

Love, (Drumming For) Janis

A Tale Of Two Daves

by Robin Tolleson

Love, Janis is a spirited look back at the music and tragically short life of singer Janis Joplin. The show recently completed a four-month run at the Marines Memorial Theatre in San Francisco. Playing the role of Joplin's drummer on such classic tracks as "Piece Of My Heart," "Down On Me," and "I Need A Man To Love" was veteran Bay Area drummer David Rokeach.

MD had the opportunity to talk with Rokeach, as well as with the original drummer in the band that launched Joplin's career—Big Brother & The Holding Company's Dave Getz. The discussion touched on the current show, as well as on how the great music it contains was created in the first place.



Love, Janis drummer Dave Rokeach (left) and original Big Brother & The Holding Company drummer Dave Getz

Re-Creating An Original

Dave Getz initially had mixed feelings about the show. "It's seeing our music and the parts that we created being appropriated," says Dave. "In one way it's good, because it keeps that music alive. But in another sense it's sort of competition, because Big Brother is still touring as a band. When [original Big Brother guitarist] Sam Andrew became the show's musical director, things got even more difficult, because it kind of legitimized the show. But when Dave Rokeach got the gig, he called me and suggested that we get together and talk about the music. So then I felt a little differently. I've seen the show twice now, and it's really enjoyable."

Rokeach, whose credits include Ray Charles, Charles Musslewhite, Calvin Keys, Joe Beck, and Tony and Merle Saunders, took *Love, Janis* seriously. Besides consulting with Getz, he studied the drumming of Kozmic Blues Band drummer Maury Baker and Full Tilt Boogie Band drummer Clark Pierson, who played with Janis later in her career.

"Clark played perfectly on 'Bobby McGee,'" says Rokeach, "but that stuff wasn't really groundbreaking like the Big Brother stuff. Their *Cheap Thrills* was a classic record. Big Brother had everything that made a band great in those days. They had great material, and they improvised. They had the blues thing and the psychedelia, and they had a bit of a jazz influence, so nobody sounded like them. That's how we wanted to play when we were kids."

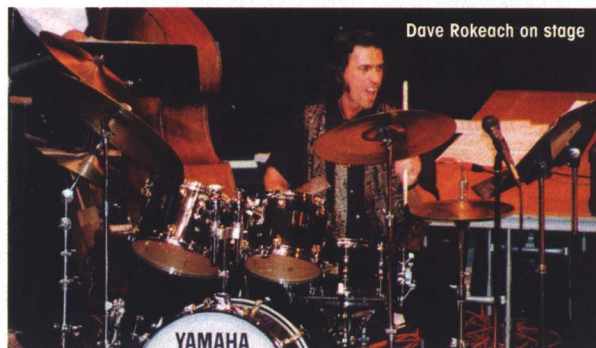
"Dave Getz played great drums with Big Brother," Rokeach continues. "There was a little bit of jazz in his playing, along with a great groove and a whole lot of feeling. He didn't play too much; he just played all the right stuff. Like 'Piece Of My Heart'...I can't think of any way to play that song other than the way Dave played it."

Dave Getz recalls, "No one ever told anybody else what to play. Someone would come in with an idea, and then everybody would make up what they thought was the appropriate part. It was a creative process that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't. But we each had a lot of freedom."

A Meeting Of The Minds

Rokeach and Getz met in 2002 when Getz attended Jazz Camp West, where Rokeach was an instructor. "When I found out he was in my class, I freaked out," Rokeach says. "I brought in the *Cheap Thrills* album and had him get up in front of the class and play the 'Piece Of My Heart' beat. This guy's a part of rock 'n' roll history."

The two Daves have been friends ever since, and when Rokeach got the gig in *Love, Janis*, he sought Getz's help on the drum parts. "Sam Andrew wanted us to get into the spirit of what they did in Big Brother, but to play it our own way,"

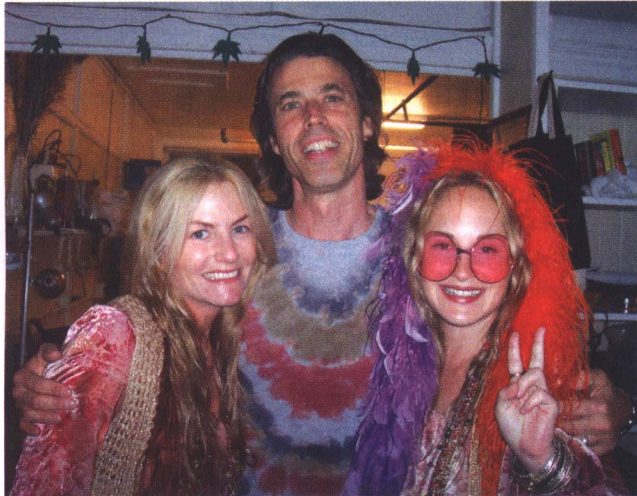


Dave Rokeach on stage

"One of the reasons playing in *Love, Janis* is so much fun is that we're supposed to play some stuff. Back in the '60s the right thing for the song was for the drummer to play a bit more."

—Dave Rokeach

Rokeach explains. "But I loved what Dave did on 'Piece Of My Heart' so much that I really wanted to get it as close as possible. And some of that stuff was really hard to hear because of the way things were recorded back then."



Dave backstage with Katrina Chester (left), daughter of famed drummer Gary Chester and Morgan Hallett, who jointly portrayed Janis Joplin in the San Francisco show.

"That's actually an Appalachian folk song that was first recorded in the 1930s," says Getz. "Big Brother was doing it before Janis joined the band. We created the arrangement, and I created that drum fill idea. When Janis came into the band, she knew the song. She just modified the words to suit what she wanted to say."

