

# Cadences of sacrifice



Music has historically been a means of expression and a way of portraying the conditions of the time in which it was written, and the feelings and circumstances of the person by which it was created. This way of expression through music can be seen in the poem “ Burying blues for Janis,” by Marge Piercy; in this poem, Janis Joplin is portrayed as pouring her soul out, through her music, and the poem casts her in a different light than society typically saw her. The words of the poem portray Janis as a strong voice which recounts the hardship that women must endure in men-women relationships. Similarly to Janis Joplin, Joni Mitchell is another timeless and unique voice that describes the relationships between men and women, particularly during the 1960’s and 1970’s (Hedley 17). Through their lyrics, Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell describe the condition of women in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and more specifically of themselves, as needing to sacrifice themselves and their own happiness in their romantic relationships. Many songs by these musicians, including but not limited to, “ Piece of My Heart,” and “ The Last Time,” by Janis Joplin and “ I Had a King,” and “ The Gallery” by Joni Mitchell describe or allude to the sacrificial nature of romantic relationships. In “ Burying blues for Janis,” Piercy insightfully describes how Janis’ performances of her music reveal her self-sacrifice.

In the poem “ Burying blues for Janis” Marge Piercy displays her ability to reach out to readers in a way that is identifiable but also revelatory (Payant 63). Her description of the way that Janis sings calls upon many of the things that audiences of Janis had likely believed about her yet were unable to express in words. In the first stanza of the poem, Piercy connects the voice of Janis to what she feels in her own life, in terms of being a woman when

she says “ Your voice always whacked me right on the funny bone of the great-hearted suffering bitch fantasy that ruled me like a huge copper moon with its phases until I could partially, break free.” Piercy is describing how Janis’ music and lyrics touched on a very particular idea or circumstance in her mind, which is that all women must suffer, especially at the hands of men and relationships. Piercy vividly describes the soulful raspy sound of Janis’ voice when she writes “ Your voice would grate right on the marrow-filled bone that cooks up that rich stew of masochism where we swim.” The poem blatantly states what was earlier implied when it says “ Woman is born to suffer, mistreated and cheated.” This statement is a radical one, but is a very prevalent theme in Janis’ music (Willet 8). Although Janis Joplin’s lyrics perhaps did not directly state these pessimistic circumstances, her voice, lyrics and the cadences of the music all expressed the depths of her soul in a way that let the listener know everything contained within (Willet 12) (Piercy 39).

The circumstance of women described in the first stanza is beautifully summed up by the lines “ Never do we feel so alive, so in character as when we’re walking the floor with the all-night blues.” The tone of these lines is subtly sarcastic, because of the words “ so in character.” These words help to bring about the inevitability of women having to suffer. Piercy again demonstrates her keen ability to relate to the bleeding suffering hearts of women everywhere when she describes the effect of the absence of a man can have on a woman by writing, “ When some man not being there who’s better gone becomes a lack that swells up to a gaseous balloon and flattens from us all thinking and sensing and purpose.” This line is very identifiable,

as most women can relate to pain and heartache brought on by the absence of a man that they care about, even if he is not good for them anyway. The “lack” of this man is difficult to deal with, and the essence of the lack acts as a constant pain that the woman is reminded of, even when it “flattens,” and the pain should be gone, but is only in a different, less immediate form. This stanza deeply and strongly depicts the hardship women often face, due to men. Piercy not only accurately and uniquely describes Janis’ music and the way it relates to relationships and the suffering of women, but she also describes the struggle of women in a way that is undeniably true, even for somebody who has never listened to Janis Joplin music (Payant 79) (Piercy 39).

