

Oh, Lord!

Janis Joplin's 356

By Jerry McDermott
and Gordon Maltby

Porsche 356s have been known to sport exotic or unusual paint jobs, especially in racing circles, but there's only one of these special renderings that has been on display at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio. And this isn't just an exotic paint job, it's a psychedelic visual tour-de-force. It's the 356C of blues/rock singer Janis Joplin.

In one of her most famous songs she lamented, "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz. My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends." In spite of what the lyrics said, it was Janis in fact, who drove a Porsche. In September, 1968 she bought a used 1965 356 Cabriolet, VIN 160371 for around \$3,500 from Otto Zipper in Beverly Hills.

Wildly painted hippy and surfer vans were familiar on the California scene of the 1960s, but Janis wanted something different. Her car had to reflect her lifestyle and her music. Accordingly, she gave the 356 to Dave Richards for the transformation. Richards was a roadie for Janis' band, Big Brother and the Holding Company.

The pearl white car with black interior was transformed into an icon. Rather than just a curious or funny-looking paint job, the Joplin Porsche reflected her lifestyle. For example, the right rear is the sun which was Janis' Capricorn sign. The two heads centrally located on the engine cover

represent "everyman." The right door, thought by many to be Sausalito, is just a typical valley town while the left side of the car represents the band. The dramatic hood display shows the Eye of God along with flowers and butterflies. Even the dashboard is painted with a face (that Janis always thought was angry with her). There is another face at the gas filler — just place the nozzle into the mouth for a fill up.

Janis' sister and biographer, Laura Joplin described the car as being freshly painted, glowing like glass when it was purchased from Zipper's. "After Janis had the car painted with its psychedelic designs, she brought it back to the dealer to show it off. They almost had a heart attack, they were so shocked."

In an interview Dave Richards in 1994, he described the graphics. Her instructions were merely to "paint it" and she didn't give any guidelines nor specifics about what to paint. The car was first sprayed with candy apple red automotive lacquer and the graphics were later brushed on in the few months Dave had the car. He said the numerous elements were intuitively influenced by the '60s drug scene—LSD and marijuana—the Vietnam war, and the movie *2001*. "The graphics just happened," he explained.

Laura Joplin remembers, "Janis drove the car everywhere, all around San Francisco and

down to Los Angeles when she was recording there. Wherever Janis went in the car, her fans recognized it. When she parked it and returned, there was always at least one note under the wipers, saying such things as, 'Keep on Rockin,' and 'You're the greatest, I love you!'"

The iconic Porsche was stolen at one point, and the thief tried to cover its distinctive paint with gray primer before the car was recovered. Because a clear coat had been applied to protect the artwork, the damage was minimal.

Becoming Janis

Janis Joplin was born and raised in Port Arthur, Texas and by 17 she was singing in coffeehouses around Texas. In San Francisco in 1963, she strove to make a name for herself as a singer, but alcohol and drugs took their toll and she was soon back home. During stints at college she made a continuing effort to find her direction, and in 1965 a friend offered her a chance to audition as lead singer for Big Brother, then a somewhat obscure San Francisco group that played the Avalon Ballroom, but with a dedicated following among the Bay Area "Beautiful People."

At the Monterey Pop Festival in 1967 the audience was electrified with Janis' performance, especially the band's version of "Ball and Chain." Acclaim from that gig brought them to the attention of Albert Grossman, who became their manager and secured a Columbia Records contract. The album that followed, "Cheap Thrills," was a commercial and artistic success. The band, unfortunately, only stayed together through 1968 and the next year Janis led a group of seasoned musicians called the Kozmic Blues Band. By now she was appearing on TV and gave major concerts in Frankfurt and London. The sound was more mainstream and it wasn't until she formed her last group, the Full Tilt Boogie Band in 1970 that Janis really felt she had found a sound that fit her style.

