The Guide
A Theatergoer’s Resource
Edited by Kathleen Conners and Erin Lucas for the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

ONE NIGHT WITH JANIS JOPLIN
Created, Written, and Directed by Randy Johnson

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The Making of a World Premiere

One Night With Janis Joplin explores Joplin’s music, words, art and diverse influences. Playwright-director Johnson’s unprecedented access to the Joplin Family archives has enabled him to give audiences a profound immersion in this blues-blasting trailblazer’s world. Packed with dynamic performances, including several legendary songs and other material the rock icon never formally recorded, this is Janis Joplin’s musical journey presented in a powerfully immediate form.

The family of Janis Joplin and those representing her estate made the decision this past year to release more of Janis’ work and writing, to continue to share with the public more of her artistry and inspirations. They connected with Randy Johnson, writer and director, and asked him to create a new theatrical presentation that would bring more of this material to the public, and they are granting rights to Janis’ work only for this new project.

We are fortunate in that, having already planned to present a musical about Janis (this production replaces the previously announced Love, Janis) we were approached by the estate to be the first theater to present this world premiere. So more than just a change of title, this is a completely fresh look at Janis’ unique gifts, and PCS audiences will be the first to experience it.

About the Artists

Janis Joplin

Janis Lyn Joplin was born January 19, 1943 and died October 4, 1970. In between she led a triumphant and tumultuous life blessed by an innate talent to convey powerful emotion through heart-stomping rock-and-roll singing. Born and raised in Port Arthur, Texas, a small Southern petroleum industry town, she gravitated to artistic interests cultivated by parents Seth and Dorothy Joplin.

Janis broke with local social traditions during the tense days of racial integration, standing up for the rights of African Americans whose segregated status in her hometown seared her youthful ideals. Along with fellow band beatnik-reading high school students, she pursued the non-traditional via arts and literature, especially music. They gravitated to folk and jazz with Janis especially taken with the blues. Discovering an inborn talent to belt the blues, Janis began copying the styles of Bessie Smith, Odetta and Leadbelly. She played the coffee houses and hootenannies of the day in the small towns of Texas. She later ventured to the beatnik haunts of Venice, North Beach and the Village in New York, eventually landing in Austin, Texas as a student at the University of Texas. Jumping into the on-the-edge lifestyle cultivated by the beats, Janis thrilled at her creativity, but almost lost herself in experiments with drugs and alcohol, especially speed.

Returning home for a year to question her life direction, she excelled at college but was never content. Music still called her to her in spite of its dangerous association with drugs. “The two aren’t wedded,” her friends counseled. When old Austin friend, Chet Helms, then in San Francisco, called to offer her a singing audition with an up-and-coming local group, Janis was tempted. She found a vital San Francisco community, turned upside down by the flower children of
About the Artists (continued)

1966, and was offered the singing position in a relatively obscure group called “Big Brother and the Holding Company.”

The group was actively courted by Albert Grossman, one of the most powerful entertainment managers of the day. Through his representation, they signed a three-record recording contract with Columbia Records, who bought out Mainstream’s rights. Their Cheap Thrills album was released in August, 1968 and soon went gold, presenting the hits “Piece of My heart” and “Summertime.” The band was playing to large audiences, for big fees, and the billing now read “Janis Joplin with Big Brother and the Holding Company.” The pressure mounted, income rose and hippie rockers indulged themselves with their new ability to use high-priced drugs. Drugs began affecting their performing and work relationships and in Christmas of 1968, the group played its last gig together.

Janis formed a new group, oriented more toward blues and released a new album I Got Dem ‘Ol Kozmic Blues Again, Mama in September of 1969. In the U.S., mixed reviews greeted the new sound but in Europe the group was welcomed with loudly enthusiastic praise. Still the anything-goes lifestyle grew with greater use of drug and alcohol to both increase the artistic creativity and to handle the tensions of coming down. Finally recognizing the problems in her life, Janis quit her drug use. She formed a third band, called Full Tilt Boogie Band, which evolved more professional popular sound. Janis felt she’d finally found her unique style of white blues. She was never happier with her new music. While recording her next album Pearl, she chanced into using heroin again. Obtaining a dose more pure than usual, she accidentally overdosed in a motel in Los Angeles at the age of 27. Her third album was released posthumously to wide acclaim, launching the popular songs “Me and Bobby McGee” and “Mercedes Benz.”

