

CHAPTER 3

Next Year in San Francisco

PHILADELPHIA—Tonight's crowd ambles languidly across the floor of the Electric Factory, a huge garage turned psychedelic playground. Mostly, they're straight kids come to gape at the hippies and fathom the Now. Ten years ago, they would have preened their pompadours before the cameras on *American Bandstand*. Today, they steal furtive drags on filter-tip cigarettes, trying to look high. They've all had their palms read by the wizard in the balcony, and their faces painted in the adjacent boutique. Now, they stand like limp meringue, watching a local group called Edison's Electric Machine belt out the psychedelic jive.

A real death scene. Not a pleasant sight for Janis, who peers through a crack in the dressing room door, and scowls, "Oh shit. We'll never be able to get into those kids. Want to see death? Take a look out there. You ever played Philadelphia? No, of course not. You don't *play* anywhere."

You could say she gets nervous before a set. The other members of Big Brother and the Holding Company sit guzzling beer, trying on beads, and hassling their roadie. But Janis stalks around the tiny room, her fingers drumming against a tabletop. She sips hot tea from a Styrofoam cup. She talks in gasps, and between sentences she belts down Southern Comfort. That brand is her trademark. Tonight, a knowing admirer has graced her dressing room with a fifth, in lieu of flowers. "I don't drink anything on the rocks," she explains. "Cold is bad for my throat. So, it's always straight or in tea. Tastes like orange petals in tea. I usually get about a pint and a half down me when I'm performing. Any more, I start to nod out."

Now, the B-group files in, dripping sweat. The lead singer gingerly places his guitar in its plush casket, and peels off an imitation brocade jacket, sweatshirt, pullover, and soaked undershirt. "Why do you wear all that clothing if it's so hot out there?" Janis asks.

"Because I'm freaky." And the door opens again to admit a fully attired gorilla with rubber hands and feet. Janis glances briefly at the ground to make sure it's still there, and then offers the gorilla some booze. He lifts his mask to accept. His name is Gary the Gorilla, and Janis digs that, so she gives him her bottle to hold during the set, and follows Peter the bassman through the dressing room door. Gary unzips his belly and passes his feet around, and the lead singer of Edison's Electric Machine examines a rip in his brocade, consoling himself with the B-group's prayer: Next Year in San Francisco.

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I first met them last year in San Francisco. In a ranch house with an unobstructed view of ticky tack. They were assembled for an interview on hippie culture, and I began with a nervous question about turning on. In answer, somebody lit up and soon the floor was hugging-warm. I glanced down at my notes as though they had become hieroglyphics (which they had). When it was time to split, and everyone had boarded a paisley hearse, I muttered something like, "We shouldn't be interviewed. We should be friends." And the car drove away laughing, with long hair flying from every window.

This summer, 20,000 nomads will be on Haight Street, hoping to get discovered like Janis, in some psychedelic Schwab's. But I'm afraid Big Brother and the Holding Company is the last of the great San Francisco bands. With new groups trying on art music like training bras, they are a glorious throwback to a time when the primary aim in rock was "to get people moving"—nothing more or less. They were nurtured in the hippie renaissance: played the Trips Festival and the first productions of the Family Dog; jammed together in a big house at 1090 Page Street, a mecca for musicians back when the only interested talent scouts were cops.

In 1961, Janis and Chet Helms (proprietor of the Family Dog) hitchhiked west. They were anonymous freaks then, newly plucked from Texas topsoil. "What were the two of you like then, Janis?"

"Oh—younger."

"How were you different from today?"

"We were . . . umm . . . just interested in being beatniks then. Now, we've got responsibilities, and I guess you could say, ambition."

She was born in Port Arthur, Texas, in 1943. Dropped out of four or five schools. Sang in hillbilly bars with a local bluegrass band. For the beer. "We'd do country songs, and then the band'd shut up and I'd sing blues, 'cause that was my thing."

Her thing was no Patti Page regatta, no Connie Francis sob-along, but a mangy backwoods blues, heavy with devotion to Bessie Smith. She still smears Bessie across everything she sings, making it possible for a whole generation of us to hear beyond the scratches in those old records. But she says she never really tried to sing rock until she joined Big Brother.

