
Hand-waving

Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix have been on my mind.

Of course, both were supremely gifted song-writing musicians; both at the wild end of late-60s rock music; and both were lost to us in 1970 while still in their 20s.

But it is their differences rather than their similarities which engage me, not the obvious female/male, white/black, Southern/Northern distinctions, but deeper differences.

Joplin was lost her whole life. A musically-gifted awkward schoolgirl from a stilted short-back-and-sides lower-middle-class small Texas town, her childhood was spent entombed in insecurities: un-boyfriended; left out on prom night; oddballed.

That set the stage for the rest of her life. From desperation to desperation, she clutched at anything, from the first available ticket West, to band to band to band, all the way to the cocktail of drugs that ultimately encoiled and consumed her whole.

She returned for her high school reunion, a hippie-tassled loud-mouthed superstar. But that "f###-you-lot-so-what-do-you-think-of-me-now?" televised parade quickly descended into a searing shrinkage back to her child-self. She fled a second time, back to stardom.

She was (and still is) seen by many in womens' liberation and female rock as a pathbreaker, putting women up front, unapologetically, loudly, as an example.

Indeed, those are things to be done. But they are not what she was doing. Instead, every performance and life-and-soul-of-the-jam-session was a shrieking for help, after every one of which, she returned to her room — for reasons she never understood — alone.

Those who appreciated her music saw only the extraordinary grace of the hand-waving of someone drowning, as she drowned, all the while cheering and urging her to ever more graceful hand-waving.

By contrast, Hendrix's childhood in Seattle Washington was far more obviously troubled: effectively single-parented; subjected to alcohol, physical, and sexual abuse; separated from his siblings; and dirt dirt poor. His first instrument at 14 was a single-stringed ukelele he found in garbage, which he taught himself to play.

But from all that seems to have emerged a calmer, more settled personality, happy, even at the height of his powers, quietly returning home.

His naive self-effacing (offstage) whimsical retiring smile proved a misfit for the army—where he napped on duty, failed to report for bed-checks, and played local clubs.

But thereafter, his gentle spirit and prodigious talent, honed by perpetual tinkering on guitars, proved irresistible to musicians and to the ladies—with some of whom he became close. Only bursts of violence when drunk, sleeplessness, and a sense that he would not make it beyond 30 betrayed lingering demons.

He found his milieu—and, later, his demise—in swinging London, stunning McCartney and similar luminaries with a complete re-rendition in concert of "Sargeant Pepper" just three days after it was first released.

And he produced his most iconic performance at Woodstock—including a solo instrumental rendition of the National Anthem which stands to this day—with a brand new band, at 8.00 o'clock in the morning, in the slushing mud, after being held over as headliner from the previous night as earlier acts had badly overrun. Amid such chaos, he was, despite appearances, the consummate professional.

As with Joplin, narcotics swirled, leading, whatever the final details, directly to his death.

But, despite thereby finding himself in deep deep water, he was not hand-waving.

As a grieving bandmate put it: "the stars aligned to produce him; where were those stars that London Autumn day in 1970?"

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