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Sweet Nothings: Women in Rockabilly Music: LaVern Baker and Janis Martin

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SWEET NOTHINGS: WOMEN IN ROCKABILLY MUSIC

LAVERN BAKER AND JANIS MARTIN

by

Stephanie Lewin-Lane

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT
SWEET NOTHINGS: WOMEN IN ROCKABILLY MUSIC
LAVERN BAKER AND JANIS MARTIN

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Stephanie Lewin-Lane

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012
Under the Supervision of Dr. Gillian Rodger

Rockabilly music is an exciting and vibrant style of early Rock and Roll that originated in the 1950s. With its aggressive beat and anti-establishment connotations, rockabilly is considered a widely male-dominated genre, a point supported by the majority of scholarship and literature on the subject. However, a review of available contemporary recordings, television shows, advertisements and interviews show that women were an integral part of the history of rockabilly music. In this thesis, I will discuss women in rockabilly music and address how issues relating to gender and race in 1950s culture affected women performers. More specifically, I will examine the experiences of two performers, LaVern Baker and Janis Martin, concentrating on formative and important events in their careers and how they affected rockabilly music overall.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Steven and Joyce Lewin, who instilled in me a love of learning at an early age. They have always supported me in everything I do and often bent over backwards to be at hundreds of performances and events. I would especially like to thank my father for showing me that no matter what life deals you, laughter truly is the best medicine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Figures	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Origins of Rockabilly Music & Early Scholarship	4
Chapter Two: The Domestic Ideal, Jim Crow, and Women in Rockabilly Music	16
Chapter Three: LaVern Baker	26
Chapter Four: Janis Martin	33
Chapter Five: After the Rockabilly Revival	43
Conclusion	47
Bibliography	49
Appendix A: Janis Martin Transcription 1/2000 Part 1 and Part II	56
Appendix B: Janis Martin Interview 2000 (TAPE 5)	67
Appendix C: Jewel Martin Interview (TAPE 6)	81
Appendix D: Janis Martin Interview (Rebel Beat)	87

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Number	Page
1. LaVern Baker, 1956	27
2. Janis Martin, 1956, Age 15	37
3. Kim Lenz, 1998	44

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I have been lucky enough to get permission to include interview outtakes with Janis Martin, and her mother Jewel, from film documentaries *Welcome to the Club* by Beth Harrington and *Rebel Beat: The Story of L.A. Rockabilly* by Elizabeth Blozan, which are

available as Appendices A-D. It is through the generosity of these two filmmakers that future researchers will have access to Janis' legacy in her own words.

I would like to give a heartfelt thank you to my academic advisor Dr. Gillian Rodger, who provided me with the academic experience and advice I needed to get this thesis done. When discussing some issues I had with writing during my first few years of Graduate School, she gave me advice that I continue to use to this day- It is not about the answers, it is about the questions. I have used this advice on a constant basis, not only in my studies, but also in life.

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Introduction

Rockabilly music is an exciting and vibrant style of early rock 'n' roll that originated in the 1950s and lasted less than ten years. With its aggressive beat and anti-establishment connotations, rockabilly is widely considered by scholars to be a male-dominated genre; a point supported by the rash of popular literature and biographical films on male performers, such as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Jerry Lee Lewis. However, a review of available contemporary recordings, television shows, advertisements and interviews show that women were an integral part of the history of rockabilly music, performing alongside their male counterparts and holding their own. Not only were women performing within rockabilly music, they were also a huge market with growing buying power, making 75% of all household purchases in the 1950s.¹ The potential for support of women in rockabilly music was tenable; however, social norms and racial prejudice produced a formidable barrier that few performers were able to negotiate.

In this thesis, I will explore rockabilly music within the context of the 1950s and the relationship with other popular music genres at that time. I will discuss women in rockabilly music and address how issues relating to gender and race in 1950s culture affected them. I will include a literature review of available scholarship on women in rockabilly and how the topic has been approached. I will examine the experiences of two artists, LaVern Baker and Janis Martin, concentrating on formative and important events in their careers and compiling in-depth information on both performers in one place.

¹ Woloch, Nancy. 1984. *Women and the American Experience*. New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 323.

I chose to focus on LaVern Baker and Janis Martin because they were strong-willed, influential singers in the rockabilly genre who both struggled with societal roles, which severely diminished their careers. Previous literature on them is scattered and occasionally conflicting, concentrating mostly on the early part of their careers. Therefore, a cohesive, scholarly study of Baker and Martin is necessary to appreciate their contributions to rockabilly music.

LaVern Baker was an aggressive performer with a passionate, powerful voice. As an African-American performer, Baker fought whitewashing policies in the mid-1950s, bringing a greater awareness to the issue. As a woman, she fought social norms and dynamics of the time, and many rockabilly artists cite her as their inspiration. LaVern Baker was a pioneer in so many ways that she deserves to be added to the rockabilly canon. Her music transcends time and is still as fresh today as when it was recorded in the 1950s.

Janis Martin was also an audacious performer who began her career while still a child, but had the voice and attitude of an adult. She unapologetically sang the music she wanted to perform, regardless of public perception. Martin loved Rhythm and Blues music, but it was not possible for a white woman to sing this genre at that time, so she sang country music. This prompted her to create a hybrid version, arguably making her a major catalyst for rockabilly music. She was forced to stop performing early in her career, simply because she attempted to follow the domestic ideal. It was obvious when

she started to perform again in the 1970s that she would have had a notably popular career if she had been allowed to continue as a working mother and wife in the 1950s.

I will highlight information on LaVern Baker and Janis Martin that still needs to be discovered and discuss their contributions to rockabilly music; both original and post 1970s second wave. I will be including primary sources that have not been available for previous scholarship, including unpublished transcripts from interviews with Janis Martin, and her mother Jewel Martin.² I will also discuss recent renewed interest on the subject and gaps that still need to be addressed.

² The interviews are unused footage from the documentaries *Welcome to the Club* by Beth Harrington and *Rebel Beat: The Story of L.A. Rockabilly* by Elizabeth Blozan.