In the second stanza of “Burying blues for Janis,” Piercy continues on with the theme of women being brought down by men, but she describes more about the necessary sacrifice which women are subjected to. This stanza ties together all of the related but not necessarily cohesive parts of the first stanza, and it also unquestionably reveals the main theme and Piercy’s main conclusion about Janis and her music. The very first line refers to Janis’ music as “the downtrodden, juicy longdrawn female blues,” which is powerful and also surprising, because it ties together the entire first stanza to form a bold conclusion about what Janis’ music does. For Piercy to describe her music as “downtrodden” is audacious and unprecedented as most audiences and listeners undoubtedly saw Janis as strong and confident; however, through the lyrics and sounds of her music, there is a certain theme of “downtrodden blues” (Willet 22). Piercy also writes that Janis’ life was fuel for her powerful music, which adds to the depth of feeling in her music, as it is confessional

and personal (Willet 15). The theme of Janis' sacrifice becomes especially evident when Piercy writes, " You embodied that good done-in mama who gives and gives like a fountain of boozy chicken soup to a rat race of men." This line is crucial to the overall theme of the poem, as it portrays the way that Janis sacrificed herself. She "[gave] and [gave]" to men, like a " done-in" mother; the words done-in portray her as used by men and as tired and as having little left of herself to give. The line " like a fountain of boozy chicken soup" represents the way in which she sacrifices herself; it is not in a wholesome way which allows her to reap happiness from it as well (Willet 25). The word " boozy" indicates that she is giving part of herself away in a way that is fickle and unhealthy, a way that will ultimately lead to no happiness or personal fulfillment (Piercy 39).

Another section which describes this sacrifice and is very crucial in understanding this poem is, " You embodied the beautiful blowzy gum of passivity, woman on her back to the world endlessly hopelessly raggedly offering a brave front to be fucked." Much of Janis Joplin's and Joni Mitchell's music deal with this circumstance; this describes Janis as willing to do anything to be loved, even to the extent of offering up herself to men who will not treat her with care. These lines are where the distinction is made between Janis' raggedness as being a form of rebellion and her raggedness being a form of courage and a result of sacrificing herself. The final lines of the poem are the most raw and descriptive in their portrayal of Janis' music and the inherent sacrifice when they say " That willingness to hang on the meathook and call it love, that need for loving like a screaming hollow in the soul, that's the drug that hangs us and drags us down deadly as the icy sleet

of skag that froze your blood.” Janis’ music touches a lot on the “willingness to hang on the meathook and call it love” in many different ways, but all sharing the common theme.

It is evident that the theme through much of Janis Joplin’s music is about how relationships bring women down through the way that the need for loving “like a screaming hollow in the soul” drags people down. Piercy then makes a comparison between the need for love being “the drug that hangs us and drags us down” and “the icy sleet of skag that froze [Janis’] blood,” which shows that she is attributing Janis’ death partly to her own self sacrifice and her “need for love” and “willingness to hang on the meathook.” Here Piercy implies that Janis’ sacrifice, which was well-intentioned and merely to serve her need for love, is what ultimately led to her death. The poem also implies that all women are subjected to such necessary sacrifice in order to be loved by men and that Janis Joplin is merely representative of this sad truth (Piercy 39). Much of the music of Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell deals with the ways in which women are dragged down by relationships and how they sacrifice themselves.

Janis Joplin has a unique and powerful way of making an audience of listeners feel her pain through her music and feel everything that she is saying as if they were experiencing it themselves. Therefore, it is easy to hear her music and feel personally connected and to identify with the words that she sings (Friedman 72). When Janis sings about relationships, the intensity of emotion is very evident, and the feelings of being “done-in” and of giving more and more of herself away, are very evident as well (Willet 25). The song “Piece of My Heart” is about how her relationship with a man