During much of her short professional life, Janis was sustained by drugs and alcohol but by



Photo opposite and left
courtesy of Michael
Joplin

Love it or hate it,
Janis Joplin's Cabriolet
has become an well-known icon
of the late sixties and the San Francisco
music scene of the time.

1969 she recognized the dangers. She recovered,
at least temporarily, from a heroin habit, but was
still dependent on booze. She was found dead on
Oct. 4, 1970 in the Landmark, a Hollywood hotel.
The official cause of death was accidental heroin
overdose. She was 27.

Her album "Pearl" was released
posthumously and was No. 1 on the hit
parade for nine weeks in 1971. It included
a cover of Kris Kristofferson's "Me and
Bobby McGee" and "Mercedes Benz."
Another track by Nick Gravenites was
included as an instrumental; Janis was to add
the vocals on the day she died. It was called,
prophetically, "Buried Alive in the Blues."



This page: The car in its
restored condition. At
left, as it was displayed in
the Rock and Roll Hall of
Fame, April 1996. The
other photos are from
Bob Brown, whose Storz
Garage in Denver main-
tained the car and stored
it when it was not on dis-
play at the theater.
[Continued next page.](#)



Above: By the time the 356 reached Tucson it was a little worse for the wear and the original paint was fading. Below: The re-creation of Dave Richard's artwork was faithful to the original with the exception of the dash, for which no good photos were found.



The homeless 356


After Janis' untimely death, the car was garaged and cared for in Los Angeles by her attorney and executor, Robert Gordon. About nine months later, the Joplin family gave the car to her manager Albert Grossman, who loaned the car to musicians and some of his clients. It was driven to Grossman's New York State home by Janis' last roommate. By 1973, the car needed repairs and was returned to the family, with a frozen engine and damage to the front and rear. In addition, rust had gotten under the painted designs and they were starting to slough off.

Most of the photos of the unrestored car were taken in 1975 in Prescott, Arizona after the car was back with the Joplin family. It was used occasionally and finally parked in 1991.

The car was completely restored in Denver with new seats and repainted in the original design by Jana Mitchell at the Denver Center Theatre Company.

In 1994 the car was featured in the lobby of that theater for the play, "Love, Janis." The play was fashioned from Janis' letters to her family as the band was on tour. The libretto was the actual words from her correspondence. Considering her constant inner turmoil, two performers played Janis. One was her on-stage persona while the other portrayed her private life. Her hometown expresses the same idea as her public statue has two faces. The play experienced standing ovations every night and then toured other cities.

Janis lives on in her music albums, the book by her sister and the play, "Love, Janis" and the movie, "Janis - The Way She Was." In addition, the movie "The Rose" with Bette Midler was loosely based on Joplin's life. Thanks to Laura and Michael Joplin as well as the late Dave Richards for their help.

Thanks also to Bob Brown of Storz Garage in Denver for photos. 



Being repainted at the Denver Center Theatre Company

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The play "Love, Janis" was based on a book of the same name written by Laura Joplin, Janis' younger sister. It has been onstage since its premier in 1994 in Denver, has traveled to several other regional venues and is currently showing at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Randal Myler was the play's director, collaborating with Laura on the project. Laura brought many of Janis' original stage clothes to the Denver Center Theatre's costume department, where they were re-created for the play. Janis' Porsche was not a prop in the production, but the idea of using it in the lobby made sense. The only problem was, it no longer had its unique paint-work.

The 356 had been with Janis' brother Michael in Tucson, where the sun baked its finish. By the time it returned to Denver, the family had the body repaired and repainted to the primer stage. The question then remained, who would paint the images back onto the car? Director Randal Myler was confident that the talent existed in-house.

The story from that point is told by Jana Mitchell, the Head Scenic Artist at Denver Center Theatre Company where "Love, Janis" was to premiere.

"We were doing sets for shows that were just bricks and wood. It was sometimes kind of boring to paint. The director stopped me in the hall one day and asked if I had ever seen pictures of Janis Joplin's Porsche. I said, 'Yes, why?'"

