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 - Obituaries
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'Love, Janis' shows piece of Joplin's heart

By [Chad Jones](#), STAFF WRITER

AN INTERVIEWER asks Janis Joplin how she likes San Francisco, and her answer is, "Thank God. I'm not alone."

If Joplin had been at San Francisco's Marines Memorial Theatre Sunday night, she'd have seen that her adopted home town still adores her.

With an audience full of people who looked like they knew Janis, crossed paths with Janis or at least worshipped at Janis' musical throne, the musical biography "Love, Janis" finally made its Bay Area debut.

Based on a book of Joplin's letters compiled by her younger sister, Laura, "Love, Janis" is part play, part concert, and was first devised and directed by Randal Myler in the early '90s.

It takes three performers to play the troubled, charismatic singer. There's Morgan Hallett, the actress, who delivers monologues based on Joplin's letters and excerpted interviews. And then there are the singers. Because the Joplin wait tends to be hard on the vocal chords, Katrina Chester and Cathy Richardson alternate performances.

Richardson performed on Sunday, and her re-creation of Joplin's raw, bluesy yowl is unbelievably powerful.

From a musical standpoint, "Love, Janis" is unbeatable and does something no public television documentary could: It puts you right in the center of Joplin's power as an artist, and that's really what her legacy is all about.

Sam Andrew, the founding member of Big Brother and the Holding Company, Joplin's first successful band, serves as musical director, and his basic four-piece band — Joel Hoekstra on lead guitar, Chris Pimentel also on guitar, Eric Massimino on bass and David Rokeach on drums — provides solid rock and blues accompaniment.

For later songs like "Try" and "Me and Bobby McGee," as Joplin's story moves on to the Kozmic Blues Band and the Full Tilt Boogie Band, the stage band expands to include Jeffrey Chin on keyboards and Thomas Dickow and Niel Levonius on horns.

From the first song, "Piece of My Heart," to the last, "Get It While You Can" nearly 2 1/2 hours later, the music is our closest and most honest link to who Joplin was and what made her tick.

The biographical half of the show is interesting, but unreliable.

It's all Joplin's own words, and that's fascinating because her intelligence, humor and sensitivity tend to be overshadowed by her powerful, iconic image as this druggo, feather-wearing Summer of Love rock goddess.

But she's writing letters to her parents back in Port Arthur, Texas, so she's obviously not going to be telling the folks back home everything that's going on when she hitchhikes to San Francisco and her career starts taking off.

The same is true of the interviews. She answers questions (voiced by an unseen Michael Santo) with candor and sass, but again, she's controlling her answers.

Hallett's heartfelt performance goes a long way toward providing some subtext to the letters and interviews, and that adds some needed layers of emotional reality.

Late in Act 2, after we hear a radio announcement detailing Joplin's death of a drug overdose at age 27, director Myler makes his one and only foray into smarmy sentiment.

As Richardson sings a tender "Little Girl Blue," she sits next to a weepy Hallett and comforts her. You half expect Joplin's wounded inner child to saunter out for a pat on the head as well.

Luckily, we move straight into a searing rendition of "Move



LIFE IN THE '60S: Morgan Hallett is Janis Joplin in the musical play "Love, Janis" at the Marines Memorial Theatre in San Francisco. (Sean Connelley - Staff)

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Over," and the music is back center stage where it should be.

Talk about your flashbacks. For the San Francisco production, Norman Schwab's groovy lighting and projection design has been augmented by the psychedelic light show master Bill Ham, who actually created the light show for Joplin's first public performance with Big Brother at San Francisco's Avalon Ballroom.

With all the trippy colors and lights swirling, and with Richardson tearing up (at tremendous volume) the likes of "Summertime" and "Ball and Chain," "Love, Janis" gives those of us who weren't on the music scene in the late'60s a taste of what it might have been like.

Of course this tribute show is performed in a polite theater, where smoking is not allowed, spontaneous dancing not a frequent occurrence and everyone has their clothes on, so this is far removed from the real thing.

Still, clapping and singing along to "Mercedes Benz" is evocative enough that you can almost sense the hippie beads around your neck or maybe even feel the flowers in your hair.

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CRY, BABY: Cathy Richardson, playing Janis Joplin, performs in the musical play "Love, Janis" at the Marines Memorial Theatre in San Francisco. (Sean Connelley - Staff)

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