Randy Johnson

Johnson, a graduate of the USC School of Theatre in Los Angeles, has produced, directed or written some of the most groundbreaking and historic landmark events in the business.

For the 20th anniversary of Elvis Presley’s death, Johnson co-conceived and directed Elvis the Concert, which reunited Elvis’ original band, singers and musical director in a virtual interactive concert featuring Elvis. The show was an immediate hit with sold out shows at Radio City Music Hall and arenas worldwide. The 25th Anniversary show, which also featured appearances by Priscilla Presley and Lisa Marie Presley, was released on DVD and appears on PBS annually. This show is in the Guinness Book of World Records as “The most successful rock tour performed by an artist deceased”. The production is in its 14th year of international touring.

Johnson staged and directed Pope Benedict’s most recent appearance in New York. The event attended by over 100,000 people, was a four-hour concert featuring top music acts from all over the world including Grammy winner Kelly Clarkson, that culminated in a Papal Mass led by the Holy Father. The entire event was broadcast worldwide.

Concert Tours and PBS Specials include; Carly Simon—A Moonlight Serenade Aboard the Queen Mary 2 for PBS, Carly Simon at the Apollo Theatre, Michael Bolton—Bolton Swings Sinatra (worldwide tour), and Elvis Lives—The 25th Anniversary Concert for PBS and Television Worldwide.
Johnson’s theater credits include: The Original Producer of Always Patsy Cline including regional theatre productions, national tours, and the successful Off Broadway Production, he also Executive Produced the MCA Original Cast Album of Always Patsy Cline; Produced the West Coast premiere of The Normal Heart starring Richard Dreyfus and Kathy Bates; Writing and Directing The Wildest—Hip, Cool and Swinging—The Musical Sounds of Louis Prima and Keely Smith, which premiered at PCPA Theatre Fest and has been published by Samuel French;


Johnson has directed many events including: Co-producing with Bernie Taupin and Directed for five consecutive years the historic Commitment to Life at the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles. These evenings featured performances by Barbra Streisand, Elton John, Bette Midler, Sarah Brightman, Liza Minnelli, Melissa Etheridge, Billy Joel, Julie Andrews, Patti LaBelle, Natalie Cole, Garth Brooks, Joni Mitchell, George Michael, Madonna, Rod Stewart, Vanessa Redgrave, Tom Cruise, Neil Diamond, Tom Hanks and many others. The events raised over 35 million dollars for Aids Project Los Angeles. The events honored David Geffen, Madonna, Barbra Streisand, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Bette Midler, Barry Diller, Elizabeth Taylor and First Lady Hillary Clinton; Directing Audrey Hepburn in an orchestral staged reading of A Diary of Anne Frank for UNICEF; Directing Katharine Hepburn in the documentary of A Wonderful Life—A Tribute to Jimmy Stewart, the grand opening of Universal Studios Islands of Adventure, with executive producer Steven Spielberg; Directing President Ronald Reagan’s 80th birthday celebration at the Beverly Wilshire; Directing the Economic Summit of Industrialized Nations in Houston; Directing Tennessee’s Bi-centennial celebration, hosted by Vice President Al Gore; Directing the Californian Governors Awards For The Arts at the Beverly Hilton Hotel; and Directing Horizon’s—the grand opening of General Motors Place in Vancouver Canada, a 22,000-seat arena, which featured performances by David Foster, Sara McLaughlin, Shania Twain and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra.

Johnson was asked by Governor Howard Dean to be on his executive staff as The National Events Producer for his Presidential Campaign. For Governor Dean, he produced events across the country featuring: Bonnie Raitt, Sean Penn, David Crosby, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Sandra Bernhard, Carly Simon and many others.