brings her down and about how she sacrifices her own happiness in the relationship. Especially evident from the poem "Burying the blues for Janis" in the song "Piece of My Heart" is the fact that "Woman is born to suffer, mistreated and cheated," and also the circumstance of "woman on her back to the world endlessly hopelessly raggedly offering a brave front to be fucked." The song starts off with Janis asking the question "Didn't I give you nearly everything that a woman possibly can?" (Janis Joplin). This shows that she feels that while she gave everything possible, that he is still dissatisfied with her. The chorus of this song is very confessional, and gets at the main point of the song, when Janis sings "Take another little piece of my heart now, baby/ Break another little piece of my heart now darling" (Janis Joplin). From the way Janis sings these words, the listener can tell the depth of her feelings regarding the words she sings, and the lyrics show that she feels like a man is taking part of herself, and it is breaking her heart. This song is particularly about Janis' feelings of emotional and mental suffering and of being mistreated, which is particularly made clear when she sings "And each time I tell myself that I, well I can't stand the pain, But when you hold me in your arms, I'll sing it once again" (Janis Joplin). These lyrics show Janis' frustrations with her inability to let the relationship go, even though she knows it is not good for her, which leads back to the "rich stew of masochism where we swim" that Piercy wrote about (Willet 70). Janis' lyrics often refer indirectly to her masochism or her self-destruction, which were often in the form of drugs and emotionally abusive or sacrificial relationships, which were problems that were perpetuated by men (Friedman 38).

The lyrics of “ The Last Time” by Janis Joplin also show a form of sacrifice and of hardship faced by Janis in a similar way, which is that of a man who is fickle and does not keep his word to her, yet she “ gives and gives like a fountain of boozy chicken soup.” The song begins with Janis’ raspy, soulful voice pleading “ Make it the last time, make it the last time” and the listener can already relate to her pleading, desperate voice. The lyrics of this song describe how Janis sacrifices her own happiness in order to love this man, whose love is inconsistent and only leaves her unhappy and unfulfilled in the end. The lyrics:

“ And every time you leave I make the very same vow

That when you come back I ain’t gonna love you no how.

But when you return you look so fine to me

I can’t stand no more, my darling, it’s just got to be” (Janis Joplin)

and the way in which she sings them tell the reader of the way in which this relationship leaves her feeling down and feeling taken advantage of (Janis Joplin). It is apparent through the lyrics that Janis wants to stop herself from loving this man, and that he takes advantage of her weakness and of her love for him, in a way that causes her to sacrifice her own feelings. This song ends with Janis displaying her sensitivity and vulnerability when she sings “ Hold on to my heart, I’ll believe it till you’re leaving, Then I’ll cry, yeah” (Janis Joplin). When juxtaposed with the image most people have of the kind of musician Janis Joplin was, which is one who represents strength, hardness, and rebellion, these lyrics cause people to see her in a totally different light,



especially due to the emotion and pain in her voice as she sings them (Willet 72). As “ Burying blues for Janis” describes, Janis Joplin sings about her own personal suffering about sacrificing at the hands of relationships and men, and she is a voice of the suffering of women in relationships, in general.

Joni Mitchell is another female musician around Janis Joplin’s time who sings about personal sacrifice in relationships and the suffering women must endure. While Joni Mitchell’s style is different, many of her overall themes are very similar to those of Janis Joplin. Joni’s song “ I Had A King” describes in a very insightful and metaphorical way, how her marriage to a man she did not love caused her to sacrifice much of herself for a time (Joni Mitchell). The lyrics of this song that are most directly related to the sacrifice in the relationship are:

“ I had a king in a salt-rusted carriage

Who carried me off to his country for marriage too soon

Beware of the power of moons

There’s no one to blame

No there’s no one to name as a traitor here” (jonimitchell. com)

This song, with Joni’s soft yet powerful and haunting voice and vividly metaphorical lyrics, describes her sacrifice involved in marrying a man too young, and how she feels that she sacrificed her happiness and a part of her youth. However, the lines “ Beware of the power of moons, There’s no one to blame, No there’s no one to name as the traitor here,” demonstrate that

while she feels she sacrificed herself, she does not blame the man. She attributes the suffering and the mistake that she made to “ the power of moons” and believes that there was no deliberate betrayal (Joni Mitchell). Yet her feeling of having sacrificed herself is very apparent in the sound and lyrics of the song. It is also apparent through the lyrics

“ I had a king dressed in drip-dry and paisley

Lately he’s taken to saying I’m crazy and blind

He lives in another time

Ladies in gingham still blush

While he sings them of wars and wine

But I in my leather and lace

I can never become that kind.”