Chapter One: Origins of Rockabilly Music & Early Scholarship

The term rockabilly is a mixture of the words “hillbilly” and “rock.” Rock is assumed to mean rock ‘n’ roll; however there is an ongoing discussion by scholars about whether rock ‘n’ roll or rockabilly came first. According to Billy Poore, the term “rock ‘n’ roll” is reported as having been used to refer to contemporary 1950s popular music as early as 1952 by disc jockey Alan Freed, and rockabilly is reported to have been coined by the Burnette Brothers in 1953.³ Around the same time, rock ‘n’ roll was considered to refer to rhythm and blues (R&B) in the late 1940s and early 1950s, more specifically to the use of the word “rock” alluding to the sex act.

Author Kirsten Zemke best explains the difference between rockabilly and rock ‘n’ roll in her conference paper “Good Girls Gone Bad: Rock-a-Billy Femininity Featuring Elvis and the Gender F[a]#s.” She cites rockabilly as “a musically distinct genre from rock and roll, one which reflected and integrated ‘white’ music influences like country and bluegrass into rock ‘n’ roll, rather than just being a mimetic interpretation of black rhythm and blues.”⁴ Zemke also differentiates between the terms rock *and* roll, which she defines as African-American R&B of the 1950s, and rock ‘n’ roll, which is what she says came out of rockabilly and its combination of other genres. By doing this, she highlights how racial issues affected the natural evolution of popular music in the 1950s and the difficulties inherent in pinpointing rockabilly pioneers based on contemporary descriptions.

³ Poore, Billy. 1998. *Rockabilly: A forty-year journey*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corp., 15.

⁴ Zemke, Kirsten. 2008. “Good Girls Gone Bad: Rock-a-Billy Femininity Featuring Elvis and the Gender F[a]#s.” *Music on the Edge: Selected Papers from the 2007IASPM Australia/New Zealand Conference*. 2007, 194-201. Dunedin, N.Z.: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 195.

Delineation between rockabilly and rock 'n' roll is further complicated in the book *What Was the First Rock 'n' Roll Record?*⁵ Authors Dawson and Propes systematically list potential recorded singles spanning the years 1944 to 1956, including genre categories, importance in rock 'n' roll, influences and who was influenced. They acknowledge the difficulty in pinpointing specific dates due to significant crossover of the genres in rockabilly music.⁶ This was particularly true with regard to R&B and country music, which both had multiple sub-genres and a connection to gospel music. Singles like "That's All Right" by Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, "Hound Dog" by Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton (who both heavily influenced Elvis Presley), and "We're Gonna Rock, We're Gonna Roll" by William "Wild Bill" Moore (who influenced Bill Haley) are listed as strong contenders based on relevant features in the recordings.

The authors' in-depth survey of possible first rock 'n' roll records also helps to define major elements in rockabilly music. The rockabilly sound was raw, unpolished, and brash, and utilized a combination of acoustic and electric instruments. First and foremost, there was a strong rhythmic beat for dancing, usually motivated by a walking bass line that was played either by an upright bass or in the left hand of the piano player. Rhythms were syncopated and the songs were similar in form to jazz standards; strophic with a verse-chorus structure. There was usually an improvised instrumental section in the middle of the song, or short sections in-between the end of a chorus and the next verse.

⁵ Dawson, Jim and Steve Propes. 1992. *What Was the First Rock 'n' Roll Record?* Boston: Faber and Faber.

⁶ Dawson and Propes, xv.

Rockabilly music often employed humor and sexual innuendo and early rockabilly influences, like Jack McVea, listed vaudeville and burlesque performers as their inspiration.⁷ Song melodies were fairly simple and did not contain large melodic jumps, which was directly opposite what the instruments were doing. Vocalists in rockabilly tended to sing in the same range, men in their higher register and women in their lower register. The songs were easy to learn, due to a large amount of repetition, which contributed to the genre's popularity and danceability.

Musically, Jump blues is the style of R&B that was closest to rockabilly, with elements such as high-energy tempos, boogie-woogie bass lines and everyday lyrics that sometimes bordered on nonsensical. Jump blues was an African-American style most popular in the 1940s, which continued to thrive after swing began to wane by employing a less-polished, aggressive sound and more contemporary lyrics. Many Jump blues artists and songs are now included as part of the rockabilly canon, particularly by post-revival scholars and enthusiasts. Artists such as Wynonie Harris, Ruth Brown, LaVern Baker and Wynona Carr all performed songs that had rockabilly elements and were influential to mainstream rockabilly performers, like Elvis Presley and Janis Martin.⁸

The other part of the rockabilly portmanteau, "hillbilly," was an often derogatory word used to describe uncivilized mountain folk. It was also a style of country music that came out of a mixture of "white folk tradition" and "Negro work and social songs" learned in

⁷ Dawson and Propes, 21-22.

⁸ Milewski, Greg. 1993. "Cat talkin' with Janis Martin." *Cat Tales*, no. 20.

railroad camps.⁹ It was primarily considered a white musical tradition. There were essentially two strains of hillbilly music, one that is closer to modern country music and concentrated on sentimental subjects, and the other that drew more from African-American traditions like the blues.

It was the latter, more energetic style that incorporated slap bass, a technique that permeated rockabilly music.¹⁰ The family group Maddox Brothers and Rose incorporated this element into their own brand of country music, which was often labeled honky-tonk. The group is cited by scholars and performers as a strong influence in the rockabilly sound, particularly due to their performance style. Little sister Rose Maddox was a headstrong, dynamic singer who inherited her drive from her mother Lulu, a divorced stage mother who acted as manager for her children.¹¹ The group used flashy costumes and energetic stage antics, which was unusual for country music where most performers would stand still and sing.

How is it that rockabilly, a controversial genre consisting of two fairly segregated music styles like hillbilly and R&B, finally went mainstream? This can be answered in two words: Sam Phillips. In 1952, Phillips opened Sun Records Recording Studio after a number of prior attempts and smaller recording successes, most of which were “race records” with African-American artists like B.B. King and Ike Turner. Phillips was raised on a mixture of country, Blues and gospel music and was particularly moved by the

⁹ Wilgus, D. K. 1970. “Country-western music and the urban hillbilly.” *The Journal of American Folklore* 83, no. 328: 157-179.

¹⁰ Slap bass got its name from the percussive technique of slapping the bass strings while playing; a popular technique with bands that had no drummer.

