

**This interview with JOHN SIMON,
producer of “Cheap Thrills,”
was conducted by the Library of Congress
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John Simon

LOC: How were you first approached to produce “Cheap Thrills”? Were you familiar with Janis Joplin or the band prior to getting the assignment?

One of the bands that made *big news* at the Monterey Pop Festival was Big Brother and the Holding Company featuring a dynamic singer named Janis Joplin.

I had first seen her at Monterey, both onstage and backstage, but she made no particular impression on me either way.

I was from the NYC culture and its hubris had convinced me that Manhattan was the center of the universe. So I didn't bother acquainting myself then with what was going on in this San Francisco hodge-podge or in the towns around it.

The band had been signed to Bobby Shad's Mainstream Records but Albert Grossman had taken over their management and convinced Clive Davis at Columbia to put up what my memory tells me was a million bucks to buy out that Mainstream contract.

Since I was Albert's new Music Guy, a few weeks after the Monterey Festival, he and I flew out to San Francisco to meet with and listen to the band.

Actually the band was Big Brother and the Holding Company. Guitarists Sam Andrew and James Gurley, bassist Peter Albin, drummer Dave Getz and Janis. She was the

newest member of the band and I don't know when the subtitle was added to their billing: "featuring Janis Joplin."

"What was Janis Joplin really like?" Well, other than looking at things musically, I didn't pay much special attention to her during those rehearsals in San Francisco. I suppose that, after her performance created a stir at Monterey, she was certainly not a diffident newcomer to the band anymore (if she ever had been diffident--hard to imagine). She was throwing her weight around with the band. There were lively discussions about their arrangements between her and three of the other members (James Gurley being typically reserved).

But that was how I saw her--only on a professional, musical level. Personally, I wasn't at all interested in her. She was loud, drunk, unattractive (though beauty *is* in the eye of the beholder).

Janis had a presence that took over a room. She wasn't very large, maybe 5'5" or so, in my memory, but she seemed not able to sit quietly and just let things happen. She had an opinion and she was going to tell you what it was.

LOC: Can you tell us about the actual recording sessions?

Some months [after that first meeting], the time came to make the Big Brother album.

Some of the sessions were done in NYC and some in LA. I don't remember which came first.

I recently listened again to "Cheap Thrills" which led to a few memories and a surprise.

The surprise was how much of a democracy the album was. Although Janis was the obvious blazing star in the group, several numbers featured vocals by other band members. This was a reminder that she was the newcomer in the band. They already had some repertoire in place in which they sang leads. But even then, as in the first song, "Combination Of The Two," her voice as part of the background vocals eclipses the lead vocal.

Sam Andrew was one of the two guitarists in the band and maybe the musical director. A quiet guy with a Veronica Lake hairstyle, I didn't give him enough credit at the time. George Gershwin's "Summertime" has been recorded countless times but I'd never heard any version with the subtle touch that Sam added.

It's hard to describe music in words, but I'll try. See if you can follow this. Janis sings:

"Summertime, time time" – chord

On the downbeat of the second measure, that's a diminished chord. That's Sam's choice. And I never heard anyone else do it. It's fabulous.

Dave Getz was the drummer. A personable, witty guy who had started out intending to be a serious painter. Dave had an ability to step outside of what the band's reputation had become and comment on it, sometimes humorously, always perceptively.

Peter Albin, the bass player, often stepped up to be the band's business representative. But, in the 60s, hippie business representatives were held to different standards: he was as stoned as the rest.

But James Gurley gave the best impression of a stoner. Because he was. I was led to believe, whether they were pulling my leg or not, that when James wanted to learn how to play the guitar, he bought one and just went out into the desert for a while. Sort of like the wilderness experience of Jesus, whose hairstyle he emulated. As a guitar player, feedback was his fallback. Although Sam's solos were composed of notes and chords that fit the song, James seemed more interested in using the feedback of his amp than he cared about the notes he played. Although that Feedback Fascination soon became a common thing in rock guitar solos, early rock (say pre-Hendrix) still avoided feedback as an unpleasant mistake.

And then there was Janis--the boss. Smart, loud, mercurial, she had the vision. "Cheap Thrills" is the album it is because of Janis, because of her raw emotion, her energy. She gave it her all. She was a blues shouter. Raw.

She practiced.

I remember her trying out different screams on us, saying, "This is the way Tina Turner would scream. Or I could do it like Big Mama Thornton." I came from a jazz background and appreciated spontaneity and improvisation. I didn't think that planning spontaneous screams was sincere. But, in retrospect, I realize she was just trying to do the best she could.

