Alexander Kurata

Garabedian

First Year Seminar

April 25, 2017

How ***We*** Learned to Stop Worrying and ***Love*** the Change

Music and activism seem to always go hand and hand; however, activism is what really changes the world. Generally, one works without the other, but there’s a special cohesion between the two that make them pop at times. Music and activism are very similar when you think about it, they both can be inspiring or demoralizing, boring or exciting, scary or … well…. not, I think you get the point. But more importantly than anything, they are both influential: Mozart defined an era of culture with his music, Martian Luther King Jr. inspired the growth of a movement that flipped the United States on its head, The Beatles have etched “Yellow Submarine” into the heads of every generation since its release, and women today march down Pennsylvania Avenue with a whirlwind of support behind them. The point being here, music and activism bring about a dramatic shift in the tone that defines history.

Music can only do so much, when you think about Mozart, you don’t generally think about his widely-spread feud with Antonio Salieri (It’s okay, hardly anyone does these days). But when you think about Bob Dylan, you can’t help but imagining the black freedom struggle of the 1960’s.

According to ideas of Alice Echols, Janis Joplin was born into a world of music in her book *Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin*. She showed that she was very musically inclined, and it’s fair to say that without music at all, her life would have been entirely different. But would her life have been lived the same without the influences around her. She was surrounded by a vastly shifting world, between the evolutions in the black freedom struggle, to the growing tensions in Vietnam, Janis Joplin was molded by a movement that shaped not only her but an era[[1]](#footnote-1).

Appealing to the details provided by Echols throughout the book, Janis Joplin experiences a quickly evolving world. Her idols became musicians, and other artists, not purely because of their shocking comprehension of music at the time, but rather because of their identity. As Echols states “Music, too, became a passion for Janis and her fellow rebels. Music wasn’t just background noise; it was a declaration of difference”[[2]](#footnote-2). The attraction towards a different type of character is what made a first impression on defining who Joplin became.

Change is the complete embodiment of activism. The only reason to really be an activist of any cause is to promote change, and difference. Socially accepted or not, Joplin identified with this set of ideals. She was clearly wanting to explore outside of the ‘standard’ to redefine her own character in a propitious manner[[3]](#footnote-3). I think it’s improper in this sense to conclude that “music can change your life”[[4]](#footnote-4), the music only worked as a medium to convey a confusing, yet alluring series of defining emotions.

Good music is a bunch of notes and chords played together to sound a certain way. Great music utilizes the same notes and chords to play meaning. People don’t inherently listen to music because its ‘pretty’ there’s a different level of resonation. There’s passion in great music, I think an apparent example of this is Nina Simone’s *Mississippi Goddamn.* Simone wrote this song out of enraged emotions towards a church bombing that subjected two children victim. You can hear the tension in her voice, her stressed tones, her excessive nature alone provokes profound feelings whether they be relevant or not.

Joplin identified with artists at the time who often conveyed these types of feelings, from Bob Dylan to Bessy Smith. Bob Dylan’s works often regarded as poetry set a defined tone, primarily about war or racism, and grew to provoke the feelings associated. Essentially, music alone was not the entire force that molded Janis Joplin and subsequently changing her life, but rather the intricate composition that composed these musical compositions (it makes sense I swear). These feelings come from a source of activism, inspired by the cruelties of the world, sparking a true taunt against their nature[[5]](#footnote-5). And the best way to share these inexplicable emotions is through music.

Music held value towards positive social change[[6]](#footnote-6) because it encouraged listeners to have expressive freedom. Joplin was a rebel, someone who didn’t centrally align with predetermined views, this exposed Janis to opinions that she wouldn’t normally encounter without a national stage under her foot[[7]](#footnote-7). Granted her rise to fame only inflated her relaxed attitude. Joplin’s career in music demonstrates a profound rationale as how her early influences in music and associations with music come full circle. She becomes an inspiring artist to many youth, and her attainment to free will in expression directly effect a status that started a movement.

Echols often views Joplin with an angle of hesitation, she approaches her life as through Janis reserved her actions initially[[8]](#footnote-8). But in the end Janis made certain decision because she felt open and confident. When being confronted about her bisexuality, Janis appeared to have been very guarded[[9]](#footnote-9) “Peggy believes that Janis’s reticence may well have stemmed from shyness”[[10]](#footnote-10). But she inevitably accepted her reserved emotions, “Janis grew up in the fifties; she could hardly have emerged unscathed by the sexual shame that haunted most people whose desires were deemed queer.”[[11]](#footnote-11) And later that same page “Janis went public once, at Woodstock in 1969, where she apparently grabbed one of Peggy’s breasts in front of a gaggle of reporters.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The book early on analyses her home life as a quaint little place, specializing in folk music[[13]](#footnote-13). But Janis Joplin expanded beyond her small-town life, she became engrossed with music and popular culture of the time. This exposure to the massive medium that is popular music helped convey ideas from activist movements to her. This primarily being the concept of freedom, as seen in a big-ticket controversy of the time, the black freedom struggle.

The same type of influences on Joplin were applied to the entire country, with popular music being so present in common culture, so many people were being shared new ideas and perspectives. An entire generation was being raised with a similar interest as Joplin. Viewing the author Charles Hughes opinions on artists in a pivotal moment in history in the book *Country Soul Making Music and Making Race in The American South,* Hughes gives a thesis regarding artists in the country soul triangle that seems pertinent: “Through their work, the musicians of the country-soul triangle became pivotal actors in the larger trajectory of U.S racial politics in the twentieth century”[[14]](#footnote-14). The artists in reference are the same, if not similar ones who broadcasted ideas to Joplin’s generation. The activist inspiration of these artists brought about a wide spread cultural change, eventually allowing Joplin to inspire masses with her music.

*Good* music can change lives. Music with a developed meaning from activist movements can change more lives. The crucial aspects of music that spark positive changes in the world come from purpose and passion. Taking steps at key political action, from protests, to marches, to media coverage lead to an overwhelming sense of anger. In the words of Aziz Ansari regarding the recent election of President Trump towards a livid Saturday Night Live audience, “Change comes from large groups of angry people, and if day one is any indication, you are part of the largest group of angry people I have ever seen.” The real way to inspire people is by making them mad, it doesn’t take much when there really is a problem. Think about it, the moment a fly buzzes into your ear, your first thought is:

“that fly has to die now.”

Bibliography:

* Echols, Alice. Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin. London, Virago, 2001.
* Hughes, Charles. *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in The American South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

1. Alice Echols, *Scars of Sweet Paradise: The Life and Times of Janis Joplin* (Holt Paperbacks, 2001), 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Ibid*, *21* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid, 85* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Steven Garabedian, “First Year Seminar” (FYS 101 Essay\_2AssignmenSheet, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid, 266* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Note: I suppose “positive change” is a complicated thing to define. The way I am trying to interpret it is as giving people more freedom in choice, personal freedom allows for an individual to decipher positive choices. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid, 196* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*, 254 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid, 251* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid, 252* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid, 85* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Charles Hughes, *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in The American South* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2015), 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)