¹¹ Bufwack, Mary A. and Robert K. Oermann. 1993. *Finding Her Voice: The saga of women in country music*. New York: Crown Publishers, 128.

energy of the latter two styles. He had a strong idea of the sound he wanted to create, and has been quoted as saying “If I could only find a white boy who could sing like a Negro I could make me a million dollars.”¹² His prayers were answered in the form of Elvis Presley in 1954 with the single “That’s All Right,” which most scholars consider to be the official start of rockabilly music.¹³

Rockabilly music in its first wave ended roughly in the early 1960s, when musical tastes moved towards more political and social subjects. Although rockabilly was considered raunchy in the 1950s, it seemed naïve and outdated by 1960s standards. Many rockabilly performers, like Wanda Jackson and Brenda Lee, moved to other genres, such as country or gospel. Performers Lorrie Collins, of the Collins Kids, and Ruth Brown stopped performing all together. Musicians who continued with a rockabilly sound, like Dick Dale, began to use electronic effects, like fuzz pedal or distortion, or went purely instrumental, which was the beginnings of surf rock. Rockabilly music in its original form was dead less than ten years after it began.

In the 1970s, there was a rockabilly revival in Great Britain, which was a late off-shoot of the Teddy Boy movement. Teddy Boys originated in the 1950s, adopting Edwardian fashion as a way to rebel against their parents’ working class culture. By the early 1960s, British bands, like The Beatles, embraced American rock ‘n’ roll. This prompted Teddy Boys to merge rockabilly culture with gang culture, bringing fashion to the forefront as

¹² Escott, Colin and Martin Hawkins. 1991. *Good Rockin' Tonight: Sun Records and the birth of rock 'n' roll*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 64.

¹³ Morrison, Craig. 1996. *Go Cat Go!: Rockabilly music and its makers*. Music in American life. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 3.

an expression of the genre.¹⁴ Rockabilly was also blended at this time with other music genres, like punk and glam, creating a harder-edged sound that paved the way for psychobilly and punkabilly styles.

State of Research on the Topic

Rockabilly music is a genre that is primarily identified through its performers. The bulk of research on rockabilly music, popular and scholarly, tends to center around a core of white male performers, such as Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash. Often, this is due to availability of sources based on gender and racial prejudice, as previously discussed. Not much exists on women in rockabilly before the 1970s, unless one includes research on hillbilly or Jump blues as influential genres.

One of the first comprehensive studies on rockabilly music was *Rockabilly: A bibliographic resource guide*, written by B. Lee Cooper and Wayne S. Haney in 1990. Cooper and Haney list print and sound sources systematically gathered over a period of fifteen years, choosing artists “central to the evolving rockabilly tapestry.”¹⁵ Although there is a preponderance of white male performers in the book, a fact acknowledged by the authors, the source offers a large range of entries on women performers, including lesser-known performers like Linda Gail Lewis and Bonnie Lou.

¹⁴ “The Teddy Boy Movement.” *BlackCat Rockabilly Europe*.
<http://www.rockabilly.nl/general/teddyboys.htm>, accessed July 10, 2012.

¹⁵ Cooper, B. L. and W. S. Haney. 1990. *Rockabilly: A bibliographic resource guide*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press.

A few sources attempted to approach women in rockabilly music from a different angle or tried to reach a specific audience. The book *Rock Music in American Popular Culture II* is directed towards librarians, educators and scholars to provide guidance on searching for topics in rock music.¹⁶ Consisting of twenty-two topics arranged alphabetically, the book attempts to provide decent coverage on the chosen subjects with suggested readings and approaches specific to information specialists. “Rock ‘n’ Roll Women” is a twenty-page chapter that begins with a short essay on gender studies in the genre and then proceeds to list resources, highlighting a few of them within the appropriate subsection.

In regards to race issues within the rockabilly genre, most sources discuss this from the standpoint of African-American musical influence and how rockabilly music was viewed culturally. It was not until the rockabilly revival that R&B artists from the 1940s and 1950s were added to the rockabilly canon; therefore, there is little on how these performers directly affected rockabilly music. The book *Blue Rhythms: Six lives in rhythm and blues* provides the most in-depth interview with LaVern Baker available.¹⁷ I was able to use this book to research additional primary resources and verify conflicting information.

The most helpful items are direct interviews with performers, most often in popular sources. The majority of interviews were conducted after the rockabilly revival in the 1970s and 1980s and are found in popular genre magazines, such as *Cat Tales*, or in

¹⁶ Cooper, B. Lee and Wayne S. Haney. 1997. *Rock Music in American Popular Culture II: More rock 'n' roll resources*. New York, Harrington Park Press.

¹⁷ Deffaa, Chip. 1996. *Blue Rhythms: Six lives in rhythm and blues*. Music in American life. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

documentaries.¹⁸ The documentary film *Welcome to the Club*, by Beth Harrington, is a pivotal work that captured multiple interviews by women performers in rockabilly, both original and recent, and has comprised a large part of my research.¹⁹

The Elvis Element

It is an expected reality that many sources on rockabilly music are going to mention Elvis Presley at some point. As aforementioned, many authors argue that Elvis was the true start of rockabilly, one even going so far as to list an “obvious Presley influence” as a requisite for a performer to be considered rockabilly.²⁰ The genre is also considered to have ended when Elvis entered military service in 1958. Therefore, it is not surprising that research on individual performers discusses how they relate to Elvis. This is especially persistent in sources on women in the genre, often with an emphasis on romantic ties.

Such a source is the book *Country Music Changed My Life*, which has a chapter titled “The Elvis Factor.” Within that chapter, the section on Barbara Pittman is ten pages, the longest I have seen on her in any source. In it, her career is credited to a “handful of singles she cut in the 1950s at the legendary Sun studios and her childhood friendship with Elvis Presley.”²¹ It is not clear if Pittman was responding to specific questions about Presley or if she was speaking on her own, however, she spends as much time discussing Elvis as she does herself, going so far as to credit his death for a renewed interest in her

¹⁸ Milewski, 1996.

¹⁹ Harrington, Beth. 2004. *The Women of Rockabilly Welcome to the club*. Seattle, Wash.: m2kmusic.

²⁰ Morrison, 1.

²¹ Burke, Ken. 2004. *Country Music Changed My Life: Tales of tough times and triumph from country's legends*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 170.

career.²² In Barbara Pittman's case, she was not as well-known a performer so her connection to Presley can be viewed as beneficial. For Wanda Jackson, who is regarded as one of the biggest performers of rockabilly, regardless of gender, any discussion of Elvis Presley is unnecessary, but often happens.