He is a recipient of “The Crystal Apple Reward” for his work with Aids Project Los Angeles, and received the “Volunteer of the Year” for his work with La Shanti, as well as being awarded 2 ISIS Awards for Horizon’s at General Motors Place in Vancouver, Canada.
World of the Play

The Set List

**Act I**
Amazing Grace  
Tell Mama  
My Baby  
Maybe  
Summertime  
Coo Coo  
Turtle Blues  
Down on Me  
Piece of My Heart  
Today I sing the Blues  
Nobody Knows When You're Down and Out  
A Woman Left Lonely  
Spirit in the Dark

**Intermission**

**Act II**
Raise Your Hand (Instrumental)  
Try (Just a Little Bit Harder)  
Little Girl Blues  
Cry Baby  
Kozmic Blues/I Shall Be Released  
Me and Bobby McGee  
Ball and Chain  
Kozmic Blues  
Stay with Me  
Mercedes Benz  
I'm Gonna Rock My Way To Heaven

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**An Excerpt—Big Brother & the Holding Company: A Brief History**

The band was formed by Peter Albin, Sam Andrew, James Gurley and Chuck Jones in San Francisco, in a Victorian mansion/boarding house owned by Peter’s uncle at 1090 Page Street in the Haight-Ashbury. That house became the site of Wednesday night jam sessions which were organized by Chet Helms who was the real “Big Brother,” naming the band, bringing James Gurley into the fold and later seeing that his old friend Janis Joplin came to sing with them. The first official Big Brother gig was at the Open Theater in Berkeley, January 1966. Within a short time they became the house band for Chet at the Avalon Ballroom and began to develop a loyal following, largely due to the charismatic, pioneering guitar work of James Gurley. The band had what Sam Andrew called a “progressive-regressive hurricane blues style,” playing such tunes as Hall of the Mountain King, Coo Coo, That’s How Strong My Love Is, and Down On Me.

During the winter of 1966, Chuck Jones left the band and was replaced by Dave Getz who played his first gig with the band on 12 March at the Matrix on Fillmore Street. Peter Albin was the main vocalist at this time, and although Sam Andrew helped out with the singing, both men knew that the band needed a singer who could match the group’s instrumental energies. Chet Helms remembered a friend from his University of Texas days, Janis Joplin, and proposed that
he bring her back to San Francisco, where she had tried to launch a singing career in 1963-1964. Janis came to town, sang a couple of tunes with the band at their Henry Street studio, and was enthusiastically welcomed into the group, playing her first Big Brother engagement at the Avalon Ball room on 10 June 1966. Big Brother had been a loose, ramshackle, experimenting ensemble and now, with Janis, the music became more structured, and the band became a family. They moved out of San Francisco, north to Lagunitas in Marin County, found a beautiful house where they could all live and rehearse and settled down to some serious music making.

In August 1966, Big Brother went to Chicago, their first real on the road experience, and they played a month at Mother Blues, a club in Old Town, and recorded their first album at Mainstream Records. It was to be a year before this effort was released and the band went through the winter of 1966 and the spring of 1967 becoming a more professional unit and building an audience. June of 1967 brought the Monterey Pop Festival, a big shift for Big Brother. Janis had learned how to sing in front of an electric band, she became larger than life and her "screamingly mournful vocals and potently sexual stage act," had, as a reviewer noted, propelled Big Brother into the national spotlight. Peter, Sam, Dave and James, strong personalities in their own right, were wise enough to give Janis the freedom truly to be herself, and people responded to the power of the band and to Janis' truly unique voice.

Janis Joplin left Big Brother in December 1968 and Sam Andrew went with her, while Peter Albin and Dave Getz joined Country Joe and the Fish. In the fall of 1969, Peter, Sam, Dave and James resurrected Big Brother with the help of Dave Schalloch (guitar), Nick Gravenites (vocals and great songwriting), and Kathi McDonald one of the best singers ever.

An Excerpt—
Woodstock 1969

Rolling Stone has called it “the most famous event in rock history.” The Woodstock Music and Art Fair, on a 600-acre farm in the township of Bethel, New York, from August 15-18, 1969, represents more than a peaceful gathering of 500,000 people and 32 musical performances. Woodstock has become an idea that has suffused our culture, politically and socially, as much as musically. Joni Mitchell, who didn't attend but wrote an anthemic song about it, once said, “Woodstock was a spark of beauty” where half-a-million kids “saw that they were part of a greater organism.” According to Michael Lang, one of four young men who formed Woodstock Ventures to produce the festival, “That's what means the most to me – the connection to one another felt by all of us who worked on the festival, all those who came to it, and the millions who couldn't be there but were touched by it.”