"See, Bessie, she sang big open notes in very simple phrasing. But you can't fall back on that in front of a rock band. I mean, you can't sing loose and easy with a throbbing amplifier and drums behind you. The beat just pushes you on. So I started singing rhythmically, and now I'm learning from Otis Redding to push a song instead of just sliding over it."

It was Chet Helms who made Janis part of the Holding Company (before that, it had been an instrumental band, one of dozens formed during the merger of folk, jazz, and rock among Bay Area youth). From the start their music began to clothe her voice. They taught her to blast, pound, and shatter a song. She returned the favor by directing her solos toward the group's rhythmic heart.

"I have three voices," she explains. "The shouter; the husky, guttural chick; and the high wailer. When I turn into a nightclub singer, I'll probably use my husky voice. That's the one my mother likes. She says, 'Janis, why do you scream like that when you've got such a pretty voice?'"

It's not a pretty sound she makes now. A better word would be "primal." She plants herself onstage like a firmly rooted tree, then whips more emotion out of her upper branches than most

singers can wring out of their lower depths. She stings like sunburn, shrieks like war. And she does one other thing that makes it all so sexy. She needs. Needs to move, to feel, to be screamed at; needs to touch and be touched.

"'Ball And Chain' is the hardest thing I do. I have to really get inside my head, every time I sing it. Because it's about feeling things. That means, I can never sing it without really trying. See, there's this big hole in the song that's mine, and I've got to fill it with something. So, I do. And it really tires me out. But, it's so groovy when you know the audience really wants you. I mean, whatever you give them, they'll believe in. And they yell back at you, call your name and like that."

It's always the same: at Monterey, where the media discovered her; at the Avalon in San Francisco, where they know her best; at the Anderson, where the New York press corps first saw her perform; and tonight at the Electric Factory in Philadelphia. She begs and coaxes her audiences until they begin to holler, first in clichés like "do-it-to-it" and finally in wordless squeals. Suddenly, the room is filled with the agony in her voice. Kids surround the stage, spilling over with the joy of having been reached. Even nerds in neckties nod their heads and whisper, "Shit . . . oh shit." Because to hear Janis sing "Ball and Chain" just once is to have been laid, lovingly and well.

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Two sets later, they are back in the dressing room, flushed with sweat and applause. There is another hassle with the roadie. Dave the drummer changes into his third shirt that evening. And Janis is sitting on Gary the Gorilla's lap, fondling his furry knees and opening a second fifth of Southern Comfort.

"Why do I always hafta dance alone in these places?" she rasps. "I mean, you saw me dancing out there between sets. All those guys were standing around, panting in the corner. Finally, I had to say to one of 'em: 'Well, do you wanna dance, or not?' and he comes on waving his arms around like a fuckin' bat. Didn't even look at me. Now, why do things like that always happen?"

"Because you're so weird looking, Janis," the roadie answers.

She nods slowly, and whispers, "Yeah." She digs and detests her weirdness. She would like to be the freakiest chick in rock,

and a gracious young lady as well. At a recent press party, to celebrate the group's new contract with Columbia Records, Janis shook out her hair only to confront a lady out of *Harper's Bazaar* who covered up her drink and said, "Do you mind?" "Fuck off, baby," Janis replied. But later she was seen pouting before a mirror, muttering, "Face it, baby, you've got ratty hair."

Now she moves out of the tiny room and surveys the remnants of this evening's scene: cigarette butts and a gaggle of local freaks. Peter the bassman is already making contact with a pale young lady searching for a seminal autograph. And Gandalf, the wizard from the balcony, offers to read every palm in the room, whispering, "Hey—let's go up to your room and smoke."

Later, at a hamburger stand, Gandalf stops in the middle of a poem he is composing on a napkin and reflects: "Tomorrow, I'm gonna make it with Janis. I'm gonna just go up to her and say 'Hey—let's make it.' 'Cause she's so groovy to watch. What a bod she must have under that voice." He pauses to consider it, and then asks a waitress for spare whipped cream cans.

But Gandalf the wizard may have to wait longer than tomorrow. For this very night, while Philadelphia sleeps, Janis is with Gary the Gorilla, and they are finishing off the second fifth. Together.

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