With hits like "Hot Dog! That Made Him Mad" (1956), "Fujiyama Mama" (1957), and "Let's Have a Party" (1960), Wanda Jackson has the most literature written on her of any rockabilly woman. She is given two sections in *Country Music Changed My Life*; one in a section on religion and music and also in the Elvis Presley chapter. Sometimes called the 'Queen of Rockabilly,' Wanda knew Elvis when she was younger and they dated briefly in 1956 when they toured together.²³ While Presley did suggest Wanda sing in the rockabilly style, her enormous talent, signature vocal growl, and elegant personality positioned her as one of the only women rockabilly performers who was able to rise above social constraints of the 1950s and enjoy measurable fame.

The book *Finding Her Voice*, by Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann, presents women in rockabilly as a result of music producers searching for a female Elvis, implying a certain sense of persistence in the business to record as many women as it took until they got it right.²⁴ In fact, Sam Phillips tried to promote Jean Chapel on the Sun Records label as "The Female Elvis Presley," but the name did not stick, especially once Presley had given his blessing for Janis Martin to use the moniker on RCA.²⁵

²² Burke, 179.

²³ Burke, 180-181.

²⁴ Bufwack and Oermann, 1993, 190-91.

²⁵ Bufwack and Oermann, 1993, 219.

Finding Her Voice includes one of the largest bibliographies on rockabilly women, although it is still only two pages long. They also list a large array of women performers not mentioned in other sources, such as the Davis Sisters and Jackie DeShannon, and include images of each. However, the chapter focuses mostly on the female performer's relationships to men and downplays their influence on the music, going so far as to label "the entire female rockabilly trend" as "one big nutty country experiment that took place in this freewheeling teen environment."²⁶

A concentration on race and gender issues within the genre in the last fifteen years, particularly in research by Sheila Whiteley and Nick Tosches, has raised interest in the experiences of women in rockabilly music. Elvis Presley is used for case study, as opposed to a being a focal point. Scholars are also concentrating more on how women contributed to rockabilly music itself.

In *Sexing the Groove*, a collection of essays edited by Sheila Whiteley, David Sanjek's chapter "Can a Fujiyama Mama be the Female Elvis?" extensively covers gender limitations in the 1950s through the relationship of the media and availability of recordings.²⁷ Sanjek discussed issues of individual women, such as Brenda Lee's inability to grow up due to audience fears and expectations, as well as the overall oppressive environment for women performers. In the end, Sanjek acknowledged his

²⁶ Bufwack and Oermann, 1993, 204.

²⁷ Whiteley, Sheila (ed.). 1997. *Sexing the Groove: Popular music and gender*. London; New York: Routledge.

tendency to devote too much attention to the struggle women musicians faced and the pitfall of creating an “alternate canon” in an attempt to reverse the past.²⁸

Author Francesca Brittan examined the influence of Elvis Presley in her study of women Elvis impersonators in *Women Who “Do Elvis.”*²⁹ The study focused on the process women go through to “do” Elvis and the overall effects this has on their gender identity, including outside negative social reactions, such as sponsors withdrawing support from or canceling shows when they find out a female impersonator is on the bill.³⁰ A female impersonator that can successfully channel such a virile identity as “Elvis the Pelvis” rocks the very foundation on which masculinity is constructed; that male identity lies within the physical reality of actually having male body parts.

Elvis himself was an amalgam of borrowed selves, from his stolen identity of popular movie stars of the time to his stolen music of African-American R&B and Blues performers. He shaped the character that he wanted to become and to which felt his audience would respond, one that became more and more inflated as he lost himself in what he had become. Brittan suggests that women who impersonate Elvis “explore the double negativity of rebecoming what they never were” when they personify something that Elvis himself never was and through that they discover things about themselves.³¹

²⁸ Sanjek, David. 1997. “Can a Fujiyama Mama be the Female Elvis?: The wild, wild women of rockabilly.” *Sexing the Groove : Popular music and gender*, ed. Sheila Whitely: 353. London: New York: Routledge, 160.

²⁹ Brittan, Francesca. 2006. “Women Who ‘Do Elvis’: Authenticity, masculinity, and masquerade.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 18, no. 2: 167-190.

³⁰ The Presley Estate and the Tupelo Convention withdrew support from the Second Annual International Conference on Elvis Presley when Elvis Herselvis was invited to perform, causing her to resign from the show. (Brittan, p. 180.)

³¹ Brittan, p. 172.

It is that exact exchange of gender identity that contradicted social norms of the 1950s and prompted an overall suspicion and fear of rockabilly music. World War II had blurred gender lines due to necessity, and a mass movement was underway to return to the status quo. However, civil and social discord began to unravel the domestic ideal and legal segregation would soon be a thing of the past.

Chapter Two: The Domestic Ideal, Jim Crow, and

Women in Rockabilly Music

During World War II, troops sent overseas were homesick and morale was floundering. They missed their loved ones and looked forward to sporadic care packages filled with familiar items, like chocolate, knit scarves and letters from their sweethearts or wives. Sometimes they were lucky enough to receive pictures, which they would attach inside their footlockers, helmets, or cockpit dashboards. It made them feel closer to home and reminded them what they were fighting for.

The government was aware of the need for morale boosters and provided the troops with various treats like cigarettes and magazines. One magazine in particular, *Esquire*, had a special feature called a centerfold that was a two page lengthwise drawing by artist Alberto Vargas of a woman in a playful, somewhat seductive pose.³² Vargas often drew his models with exaggerated features to represent the representation of the quintessential dream girl. These drawings became known as pin-ups because they were often pulled out of the magazines and “pinned up” on walls.

Pin-ups were a hit with the troops and quickly became the American feminine ideal, even though they were stylized drawings that defied the reality of most female bodies. Tamar Christensen in the thesis “The Golden Age of the American Pin-up, 1941-1957” sums up the phenomenon:

³² Christensen, Tamar S. 2007. *The Golden Age of the American Pin-up, 1941-1957: Cultural representation and relevance*. Masters, California State University. 5.

“The pin-up image struck the perfect balance between reality and fiction, infused with home front qualities. It became the iconic representation of the American way of life.”³³

The pin-up served as more than a reminder of American women, it allowed men to create their idea of the perfect woman waiting for them at home. Essentially, GIs were being trained to think of women as paragons, something unreal, a picture.