By Wednesday, August 13, the lush green bowl in front of the massive 75-foot stage was already filled with some 60,000 people. On Friday the roads were so clogged with cars that the only way most artists could reach the festival was by helicopter from a nearby airstrip. Though over 100,000 tickets were sold prior to the festival weekend, they became unnecessary: The fences and gates were never finished and people simply swarmed over those that were in place. “It’s a free concert from now on!” was announced from the stage. As John Roberts later pointed out, “It took us eleven years to break even, but it was a success in every other way.”

The music was scheduled to start at 4 p.m. on August 15, and just after 5 it did, thanks to New York-born folksinger Richie Havens. His improvised and rhythmic “Freedom” set the tone for the weekend. “The vibe at Woodstock was an expression of the times,” says Joel Rosenman.
Artists that Inspired Janis

Joan Baez in full Joan Chandos Baez (born Jan. 9, 1941, Staten Island, N.Y., U.S.), American folksinger and political activist who interested young audiences in folk music during the 1960s. Despite the inevitable fading of the folk music revival, Baez continued to be a popular performer into the 21st century. By touring with younger performers throughout the world and staying politically engaged, she reached a new audience both in the United States and abroad. Her sense of commitment and unmistakable voice continued to win acclaim.

The daughter of a physicist of Mexican descent whose teaching and research took him to various communities in New York, California, and elsewhere, Baez moved often and acquired little formal musical training. Her first instrument was the ukulele, but she soon learned to accompany her clear soprano voice on the guitar. Her first solo album, Joan Baez, was released in 1960. Although some considered her voice too pretty, her youthful attractiveness and activist energy put her in the forefront of the 1960s folk music revival, popularizing traditional songs through her performances in coffeehouses, at music festivals, and on television and through her record albums, which were best sellers from 1960 through 1964 and remained popular. She was instrumental in the early career of Bob Dylan, with whom she was romantically involved for several years. (Her relationship with Dylan and with her sister and brother-in-law, the folksinging duo Mimi and Richard Farina, is chronicled in David Hajdu’s Positively 4th Street [2001].) Two of the songs with which she is most identified are her 1971 cover of the Band’s “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” and her own “Diamonds and Rust,” which she recorded on her acclaimed album of the same name, issued in 1975.

An active participant in the 1960s protest movement, Baez made free concert appearances for UNESCO, civil rights organizations, and anti-Vietnam War rallies. In 1964 she refused to pay federal taxes that went toward war expenses, and she was jailed twice in 1967. The following year she married David Harris, a leader in the national movement to oppose the draft who served nearly two years in prison for refusing to comply with his draft summons (they divorced in 1973). Baez was in Hanoi in December 1972, delivering Christmas presents and mail to American prisoners of war, when the United States targeted the North Vietnamese capital with the most intense bombing
campaign of the war. The title track of her 1973 album *Where Are You Now, My Son?* chronicles the experience; it is a 23-minute spoken-word piece punctuated with sound clips that Baez recorded during the bombing. Throughout the years, she remained deeply committed to social and political causes, lending her voice to many concerts for a variety of causes. Among Baez’s other noteworthy recordings are *Very Early Joan* (1982), *Speaking of Dreams* (1989), *Play Me Backwards* (1992), *Gone from Danger* (1997), and *Bowery Songs* (2005). She wrote *Daybreak* (1968), an autobiography, and a memoir titled *And a Voice to Sing With* (1987).

Aretha Franklin

in full Aretha Louise Franklin (born March 25, 1942, Memphis, Tenn., U.S.), American singer who defined the golden age of soul music of the 1960s. Franklin’s mother, Barbara, was a gospel singer and pianist. Her father, C.L. Franklin, presided over the New Bethel Baptist Church of Detroit, Michigan, and was a minister of national influence. A singer himself, he was noted for his brilliant sermons, many of which were recorded by Chess Records.

Her parents separated when she was six, and Franklin remained with her father in Detroit. Her mother died when Aretha was 10. As a young teen, Franklin performed with her father on his gospel programs in major cities throughout the country and was recognized as a vocal prodigy. Her central influence, Clara Ward of the renowned Ward Singers, was a family friend. Other gospel greats of the day—Albertina Walker and Jackie Verdell—helped shape young Franklin’s style. Her album *The Gospel Sound of Aretha Franklin* (1956) captures the electricity of her performances as a 14-year-old.