Doing The Right Thing

The drum fill Getz played on "Down On Me" (also from *Cheap Thrills*) is like a musical hook. Although Rokeach transcribed the original drum part for 'Down On Me' note for note, Getz informed him that he doesn't play the part that way any more. "I'm much looser with it now," Getz reveals. "I probably couldn't even play those exact things. I told Dave that I didn't think he had to play those drum fills the way I played them. But he said, 'No, I really want to be authentic.' And when I heard him play that song at the show, it sounded so much better! It was essentially the same phrasing. But with the sound of the drums through the sound system, and the way Dave played it—his touch—compared to the way I played it back in 1966, it really sounded good. So he was right."

Rokeach adds, "To a lot of us who have those recordings burned into our brains, those fills are part of the composition. Another great



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example is 'I Need A Man To Love.' It's one of my favorite things that Dave Getz plays, and we do an edited version in the show. It's kind of a Stax groove, but there's all this psychedelic guitar. During the guitar solo Dave played in unison with the guitar on the snare drum. If you were to do that in a pop tune nowadays it wouldn't be appropriate, but it sounds *so cool*.

"One of the reasons playing in *Love, Janis* is so much fun is that we're *supposed* to play some stuff," Rokeach says. "In pop music later on, the drums became more simplified. But back in the late '60s the right thing for the song was for the drummer to play a bit more. There's a whole lot of dynamics, and you feel like the drums have a pretty important voice in the music. For example, on the second bar of each chorus on 'Summertime,' they kind of stop the time, and Dave Getz plays half notes on the ride cymbal, like a Count Basie thing. I didn't realize that until Dave pointed it out. A lot of rock bands weren't doing stuff like that."

"If you listen to the original recording of 'Bye Bye Baby,'" Rokeach adds, "it's kind of a swing tune that goes to a rumba beat, and then they go to a waltz off the quarter-note triplet, kind of like The Beatles in 'We Can Work It Out.' And this was pop music of the day. Anything could happen."

The First Jam Bands

Big Brother came up in a day when all the best bands did a bit of jamming. "When Janis joined Big Brother, we had to make things more concise," Getz recalls. "But in the early days, our audiences loved it when



we'd start with 'In The Hall Of The Mountain King' from the *Peer Gynt Suite* by Greig, and then go into ten minutes of modal jamming. We also had a thing called 'Electric Caravan,' where I'd start an up-tempo Bo Diddley beat, and they'd jam for ten minutes."

Getz has been doing dates with Big Brother since the band re-formed in 1987, but he doesn't play the tunes exactly like he did in 1966. "People ask me about that all the time, and I always respond that I created the parts, so I don't feel like I have to copy myself. I can do whatever I want with it, I own it. I don't get too far out, but I feel I have the liberty to do that."

Dave Rokeach smiles at Getz's statement, and expresses a bit of envy. "When Dave Getz plays with Big Brother today, he still gets to stretch out," Rokeach says. "What we're doing with *Love, Janis* is theatre. We need to *sound* like we're stretching out, but in actuality every song is about the same length every time. Still, I believe we're offering our audiences the next best thing to a time-warp back to the '60s."

For information about Dave Getz and Big Brother & The Holding Company, go to www.bbhc.com.



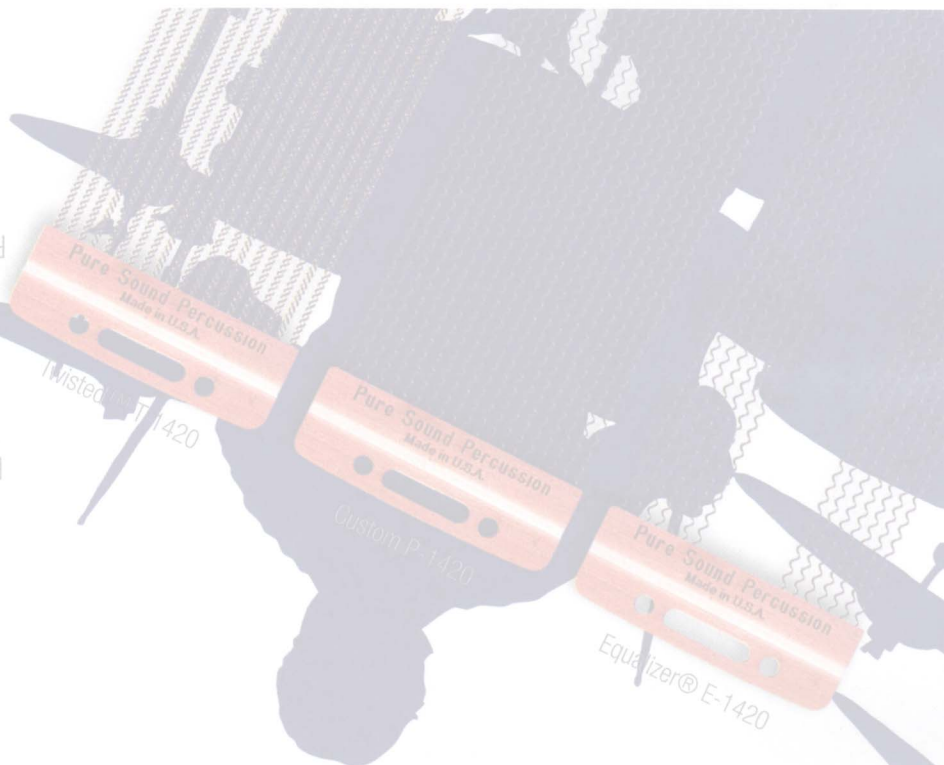
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