According to Christensen, there were three factors for the broad pin-up appeal- the images flooded American pop culture, the morality of the images were upheld by a Supreme Court ruling allowing them to be mailed, and the military overlooked the images being used on government property.³⁴ Pin-up images were exempt from normal military restrictions because they provided such high morale for the homesick troops fighting overseas. Pin-up nose art on fighter planes served as a constant reminder to fighting GIs and a visual warning to enemies. It was the image of Rita Hayworth that was painted on the atomic bomb to show the power of the American woman, who was the epitome of American ideals and freedom.³⁵

After the war, GIs looked forward regaining the lifestyle they fought to protect. They were shocked to return and find that the determined, self-reliant woman created by the war was not what they had dreamed of. Women were called on to help their country by taking over jobs previously held by men while also running their households. Not only were the working women doing well, becoming competent in skills previously thought

³³ Christensen, 26.

³⁴ Christensen, 17.

³⁵ Christensen, 49.

only manageable by men, they were providing much needed extra income and handling their regular duties at home. In this context, images of powerful women were no longer patriotic, but dangerous, and something to be contained and controlled. Post-war women were expected to stay at home and be the perfect housewife and mother.

If a woman did work, it was in a position deemed feminine in nature, like secretary or teacher. This “victory” did not come without a price. Working women were paid considerably less than their male counterparts. It was also expected that work outside the home was only temporary, lasting until she married and had a family. Some businesses promised romance opportunities and marriage to entice single women to work, only to fire them when they did marry or become pregnant.³⁶ Working women endured negative backlash for being unfeminine or a “bad mother” if they had children, regardless of their family’s financial situation.³⁷

One of the major changes in the landscape of the post-war American household dynamic was the mass migration to the suburbs by working families. The suburbs were part of the domestic ideal – entire communities made up of middle-class families all conforming to a vision of what was supposed to be the American Dream. But a side effect of this was the isolation of the housewife, which created a greater dependence on outside influences, like magazines, cookbooks, and television, in order to live up to the expectations of the domestic ideal.

³⁶ Parks, L. 1999. "Watching the "Working Gals": Fifties sitcoms and the repositioning of women in postwar American culture". *Critical Matrix*. 11 (2): 42-66, 1.

³⁷ Brodtkin, Karen. 1998. *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 88.

Regardless of the positive steps that women were taking, the outside pressure to maintain the domestic ideal was overwhelming and persuasive. The government made funds available to women who otherwise would have to work, as encouragement for them to stay at home. The government was also using the American family and the domestic ideal as propaganda to win the Cold War. The combination of the aftermath of World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II left families struggling, afraid they would not be financially stable.

Much later, in the 1950s and 1960s, this history of instability, war, and poverty would have a great effect on the way women perceived and upheld the post-war domestic ideal the 1950s seemed to create. Women had found a sense of security within the domestic ideal that they had long lacked, between their childhoods during the Great Depression and the chaos of World War II.³⁸ The outside influences of the government, the media, and the men in their lives did influence women to accept the domestic ideal, but the women themselves embraced and upheld the image of the perfect housewife, too.

Being a woman in rockabilly music defied the domestic ideal on almost every level. Women in rockabilly had to “rebecome” themselves in order to define their place in the genre. Much as men in rockabilly took on feminine traits, like longer hair and flashy dress, women in the genre shed a their feminine identity to really get to the music that was rampant with heavily masculine traits that fed off of blatant sexual energy. Heavy touring schedules with only male counterparts left little room for a domestic home life and many of the women preferred it that way. Rose Maddox sums up the overall attitude

³⁸ Woloch, 321.

of non-traditional ideals held by some women in rockabilly, “Women were expected to get married and have children. That’s *all*. Well, I just wasn’t made that way.”³⁹

Not only were women expected to be the perfect housewife and mother, they were constantly bombarded with images of a sexual double-standard that pervaded the 1950s and 1960s. This is most easily seen in movies where a buxom leading lady is forced to take on child-like traits in order to not prove a threat to the curiously nerdy leading man that she inevitably falls for in the end. In music, mass media concentrated on a singer’s physique or played up their “domestic” attributes, if they were of an age that they were allowed to have them, instead of writing about their performance style or music.

One exception to this was singer Charline Arthur. She dressed in men’s clothing and was fairly aggressive in her behavior, which was considered a masculine trait in the 1950s. Reporters felt she did not have feminine qualities at all, so she was often overlooked or written about as “distant.”⁴⁰ Charline’s lack of media support was a large factor in her short-lived career. She tried to remedy this by softening her image, dressing in a more feminine manner and trying to be less aggressive in her delivery. Unfortunately, it was too late. By the end of the 1950s, Arthur was penniless and living in a mobile home, taking gigs in local honky-tonk bars. She died at fifty-eight years old, on the verge of a minor come-back.⁴¹

³⁹ McNutt, Randy. 1988. *We Wanna Boogie: An illustrated history of the American rockabilly movement*. Hamilton, Ohio: HHP Books, 185.

⁴⁰ Neely, Emily. 2002. “Charline Arthur: The unmaking of a honky-tonk star.” *Southern Cultures* 8, no.3, 92.

⁴¹ Bufwack and Oermann, 1993, 175.

Some performers began at a young age, such as Lorrie Collins of the Collins Kids, and were able to sidestep this issue because they were thought of as "children," and not considered to be a threat. However, they were often pressured by producers to not outwardly mature or were punished when they did. For example, Brenda Lee was only eleven-years-old when signed to Decca records in 1955. A walking contradiction, Lee was a child with an adult's voice. She would record suggestive songs with alluring lyrics, but be dressed in frilly, baby-doll dresses and talked to in baby talk. Brenda was under constant adult supervision, which hindered her having a normal teenage life, "I *wanted* to get in trouble, but there was no way."⁴²

Race

Numerous variables were feeding the growing fear of the breakdown of traditional values including a rise in juvenile delinquency (45% between 1948 and 1953), the communist "red scare" frenzy of the cold war, and racial tensions surrounding segregation.⁴³

Rockabilly music became a hotbed of accusation and controversy to parents and media who felt it encompassed all three with its wild lyrics and dangerous hold on suggestible youth. In the case of women, an out-of-control teenager was equated with a bad mother and anything that influenced children to act out was quickly suppressed.

Restless teens eager to break out of their parent's shadow of repression adopted the volatile music as their anthem. Movies filled with high-energy rockabilly music and non-existent story plots, like "Blackboard Jungle" and "Rock, Rock, Rock," were quickly

⁴² Sanjek, 150.