At age 18, with her father’s blessing, Franklin switched from sacred to secular music. She moved to New York City, where Columbia Records executive John Hammond, who had signed Count Basie and Billie Holiday, arranged her recording contract and supervised sessions highlighting her in a blues-jazz vein. From that first session, “Today I Sing the Blues” (1960) remains a classic. But, as her Detroit friends on the Motown label enjoyed hit after hit, Franklin struggled to achieve crossover success. Columbia placed her with a variety of producers who marketed her to both adults (“If

Ever You Should Leave Me,” 1963) and teens (“Soulville,” 1964). Without targeting any particular genre, she sang everything from Broadway ballads to youth-oriented rhythm and blues. Critics recognized her talent, but the public remained lukewarm until 1966, when she switched to Atlantic Records, where producer Jerry Wexler allowed her to sculpt her own musical identity.

At Atlantic, Franklin returned to her gospel-blues roots, and the results were sensational. “I Never Loved a Man (the Way I Love You)” (1967), recorded at Fame Studios in Florence, Alabama, was her first million-seller. Surrounded by sympathetic musicians playing spontaneous arrangements and devising the background vocals herself, Franklin refined a style associated with Ray Charles—a rousing mixture of gospel and rhythm and blues—and raised it to new heights. As a civil-rights-minded nation lent greater support to black urban music, Franklin was crowned the “Queen of Soul.” “Respect,” her 1967 cover of Otis Redding’s spirited composition, became an anthem operating on personal, sexual, and racial levels. “Think” (1968), which Franklin wrote herself, also had more than one meaning. For the next half-dozen years, she became a hit maker of unprecedented proportions; she was “Lady Soul.”

In the early 1970s she triumphed at the Fillmore West in San Francisco before an audience of flower children and on whirlwind tours of Europe and Latin America. Her return to church, *Amazing Grace* (1972), is considered one of the great gospel albums of any era. By the late 1970s disco cramped Franklin’s style and eroded her popularity. But in 1982, with help from singer-songwriter-producer Luther Vandross, she was back on top with a new label, Arista, and a new dance hit, “Jump to It,” followed by “Freeway of Love” (1985). A reluctant interviewee, Franklin kept her private life private, claiming that the popular perception associating her with the unhappiness of singers Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday was misinformed.

Etta James

World of the Play

(continued)

With bandleader Johnny Otis, James as a teenager composed a reply song to Hank Ballard and the Midnighters’ suggestive hits “Work with Me, Annie” and “Annie Had a Baby”; originally titled “Roll with Me, Henry,” “The Wallflower” became a rhythm-and-blues hit for James and then a million-seller in a sanitized cover version (“Dance with Me, Henry”) by Georgia Gibbs. A veteran of grueling tours on the rhythm-and-blues theatre circuit, James battled drug addiction for much of her career. Her highly dramatic qualities became evident on her 1960s ballads such as “All I Could Do Was Cry,” “I’d Rather Go Blind,” and the sensuous “At Last.” Over the years James’s voice changed—growing rougher and deeper and losing its little-girl quality—and she became one of the first women to sing in the style that became soul. She continued to perform and record into the early 21st century.

Odetta née Odetta Holmes (born Dec. 31, 1930, Birmingham, Ala., U.S.—died Dec. 2, 2008, New York, NY.), American folk singer who was noted especially for her versions of spirituals and who became for many the voice of the civil rights movement of the early 1960s.

After her father’s death in 1937, Odetta moved with her mother to Los Angeles. She began classical voice training at age 13, and she earned a degree in classical music from Los Angeles City College. Though she had heard the music of the Deep South as a child, it was not until 1950, on a trip to San Francisco, that she began to appreciate and participate in the emergent folk scene. She soon learned to play the guitar and began to perform traditional songs. Her distinctive blend of folk, blues, ballads, and spirituals was powered by her rich vocal style, wide range, and deep passion. Within a few years her career took off. In the early 1950s she moved to New York City, where she met singers Pete Seeger and Harry Belafonte, who became loyal supporters. Her debut solo recording, Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues (1956), was soon followed by At the Gate of Horn (1957). Singer-songwriter Bob Dylan later said that hearing Odetta on record “turned me on to folk singing.” She performed at the Newport (R.I.) Folk Festival four times during 1959–65, and she subsequently appeared on television and in several films.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Odetta continued to record as a leading folk musician—although recordings did not do her performances justice. Her music and her politics suited the growing civil rights movement, and in 1963 she sang at the historic March on Washington led by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Inevitably, as the movement waned and interest in folk music declined, Odetta’s following shrank, although she continued to perform. In 1999 Pres. Bill Clinton awarded her the National Medal of Arts, the highest award given in the arts in the United States, and in 2003 she was named a Living Legend by the Library of Congress.