"He asked me if I'd like to restore it and I said, 'What do mean, restore it?'" Myler explained the task of re-creating the iconic paint job and Jana eagerly agreed.

Jana's confidence in her ability is clear from her description of her work: "My job is translating a picture from a designer into a drop, or scenery. I'm basically a giant color Xerox machine. I have to exactly translate a design into reality."

Regarding the 356 project she says, "I was very excited, it gave me something to look forward to. The car was in primer when we received it, a few weeks before I would be able to work on it. It just sat there in a corner, tempting me. It was a bittersweet thing. When it came in my shop I had the keys, but it didn't run. I had the keys to Janis Joplin's Porsche! After I finished it I wanted to take it out for a spin but I couldn't. It was barely running, the ragtop was trashed. After we finished it, it went out on a flat bed to have the engine repaired and the top and seats replaced.

"We had photos that Laura had rounded up, and there was a video of just the car, with the Mercedes Benz song playing in the background. We had no pictures of some areas of the car, so making stills from that video was the only way to fill in some blanks. There was even a photo of the screaming face, painted inside the flip-up gas cap. We had almost all the information, except one

Jana on Janis

Re-creation of the iconic paint job

thing: there was no photo of was the dashboard. Laura described the dashboard, but there was no way I could get close to recreating it without seeing it." It was decided to leave the dash blank rather than try to incorrectly recreate the design.

Once underway, the car's new finish went quickly. "My assistant Amber Owen and I worked on it for about two and a half weeks. We initially pencilled in all the designs from the photos. Putting the first drop of paint on the car was really difficult. It was intimidating. But once we got going on it were were just having a ball. During the time we worked on it, there were always other issues, questions about upcoming plays and projects that took me away from the car. I felt like, 'leave me alone, I don't want to do a play right now. I want to do the car!'"

"We had to second guess some of the colors, which looked different. I've painted my own car, but I've never done something like this. I went to an automotive paint store and asked what to use. They suggested using 'One-Shot,' which is an enamel used for sign painting, and then put a good clear coat over it. After we got into it, I became convinced that the car was originally painted with One-Shot.

We were using colors right out of the can, and they matched exactly the colors we were seeing in the photos. I never talked to the original artist, but we had the information we needed to do the project without talking to him. A special clear coat really brought out the colors. It was brushed on and leveled perfectly.

"During the play's run, the car was in the lobby of the theater, and I used to love to go hang out in the lobby before the play. I would eavesdrop on people's conversations about the car. It was really funny. Lots of people remembered it, or had seen photos of it, but some would have their stories about the car way wrong."

Jana laughs as she relates, "Some people thought that the car was placed against a wall because they were sure there was something real-

ly lurid on the other side."

"A gift shop here in town had a cookie jar and a music box of Janis's Porsche. My husband asked what I wanted for our anniversary, and I said, I want the Janis cookie jar. It's important to me because the paint on those ceramic pieces is the paint I put on the car. They would have taken photos after it was painted here and made their designs from those photos. And I know the subtle little differences. My bird is a little fatter than the original bird, for instance.

"It was such a labor of love, while I was working on it, I really got into it. I would listen to Janis' music and I thought maybe I should have a bottle of Jack Daniels handy. Laura Joplin was very supportive. She would come to visit from time to time and offered to bring us some cookies. I said, 'Or maybe some brownies?'"



Jana bids farewell as the car is sent from Denver to the Rock & Roll Museum.

"I couldn't believe they were paying me to do this! Once we got into production, and I was seeing the power of Janis on the stage, I felt really connected. I had a dream that I ran into Janis, backstage. She said, 'Hey, that's really cool! Thanks for painting my car.' I was telling everyone in my dream that I had met Janis. They assumed I meant I had met the actress playing Janis, but I felt I really had connected somehow with the real Janis.

"It was by far the best project I have ever worked on. And I know it will be the best project of my career. Not just because it was fun, but because it was such a historical and significant project." **GM** 