⁴³ Kallen, Stuart A. 1999. *The 1950s. A cultural history of the United States through the decades*. San Diego, Calif.: Lucent Books, 145.

released to eager and sometimes destructive teenage audiences.⁴⁴ Moralistic films like “Rebel Without a Cause” were also released in reaction to this, in order to show what could happen to out-of-control teens in hopes of preventing or rehabilitating wayward youths.

Rockabilly music owed much of its energetic backbeat to R&B, particularly jive and bop. However, R&B was an African-American genre and rockabilly’s similar wild lyrics and exotic rhythms did little to suppress the already biased views of white Americans scared by the growing violence of anti-segregation riots. The media further exacerbated the situation by constantly airing congressional hearings and sound clips on the subject, one of the most famous being the clip of Reverend Jimmy Snow railing about “the beat, the beat, the beat!”⁴⁵

Americans had been living with legal segregation since 1896, when the Supreme Court passed *Plessy v. Ferguson*, also known as the “separate but equal” law. The statute, based on an incident on a train, states:

“...all railway companies carrying passengers in their coaches in this state, shall provide equal but separate accommodations for the white, and colored races, by providing two or more passenger coaches for each passenger train, or by dividing the passenger coaches by a partition so as to secure separate accommodations: provided, that this section shall not be construed to apply to street railroads. No person or persons shall be permitted to occupy seats in coaches, other than the ones assigned to them, on account of the race they belong to.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ “Blackboard Jungle” was banned from theaters due to riots caused by the song “Rock Around the Clock” that played over the beginning credits. (Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 2009. “Rock Around the Clock” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/506052/Rock-Around-the-Clock>, accessed May 1 2009.)

⁴⁵ Harrington, 2004.

⁴⁶ *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, Judgement, Decided May 18, 1896; Records of the Supreme Court of the United States; Record Group 267; *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163, #15248, National Archives. on Archives.gov, accessed July 30, 2012.

Plessy v. Ferguson upheld Jim Crow laws of the southern states, setting a precedent that allowed local government to regulate what they felt was equal treatment, which was rarely the case. Named after the popular nineteenth-century minstrel character Jim Crow, the laws were built on the fear that African-Americans were savage, sexual, and inferior creatures that needed to be controlled for their own well-being. Organized groups, like the Klu Klux Klan, formed to help “protect” against the integration of whites and African-Americans, and inter-racial marriages were prohibited.

Schools, neighborhoods, public transportation, and hotels were segregated with white and “colored” areas, along with steep fines and possible jail time for anyone who defied the rules. Landlords were not allowed to let African-American tenants move in if a white person lived in the building and hospitals had to have separate entrances. Restaurants could allow whites and African-Americans in the same building, but had to have a seven-foot, solid partition blocking them from each other and separate entrances for each section.⁴⁷

Jim Crow laws made life for musicians challenging in multiple ways. African-American performers had to find ways to maneuver around Jim Crow laws that would allow them to perform in white clubs and events, but not use the facilities or talk with patrons.

African-American and white performers also were not allowed to be on stage together. In the documentary *Welcome to the Club*, piano player Big Al Downing talks about a show with Wanda Jackson where he was the only African-American in the band:

⁴⁷ Tischauser, Leslie Vincent. 2012. *Jim Crow laws*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: Greenwood, xiii.

“I was in Butte, Montana one time, and I was on stage with Wanda Jackson, playing piano behind her and all of that. And the owner came up and stopped the band... Bobby Poe said ‘What do you mean stop the band?’ He said, ‘Well, there’s a black guy playing up there with Wanda and we don’t want it. Not in my club.’ So they said, ‘You can play once the black guy leaves the stage.’ And so I started to walk off the stage... and Wanda said, ‘Al is in my band. If he can’t play here, I can’t either.’”⁴⁸

Racially integrated shows like *The Biggest Show of Stars for 1957*, with artists such as Fats Domino, The Drifters, and The Everly Brothers, were becoming more accepted. However, artists still had to deal with segregation at event facilities. Performers found ways around Jim Crow laws to help each other whenever possible. White musicians would often sneak food and beverages to African-American musicians, and vice versa. Depending on what part of the country the show was in, either white or African-American performers would not perform at all. Eventually, the entertainers bonded together and started to refuse to perform if the venue was racially segregated.⁴⁹

One of the most damaging practices in music was race covers, or “whitewashing.” This was when a performer, often white, recorded an almost exact copy of a popular R&B single for a white audience, changing the lyrics if deemed too risqué. Many radio stations would not play recordings by African-American performers and Jim Crow laws kept many music stores from selling them, so the whitewashed version often became more popular, resulting in higher chart placements and displaced revenue for the R&B original. Performers like Patti Page, Georgia Gibbs, and Vicki Young covered songs by R&B artists Ruth Brown, The Clovers, and The Drifters.

⁴⁸ Harrington, 2004.

⁴⁹ Deffaa, 196-198

The social climate of the 1950s was a confusing binary that, on the surface, seemed to uphold wholesome values and a growing economy, steeped in patriotism and consumerism. However, a closer look shows growing dissent based on gender and racial inequalities, culminating in social and political turbulence of the 1960s. Pairing this environment with involvement in a genre of music that pushed the social norm meant that women in rockabilly music had little hope of any kind of support, as is evident in a study of two of the genre's most influential performers; LaVern Baker and Janis Martin.

Chapter Three: LaVern Baker

Of all the women in rockabilly in the 1950s, LaVern Baker was perhaps the most notable victim of the practice of whitewashing. Delores LaVern Baker was born in Illinois on November 11th, 1929. Baker's parents were separated and she spent her youth traveling back and forth between Chicago to stay with her mother and Milwaukee, Wisconsin to stay with her father.⁵⁰ Baker was highly influenced by her aunt Merline Johnson, who was a popular blues performer known as "The Yas Yas Girl." Another relative, Memphis Minnie, was a well-known blues singer in the 1930s and 40s and Baker would have the opportunity to sing with both early in her career.

Baker began performing as a child in her Baptist Church choir, but had to wait until she was seventeen to get a professional work permit to sing in bars. Her first big break was at Chicago's Club DeLisa where the owners gave her the persona of "Little Miss Sharecropper," a country bumpkin with a basket on her arm and a big straw hat who told funny stories and sang. It was a vaudevillian character that relied heavily on minstrel stereotypes, which Baker saw as a necessary evil to achieve her goals. "I was never happy doing it, but to get my foot in the door, I accepted it," she said in a 1991 interview.⁵¹

LaVern met the jazz performer Fletcher Henderson at Club DeLisa, and he wrote the song "When I'm in a Crying Mood" for her. Baker recorded this song for Columbia

⁵⁰ Deffaa, 176.