I've always felt that part of Janis's enormous popularity came in part from her appearance and the way she behaved. Before she came on the scene "girl singers" looked and behaved a certain way. If you look at pictures of Lesley Gore, Mary Wells and all the girls groups of the time, they looked like their mothers chose their outfits and did their hair.

Then take a look at Janis. Her mother didn't pick her outfit or do her hair!

These were the years of Liberation and I've always thought that Janis was a symbol of liberation for every "plain girl" who had about given up trying to look like those gussied up, coiffured young singers of the time. For those young women, her sudden, enormous, universal popularity seemed to be like a violent eruption blasting out from their cosmetic frustration: "Yay! Now we've got a champion!"

(Rock historian Tom McAffrey points out that since the advent of MTV, that same requirement has returned. A girl has to be glamorous to make the cut. He writes, “If Janis had come on the scene 30 years later, with the same talent and energy that she had in the 60s, would she never have gotten a record deal and instead stayed a complete unknown?”!)

But that sudden popularity would be dangerous ground for anyone. Just imagine. In San Francisco she had been able to walk through Golden Gate Park and be warmly greeted with smiles from her Flower Power “family.” Now, on the covers of magazines, she couldn’t step out the door of her hotel without encountering a crush of fans.

And in that respect she became a tragic soul--thrown into the world's spotlight faster and harder than she'd ever imagined. But Albert Grossman was her rock. Her shield from the outside world. They clearly loved each other and also depended on each other: Janis on Albert for protection, Albert on Janis for money.

And patchouli. It seemed to me that Janis dipped herself in patchouli oil like strawberries get dipped in chocolate.

I was trying to find a way to describe it. “Pungent” seemed inadequate. According to a botanical text:

Pogostemon patchouli is laevorotatory, with the specific gravity of 0.970 to 0.990 at 15 degrees C. (59 degrees F.).

That doesn’t tell you much either. Then, on the internet, I found this entry in the “Urban Dictionary”:

Hippie perfume. An oil worn as perfume by dirty hippies in lieu of showering or bathing in any way. Used to mask the scent of marijuana and week-old body odor, but usually it merely mixes with the scent to form a new, BO/patchouli combo that can repulse even those who are olfactorally challenged, except for hippies, who love it.

Pretty harsh. But it was noticeable to say the least. Janis coated her outside with patchouli and her inside with Southern Comfort.

Then there was me. Recently out of a suit and tie. Arrogant. Competitive. As the producer, it was my responsibility to deliver a record album. But on their terms, the Haight-Ashbury *hippie* terms, I had no leverage. So, in order to keep control, I had to exact from them a certain degree of *musical* performance. And that I knew how to do.

The recording of “Summertime” was a good example.

For that song, the guys wanted an intro that was like a Bach fugue but they didn't really know how to do that. They got as far as imagining some contrapuntal, weaving melodies

but they hadn't figured out how to make them work as pleasant harmonies at the same time.

Well! As a music major who'd gone through all the harmonizations in the Bach Chorale books, there was finally a way that I could be of some use, apart from generally trying to wrangle them.

So we began every session by rehearsing that intro. I'll lay it out here as simply as I laid it out to them:

Since the song is in the key of A minor, they could try to arrive on the downbeat of each measure playing any one of the three notes in an A minor chord (A, C or E). That was a help. And then I asked them to try the same thing in the middle of the bar. And, lo and behold, chaos was turning into order!

Janis was the newest addition to Big Brother and the Holding Company, but it soon became plain to see and to hear that she was the star. And, as such, she had become the leader. In a zenith of understatement, her name is just listed in the corner of the "Cheap Thrills" album cover as "Janis Joplin, vocals."

As a producer, I would always seek the rubber stamp approval from the artist about everything that was going on the record no matter where the idea or performance originated. So it was Janis to whom I looked. And it was that way with the others in the band too. I may have called the shots as to what we did next, whether we needed another take, what in my opinion was wrong and what was right. But it was Janis whose approval was necessary. And this wasn't always easy. Progress didn't always go in a straight line because of her wild-card drinking.

As it turns out, this dynamic was pretty accurately recorded by Don Pennybaker in the film he shot of a recording session. While I was trying to push us toward accomplishing something or other, Janis was ignoring whatever our objective was at the time and was wrapped up in telling us all a story.