Nina Simone (Eunice Waymon), American singer (b. Feb. 21, 1933, Tryon, N.C.—d. April 21, 2003, Carry-le-Rouet, France), created urgent emotional intensity by singing songs of love, protest, and black empowerment in a dramatic style, with a rough-edged voice. Originally noted as a jazz singer, she became a prominent voice of the 1960s civil rights movement with recordings such as “Mississippi Goddam” and “Old Jim Crow”; her best-known composition was “To Be Young, Gifted and Black.” She also recorded songs by rock and pop songwriters. A precocious child, she played piano and organ in girlhood. She became sensitive to racism when at age 12 she gave a piano recital in a library where her parents had to stand in back because they were black. A student of classical music at the Juilliard School of Music in New York City, she began performing as a pianist. Her vocal career began in 1954 in an Atlantic City, N.J., nightclub when the club owner threatened to fire her unless she sang too. Her first album featured her distinctive versions of jazz and cabaret standards, including “I Loves You, Porgy,” which became a 1959 hit. In the 1960s she added protest songs, became a friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, and performed at civil rights demonstrations. Her popularity grew as she added folk and gospel selections as well as songs by the Bee Gees, Bob Dylan, and Screaming Jay Hawkins (“I Put a Spell on You”), to her repertoire. Angered by American racism, she left the United States in 1973 and lived in Barbados, Africa, and Europe for the rest of her life. Like her private life, her career was turbulent, and she gained a reputation for throwing onstage tantrums, insulting inattentive audiences, and abruptly canceling concerts. A 1980s Chanel television commercial that included her vocal “My Baby Just Cares for Me” helped introduce
her to many new, younger listeners. Despite ill health, she continued to tour and perform, and she maintained a devoted international following to the end.

**Bessie Smith**

in full Elizabeth Smith (born April 15, 1898?, Chattanooga, Tenn., U.S.—died Sept. 26, 1937, Clarksdale, Miss.), American singer, one of the greatest of blues vocalists.

Smith grew up in poverty and obscurity. She may have made a first public appearance at the age of eight or nine at the Ivory Theatre in her hometown. About 1919 she was discovered by Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, one of the first of the great blues singers, from whom she received some training. For several years Smith traveled through the South singing in tent shows and bars and theatres in small towns and in such cities as Birmingham, Alabama; Memphis, Tennessee; and Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia. After 1920 she made her home in Philadelphia, and it was there that she was first heard by Clarence Williams, a representative of Columbia Records. In February 1923 she made her first recordings, including the classic “Down Hearted Blues,” which became an enormous success, selling more than two million copies. She made 160 recordings in all, in many of which she was accompanied by some of the great jazz musicians of the time, including Fletcher Henderson, Benny Goodman, and Louis Armstrong.

Bessie Smith’s subject matter was the classic material of the blues: poverty and oppression, love—betrayed or unrequited—and stoic acceptance of defeat at the hands of a cruel and indifferent world. The great tragedy of her career was that she outlived the topicality of her idiom. In the late 1920s her record sales and her fame diminished as social forces changed the face of popular music and bowdlerized the earthy realism of the sentiments she expressed in her music. Her gradually increasing alcoholism caused managements to become wary of engaging her, but there is no evidence that her actual singing ability ever declined.

Known in her lifetime as the “Empress of the Blues,” Smith was a bold, supremely confident artist who often disdained the use of a microphone and whose art expressed the frustrations and hopes of a whole generation of black Americans. Her tall figure and upright stance, and above all her handsome features, are preserved in a short motion picture, *St. Louis Blues* (1929), banned for its realism and now preserved in the Museum of Modern Art, New York City. She died from injuries sustained in a road accident. It was said that, had she been white, she would have received earlier medical treatment, thus saving her life, and Edward Albee made this the subject of his play *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960).

