women to find a husband in order to guarantee security but this was not something Joplin could accept. Since she had such close male friends she tended to view men in the way that men, at that time, viewed women; as property. Joplin refused to couple off because she felt that it would deny her of her own individual identity. Joplin’s song, *Turtle Blues*, perhaps captures her ideas on a relationship between a man and a woman the best; “I ain’t the kind of woman who’d make your life a bed of ease. No, I’m not that kind of woman, no, to make your life a bed of ease.

⁷ Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 109.

⁸ Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 45.

Yeah, but if you wanna go out drinkin', honey, won't you invite me along please"⁹. Joplin was the epitome of feminism, in one of its earlier stages. She wore men's clothing throughout college, she drank with men, she had sex with random people, and she cussed like a sailor. She saw herself, and every other woman as equals to men and the only thing holding women back was themselves.

America during this time, was held back by things rooted deeper than just social thinking and values. In the 1950s there were various pieces of literature that attempted to explain how young adults and families should live their lives. Many Americans took these guidelines to heart. In one piece of literature it was said that, "A girl who reaches the middle twenties without a proposal ought to consider carefully whether she really wishes to remain single. If she does not, she should try to discover why marriage hasn't come her way, and perhaps take steps to make herself more interesting and attractive"¹⁰. In the modern era, this bit of "advice" would seem extremely sexist, but during the 1950s and 60s this literature was common. Young females had pressure on them from their parents and society to become wives and mothers, with or without their college degrees. While women in the workplace was becoming increasingly more accepted because of consumerism, it was still out of place for a woman to remain single her entire life, especially if she was promiscuous. Young females who ran around with multiple boys and never settled down were considered tarnished. While Joplin's mother encouraged her to be an independent woman, she was always worried that her reputation would be destroyed because of how free she really was. Joplin performed a song entitled, *Ball 'n' Chain*, which was originally sung by Big Mama Thornton. "Somethin came

⁹ Janis Joplin. *Turtle Blues*.

¹⁰ Elaine Tyler May. *Homeward Bound*. Page 89.

along, grabbed a hold of me, and it felt just like a ball and chain. Honey that's exactly what it felt like, honey just draggin me down"¹¹. Young females living in "a man's" world constantly felt like they were being pulled down because of their sex. Young women who were actively involved in the counter-culture movement were even more weighed down because of how society viewed them.

While the young adults who were part of the counter-culture seemed like they were fully enjoying their ultimate freedom, they wrestled with their own demons internally. Joplin struggled with depression from the time she was in high school to her death. She had bouts of happiness followed by times of self-doubt. While she fully believed in what she was doing, she also felt as if she was a deep disappointment to her family. In one letter home she wrote, "So, although I envy many aspects of being a student and living at home, I guess I have to keep trying to be a singer. Weak as it is, I apologize for being so just plain bad to the family. I realize that my shifting values don't make me very reliable and that I'm a disappointment and, well, I'm just sorry"¹². Leaving home and feeling like a letdown to their families was not a joyous occasion. These young adults still needed to feel loved and accepted no matter how hard of an outer shell they attempted to put up. "Lord I ain't got no reason for goin', give me no reason to stay here. I got these blues, Lord I gotta finally know why"¹³. Many of Joplin's songs have the same blues attitude that her song, "No Reason for Livin'" has. She found solace in writing out her intimate thoughts into song lyrics and many other young adults at the time found themselves wondering and battling the same feelings within themselves. Another way that

¹¹ Janis Joplin. *Ball n Chain*.

¹² Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 199.

¹³ Janis Joplin. *No Reason for Livin'*.

these young adults demonstrated their personal demons was through the use of illicit drug and alcohol use.

The counter-culture was filled with alcohol and drug use. LSD, heroin, hard liquor, and Speed were commonplace in “hippie” communities. The artistic movers in this culture used the effects of drugs and alcohol in order to gain new insights into their artistic abilities, for many people, these things were a way to escape everyday life. “Drug use was not symptomatic of a problem in hippie Camelot. It was a deep-rooted problem of our society that spawned the 1960s, and it was, regrettably, carried forward by the new innocents”¹⁴. The counter-culture was not centered on the use of drugs and alcohol, although that does seem to be the lasting memory that later generations remember. Unfortunately, Joplin died from a heroin overdose in 1970. “The nature of Janis’s death, from a heroin overdose, seems to have overshadowed her image in life. The press seldom writes about her fun-loving character, her concentration on art, or her social attitudes, which were so familiar to those of us who knew her. In many people’s minds, the Janis Joplin story is mostly about the steps she took that led to her overdosing on drugs”¹⁵. Joplin’s story can hold true for the rest of the counter-culture movement. In history, it is remembered as a large drug induced orgy but in the context of the actual movement, it meant so much more.

The Woodstock festival experience has helped characterize the counter-culture movement in a number of ways for the modern era. When today’s adolescents learn about the famous festival they are shown pictures of tents with people inside getting high, drinking

¹⁴ Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 242.

¹⁵ Laura Joplin. *Love, Janis*. Page 379.

ridiculous amounts of alcohol, and making “free love”. The reality of Woodstock is that these things did happen, but the festival also had a much larger impact. The artists who performed there, including Joplin, sang songs in which they wished to engage the audience with. The actual festival location was actually moved around to multiple cities in New York until they found a community willing to let the festival happen. Most rural Americans were afraid that hippies would destroy the community with uncontrollable trash and drug use during and after the festival. Those who lived in the community actually changed their minds after the Woodstock festival was completed. “The hippies many of the residents feared, turned out, in many cases, to be kind, polite, willing to pitch in and help in whatever way they could. Many residents were able to overcome their prejudices about the long-haired, ragged, and peculiarly dressed individuals they had heard so much about, but had rarely ever seen”¹⁶.

Young adults who were actively involved in the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and 1970s were willing to risk their comfortable lives in order to find a life full of meaning. It was not easy to leave the comfort of home and to reject the beliefs that had been instilled in them since birth. It was also not simple to deny and reject the teachings of their parents, but these young adults did so in order to make a difference in their world. These young Americans, such as Janis Joplin, put their reputations on the back burner in order to achieve a voice for those who had no voice of their own. These young Americans rejected the hypocrisy, which pervaded the world in which they grew up. While many will still consider this generation lost and sinful, they should be remembered as brave and powerful.

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