Pennybaker's camera was getting intrusive at one point and I said to him, "Turn that fucking thing off!" That was my film debut.

LOC: Were you on hand at the Fillmore for the live recording of "Ball and Chain"?

Of course.

Months earlier in San Francisco, after checking out their rehearsal, I was supposed to hear the band play live. They had a reputation for inspiring a level of excitement in their audience that was as much a part of their show as their performance. In order to capitalize on that excitement they were eager to record a live album. So that was decided: this new album would be a live recording.

The band was enthusiastic about that prospect. But I wasn't sure they had what it took to make a live recording. In a concert, mistakes are forgotten seconds after they occur but, on a record, MISTAKES LIVE FOREVER.

So I rented Wally Heider's remote recording truck and we recorded a live show at the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco. It was called that because it had once been a skating rink. Though the band may not have known it, this recording was, for Albert and me, an audition. Could they play well enough for a live album?

My suspicions were confirmed. They played with an avalanche of energy and the audience loved it but there were mistakes a-plenty so I knew we'd have to record in the studio where we could stop and start again when there were mistakes. But word had already spread and already a live recording of Big Brother and the Holding Company was enthusiastically expected. I didn't want their fans to be disappointed.

Uh-oh. What to do?

LOC: There has been much talk over the years about the “crowd noise” that was added to the tracks on the album. Can you tell us about that—the idea behind it?

I decided to *fake* a live recording. Earlier, in 1965, I had faked a live stereo recording of the Army-McCarthy hearings on an album called “Point Of Order” from the original monaural tapes. So I'd already gotten my fake-live feet wet.

The choice to make a studio album paid off in “I Need A Man To Love.” If you compare this version with the version on the “Janis Joplin Live at Winterland” album (actually the band's audition tape) you can hear how ragged the background vocals (“No, it just can't be”) sound on the live version. As a studio overdub, we were able to make them clearer and even more powerful by doubling them.

With “Turtle Blues,” the pretense of a recording in a large auditorium was dropped completely. The ambience shrunk from a ballroom to a bar. We even added a glass breaking at the end of Peter's guitar solo and, from the claps at the end, it sounds like an audience of four or five people.

Promoter Bill Graham ends the record with “Have a happy Sunday” and the liturgical music playing in the background was not a studio addition. It was unquestionably recorded live at Winterland.

Remember that test session we did of the band performing live at Winterland months earlier?

In spite of Bill Graham's intro (“Four gentlemen and a great, great broad”) this is not a live album. “Ball and Chain” is the only performance on the album that was actually from a live recording. Well, 90% live because we substituted a new guitar solo for the original.

And that became Exhibit A in what might have been called an “Evidentiary Hearing.”

Some years later, Sony, the inheritor of Columbia Records, issued an album titled “Janis Joplin Live at Winterland” that they maintained were “recently discovered tapes.” Elliott Mazer, who had assisted me in the completion of “Cheap Thrills,” called me up and said, “Hey, those are the test recordings you did. The audition tapes from Winterland. Are you getting royalties?”

I wasn't.

When I reached someone at Sony, they wouldn't believe that the tapes were actually part of the “Cheap Thrills” recording I had done, maintaining that they were “discovered” in their vault unlabeled by a researcher named Bob Irwin (who took a production credit). Whether or not any labels had been destroyed, I put together an Evidence Tape. On the left channel was “Ball and Chain” from the “Janis Joplin Live at Winterland” album and on the right channel was the same song from “Cheap Thrills.”

It was so obvious that they were identical, except for the replacement guitar solo. Even a Martian could hear it.

But when I played it for the suits who ran the biggest record company in the world, they said, “We are not equipped to make musical decisions.”

I am going to repeat that because that sentence is so precious to me.

The lawyers and executives who ran Sony, the biggest record company in the world, said, “*We are not equipped to make musical decisions.*”

In general, and completely, truer words were never spoken. They said they'd have to refer it to their A&R department.

Meeting with a Sony A&R guy, I proved that I produced the “Janis Live At Winterland” recordings (and got a fabulous sushi lunch out of it in the tower of the Sony building) but trying to get the royalties that were due me for producing that audition tape brought more trouble since Bob Irwin already was to receive a royalty.

But that kind of messy bookkeeping has never been atypical in the entertainment business.

LOC: Were there any tracks produced during those recording sessions that didn't make it onto the final album? What was left off and why?

I don't think there were any other tracks. It was hard enough to get [the ones we got]. If there had been other tracks, I think Sony would be quick to issue them to make money from them.