**Big Mama Thornton**

(with Big Mama image), by name of Willie Mae Thornton (born Dec. 11, 1926, Montgomery, Ala., U.S.—died July 25, 1984, Los Angeles, Calif.), American singer and songwriter who performed in the tradition of classic blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Memphis Minnie. Her work inspired imitation by Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin, who recorded popular cover versions of Thornton’s “Hound Dog” and “Ball and Chain,” respectively.

The daughter of a minister, Thornton was introduced to church music at an early age. A skilled singer and dancer and a self-taught drummer and harmonica player, she toured the American South as a member of Sammy Green’s Hot Harlem Revue during the 1940s. Settling in Houston, Texas, in 1948, she came under the influence of blues greats Lightnin’ Hopkins, Lowell Fulson, Junior Parker, and Clarence (“Gatemouth”) Brown. In the early 1950s she began performing with bandleader Johnny Otis, with whom she recorded many songs for Peacock Records, including the Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller composition “Hound Dog,” a number one rhythm-and-blues hit for Thornton in 1953 and an even bigger pop hit in 1956 for Presley, whose rock-and-roll version owed much to Thornton’s original.

As interest in blues declined, Thornton ceased recording but continued to perform in the San Francisco Bay area, where she came to the attention of Joplin, whose late 1960s version of the Thornton-written “Ball and Chain” revived interest in the blues singer called “Big Mama” because of her girth and larger-than-life voice and stage presence.

**Ethel Waters**

(born Oct. 31, 1896/1900, Chester, Pa., U.S.—died Sept. 1, 1977, Chatsworth, Calif.), American blues and jazz singer and dramatic actress whose singing, based in the blues...
tradition, featured her full-bodied voice, wide range, and slow vibrato. Waters grew up in extreme poverty and was married for the first time at the age of 12, while she was still attending convent school. At 13 she became a chambermaid in a Philadelphia hotel, and that same year she sang in public for the first time in a local nightclub. At 17, billing herself as “Sweet Mama Stringbean,” Waters was singing professionally in Baltimore, Maryland. It was there that she became the first woman to sing the W.C. Handy classic “St. Louis Blues” on the stage. Her professional rise was rapid, and she moved to New York City. In 1925 she appeared at the Plantation Club in Harlem, and her performance there led to Broadway.

In 1927 Waters appeared in the all-black revue Africana, and thereafter she divided her time between the stage, nightclubs, and eventually movies. In 1930 she was on the Broadway stage again in Blackbirds, a revival of the popular 1924 musical, and the following year she starred in Rhapsody in Black. In 1933 Waters appeared with Marilyn Miller in Irving Berlin’s musical As Thousands Cheer, her first departure from shows with all-black casts. Her rendition of “Heat Wave” in that show linked the song permanently to her. Considered one of the great blues singers, Waters also performed and recorded with such jazz greats as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman. Several composers wrote songs especially for her, and she was particularly identified with “Dinah” and “Stormy Weather.”

Waters’s first straight dramatic role was in the 1938 production of DuBose and Dorothy Heyward’s Mamba’s Daughters. Two years later she spent a season on Broadway in the hit musical Cabin in the Sky, and she also appeared in the 1943 film version. Probably her greatest dramatic success was in the stage version of Carson McCullers’s The Member of the Wedding in 1950, a performance for which she won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. She also starred in the movie version in 1953.

Among Waters’s other films are Cairo (1942), Pinky (1949), and The Sound and the Fury (1959). Her autobiography, His Eye Is on the Sparrow (1951), was a best-seller. After the mid-1950s Waters worked in television and occasionally in nightclubs. In the 1960s she appeared frequently with Billy Graham in his evangelistic crusades.
Discussion Questions & Exploration Activities

1. What piece of the musical touched you the most? Why did it resonate with you?

2. What role does the Blues Singer play in this piece? How did this character change or inform your opinion of Janis?

3. This world premiere includes a never-recorded song written for Janis, “I’m Gonna Rock My Way to Heaven.” What did you think of this piece? Is it different than other Janis tunes you know?

4. What can we learn from Janis’s legacy?

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