This verse shows that Joni feels that this man is from “ another time” and that he does not understand her. This is evident through the fact that he calls her “ crazy and blind.” Throughout this song, Joni does not blame the man for her circumstance, yet she still feels somehow violated and taken advantage of, likely by the pressures of society to be married, which pushes her into marrying the wrong man (Joni Mitchell). However, the end of this verse, while very sad and full of raw emotion, can also be seen as hopeful since Joni acknowledges that she has married the wrong man and concludes “ But I in my leather and lace, I can never become that kind.” While the listener can identify with her sadness regarding having sold herself out for a

time, it is clear that she will change her circumstances, particularly in the upcoming chorus: “ I can’t go back there anymore, You know my keys won’t fit the door, You know my thoughts don’t fit the man, They never can they never can.” The song ends with repetition of the phrase “ They never can,” which she ends by singing very low and full of power. This represents a contrast between the music of Joni and of Janis. While Joni ends the song on a hopeful note, saying that she will not go back to her sacrificial circumstances, Janis ends many of her songs pleading with men, or singing the blues.

Another song by Joni Mitchell which tells of a woman sacrificing herself in a romantic relationship, which Joni uses to represent her own personal circumstance, is The Gallery. This song is about being with a man who does not return to her all of the love which she gives him, and is possibly unfaithful. The fact that this man does not treat Joni as well as she treats him is portrayed by the lines “ I keep your house in fit repair, I dust the portraits daily, Your mail comes here from everywhere, The writing looks like ladies.” These lines show that while Joni tries to make keep this man happy in every way that she can, she suspects that he is being disloyal with her. However, this man pleads “ Lady, please love me now, I am dead. I am a saint, turn down your bed,” and she is caught in the endless cycle of sacrifice and suffering. The song goes onto to say how Joni sacrificed many of her good years for his sake through the lyrics “ I gave you all my pretty years, Then we began to weather. And I was left to winter here, While you went west for pleasure.” These lines embody the essence of this entire song, which is that of a woman who sacrifices herself for a man who she cares about, while he

does not care for her nearly as much, and he does everything selfishly in order to please himself. The fact that this man left her after she gave him her “pretty years” and went to find pleasure through other women with no regard for her shows the incredible degree of sacrifice which was present in the relationship. This song connects back to “that willingness to hang on the meathook and call it love” that Piercy wrote about. It demonstrates how women in romantic relationships, much like Joni in this song, will often give up everything because of their need for loving, “like a screaming hollow in the soul.”

Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell are different in their approaches and in their musical style, but they both write about the suffering they have endured and the sacrifices they have made in relationships with men. Janis’ style is more rough and more ragged and more closely embodies the “great-hearted suffering bitch fantasy” that Piercy refers to in “Burying Blues for Janis,” while Joni is more metaphorical and subtle, in terms of both her lyrics and her voice. While it is Janis’ voice that tends more to “grate” on the bone, and she is more likely to perform in a way that more immediately comes across as the “downtrodden juicy longdrawn female blues,” both women’s music shows that women “are trained to that hothouse of exploitation” and both women embody a “woman on her back to the world endlessly hopelessly raggedly offering a brave front to be fucked,” and the need for loving “hangs” and “drags” them both down (Piercy 39). Their voices and lyrical choice and even musical genre are all vastly different, but the ways in which the two women portray their relationships with men share many

similarities. Both musicians depict their relationships with a great deal of suffering and sacrifice.

In conclusion, while Joni Mitchell and Janis Joplin have very different music, there is a common theme that ties their music together. It is the theme that Marge Piercy writes about in “ Burying Blues for Janis”, which is self-sacrifice. As suggested by the words of the poem, Janis Joplin- and Joni Mitchell as well- are confessional musicians who express themselves and the greatest depth of their feelings through their music. Both of these women are strong and distinct voices who serve as accounts of sacrificial relationships which men subject women to. Through the writing of Marge Piercy, it is clear that Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell are testaments to the suffering and sacrifice they had had to face in their own personal relationships, and also to the condition of women in the late 60’s and early 70’s.

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