⁵¹ Milward, John. 1991. "Pop music : Everything's just Jim Dandy..." *Los Angeles Times*, April 14.

Records in 1947, but it was never issued.⁵² She moved to Detroit, Michigan and started performing at The Flame Bar, which was run by Al Green, who later went on to manage Jackie Wilson. Green began to manage Baker and introduced her as a mentor to a young Johnnie Ray, whom she taught to sing the blues.⁵³ In 1949, she recorded with Eddie Penigar on RCA Victor, and then made “Sharecroppers Boogie” with Hot Lips Page on Columbia Records in 1950. The next year, LaVern recorded three singles with Maurice King and His Wolverines under the name Bea Baker for Okeh records and “Little Miss Sharecropper” for National Records. She spent the next few years touring with the Todd Rhodes Orchestra and signed briefly with King Records, where she recorded multiple

singles like “Trying” and Pig Latin Blues,” a novelty bop song. By 1953, she had shed the “Little Miss Sharecropper” persona for a mature, glamorous look.⁵⁴



LaVern Baker, 1956
 Photograph by Bruno Bernard
 Image courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and
 Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-123601

In 1953, LaVern Baker was signed to Atlantic Records and recorded her first full album *Soul On Fire*. Her first charting single “Tweedlee Dee” was recorded in October, 1954. It was a smash hit that burned up the R&B charts and spent eleven

⁵² Defaa, 175.

⁵³ Gart, Galen. 2003. *Rhythm & Blues in Cleveland, 1955 edition*. Winter Haven, Fla.: Big Nickel Publications, 82.

⁵⁴ Sacks, Leo. 1991. *Rock & Roll Hall of Fame Induction Dinner 1991*. New York: Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation, Inc.

weeks on the pop charts, an uncommon feat for an African-American performer at that time. According to Cash Box Magazine, “Tweedlee Dee” was rated one of the most played tunes in the nation by top disc jockeys.⁵⁵ The song quickly dropped to number fourteen when it was bumped by another version of the song that had been recorded by white singer Georgia Gibbs. Gibbs made a career out of race covers, so much so that Baker listed Gibbs as a beneficiary on a travel life insurance policy with the note “If anything happens to me, you’re out of business.”⁵⁶

Lavern Baker became so fed up with whitewashing practices that in February 1955, she wrote an appeal letter to Michigan Representative Charles Diggs, Jr. to revise the *Copyright Act of 1909*, which gave little protection against race covers. In the letter Baker criticized Gibbs and singer Vicki Young for their “arrogance in thefting my music note for note” and estimated a loss of \$15,000 in royalties because people bought the covers thinking they were her.⁵⁷ Baker was the first performer to go to such lengths to push for legislative change, a daring feat for a woman, much less an African-American woman in the 1950s.

Nothing was ever done in response to Baker’s congressional appeal and her songs continued to be whitewashed over the next ten years. Georgia Gibbs denied that she stole LaVern Baker’s sound and felt it was unfair to place the blame solely on her. According to Gibbs in a 1991 interview, “I came into the studio and had no say at all about the

⁵⁵ Gart, 77.

⁵⁶ *Biography.com*. “Lavern Baker.” <http://www.biography.com/people/lavern-baker-17171568>, accessed January 23 2012.

⁵⁷ *Billboard*. 1955. Lavern Baker seeks bill to halt arrangement 'thefts'. March 5, 13.

background or the arrangement. To this day, I've never even heard her version."⁵⁸ A comparison of the two versions of "Tweedlee Dee" makes it difficult to believe Gibbs' claim. Aside from the fact that producers on Gibbs' record used the same arrangement, backing musicians and background singers as Baker's version, Gibbs' vocal inflections, added riffs and even vibrato almost exactly match those of Baker. Gibbs' version is in a slightly higher key and has a few more horn hits; however, it is easy to understand how people could confuse the two recordings with all of the similarities.

Despite whitewashing issues, LaVern Baker's star continued to rise and in 1955 she performed on the Ed Sullivan Show as part of an R&B segment put together by New York disc jockey Dr. Jive.⁵⁹ It was during this time that she recorded her second big hit single "Jim Dandy," which went to number one on the R&B charts. She recorded "I Cried a Tear" in 1959, which went to number six on the pop charts. It was also her first serious song after a long line of novelty tunes, like "Jim Dandy Got Married" and "Tra-La-La."

"I Cried a Tear" was an excellent vehicle for Baker's soulful voice and an indication of the direction she wanted to go artistically. The ballad was a perfect combination of jazz, Blues and R&B, with a slow, shuffling drum beat for dancing.

I cried a tear because of you
 I cried a tear because we're through
 I cried a tear what else could I do
 But cry and sigh for love of you

⁵⁸ Milward, 1991.

⁵⁹ Gulla, Bob. 2008. *Icons of R & B and soul: an encyclopedia of the artists who revolutionized rhythm*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.

I felt a tear fall in my heart
 You fooled me so I wasn't smart
 I can't believe that we must part
 Come back to stay let's make a new start

I cried a tear because of you
 I cried a tear because we're through
 Please make my dream of you come true
 Don't make me cry a tear for you⁶⁰

The song paired LaVern's soaring voice with a solo saxophone that mirrored her subtle phrasing, and vice versa. As with her previous recordings, there is a chorus in the background, but they are essentially superfluous; the conversation between LaVern and the saxophone provides the emotional backbone of the song. She transforms the simplistic melody with emotional vocal nuance; using shorter, choppy phrases that mimic crying in contrast with the elongation of certain words, like "tear" and "through." Baker is elegant and dramatic, moving between constraint and despair.

In the early 1960s, Baker recorded a number of duets with various popular R&B singers, like Ben E. King and Jackie Wilson. She also recorded "Saved" and "See See Rider," two moderately popular singles in 1961 and 1962. By the mid-1960s, Baker found her popularity waning and went on a USO tour to entertain troops in Vietnam. While there she contracted bronchial pneumonia, which almost killed her twice, and was diagnosed with an enlarged heart and high blood pressure.⁶¹ Unable to travel, she was left behind with no way to contact anyone or return to the United States. Consequently, her second

⁶⁰ Julia, Al and Fred Jacobson. Lyrics. 1991. "I Cried a Tear." *Atlantic Rhythm & Blues 1947-1974, volume 4*. Atlantic Recording Corporation, compact disc.

⁶¹ Hoekstra, Dave. 1992. "A dandy homecoming for lavern baker." *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 31.

husband, comedian Melvin “Slappy” White, had her declared dead and assumed rights to her song royalties.⁶²

Baker remained in the Philippines for the next twenty-one years, starting a new family and working as the entertainment director at the U.S. Naval Base in Subic Bay, Hong Kong.⁶³ In 1988, she finally returned to the United States to perform in the *Atlantic Records 40th Anniversary Celebration* and never returned. She concentrated on live shows and recorded songs for the soundtracks of *Shag*, *Dick Tracy*, and *A Rage in Harlem*.⁶⁴ In 1990, she took over a role in the stage show *Black and Blue* that had been originated by close friend and fellow former Atlantic Records performer Ruth Brown. That same year, she became one of the first eight recipients of the Career Achievement Awards from the Rhythm and Blues Foundation.⁶⁵ In 1991, she became the second woman to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In 1992, Baker recorded a comeback album *Woke Up This Mornin’* and prepared to continue to ride her second wave of success, but her health was declining and she was diagnosed with diabetes. She continued to work on and off even after a series of strokes and complications from diabetes caused her to lose her legs; the right leg in 1994 and the left in 1995. After that she performed in a wheelchair, which did little to diminish her

⁶² Hoekstra, 1992.

⁶³ Morris, Chris. 1997. “R&B legend, rock pioneer Lavern Baker, 67, dies.” *Billboard* 109, no. 12: 10.

⁶⁴ Zuhri, Chimsima. 2010. “Delores LaVern Baker.” <http://todayinafricanamericanhistory.com/african-american-history/november-11th-in-african-american-history-delores-lavern-baker>, accessed July 12, 2012.

⁶⁵ Sacks, 7.

spirit. In a 1995 interview, she told Los Angeles Times reporter Elysa Gardner, “I lost my legs... but I didn’t lose my mind... God gave me a talent and I can still use it.”⁶⁶

LaVern Baker died from heart failure on March 10, 1997 at St. Luke’s- Roosevelt Hospital in New York. She was 67 years old.⁶⁷ Her legacy in rockabilly music was far-reaching and she inspired other women performers, like Janis Martin, with her passionate, in-your-face sound. Her brave attempt at changing unfair copyright laws led to a greater awareness of whitewashing practices and prompted more air play of African-American recordings. This helped to diminish the taboo of R&B and rockabilly music in the 1950s.

⁶⁶ Gardner, Elysa. 1995. “Hall of famer returns to the spotlight.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 26.

⁶⁷ Morris, 1997.

Chapter Four: Janis Martin

Janis Darlene Martin was born March 27, 1940, in Southerland, Virginia and started to learn guitar at the age of four. Janis' mother Jewel Martin, a typical stage mother by her accounts, recognized her talent from an early age.

I remember the first thing that she learned to play and sing with the guitar was that old song "Don't Fence Me In." And from that she kept practicing and practicing and practicing, and pretty soon she could accompany herself with anything that she [sic]...the tune that she knew and she could sing. And so it come to the point where the neighbors would be there and Janis would get her guitar and show 'em what she could do. And they were just fascinated..."⁶⁸

Jewel started entering Janis in local and state talent contests at age eight, which she consistently won. By age thirteen, Janis was opening for Ernest Tubb at the *Richmond Tobacco Festival*. This quickly led to a spot on *The Old Dominion Barndance* in Richmond, which aired on the CBS Radio station, and Janis' own show, *Janis Martin and Her Guitar: Singing Songs You Like*.⁶⁹

It was during her time in *The Old Dominion Barndance* that Janis became aware of R&B music and began to incorporate it into her shows.

"I was fiddling with the radio, trying to find something I liked, and I ran up on the song Ruth Brown 'Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean.' I said 'That's it. That's it!' Pretty soon I was doing Ruth Brown's music on this all country show. It was up-tempo and it was lively and it was something happening, rather than just getting out there... with a guitar and getting behind a microphone and just standing."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See Appendix C.

⁶⁹ *Bee, The*. 1954. Rialto theater ad- "Janis Martin: Singing songs you like the way you like them." October 28.

⁷⁰ Harrington, 2004.

Martin started to perform these country infused versions of R&B songs in her shows. This was in 1953; one year before Elvis Presley's recording of "That's All Right Mama" was released. At this point, no mainstream recording stars were performing this kind of music which, according to Janis, often led to confusion in her audience.

"At first I think people looked at me, 'well this is strange,' you know, 'this is an all country show,' but they loved it. They would just tear the place down and we had two shows a night. You know they'd empty the theater and come back and they might go outside and say 'O.K. Janis did this song, I've never heard it before but you gotta hear this,' then they'd come in, they loved it. Because it was somethin' different, out of the ordinary and, of course, I was having a ball with it."⁷¹

Janis became popular enough with her "hillbilly rave-ups" that she was given her own show on the radio, *Eight O' Clock Rock*. It aired right before *The Old Dominion Barndance* show.⁷²

It was this new, energetic performance style that landed Janis a recording contract with RCA Records in 1956, at age fifteen. Her first single "Will You Willyum" sold over 750,000 copies and is one of Janis' strongest recordings. It has all of the elements of rockabilly in it: a shuffling drum beat, boogie-woogie bass line, slight sexual innuendo in the lyrics and energetic vocals with an R&B influence.

They can call you Bill, or even Billy
But you're my sweet William and you drive me silly

(Chorus)
Oh will-will-will you thrill me to my fingertips
William, William, William
Yum-yum-yum, I like your tasty lips
William, William, William

⁷¹ See Appendix B.

⁷² Blue Ridge Institute and Museum. *Virginia Rocks: The history of rockabilly in the commonwealth*. Ferrum, Va.: Blue Ridge Institute & Museum of Ferrum College, 14.

When I'm close to you all I can do is say
Willyum, will you, William

I will sit with Jim or dance with Henry
But it takes my William to really send me

Got no hot rod car and he can't bop
But when he starts rockin' I yell don't stop⁷³

Janis starts “Will You Willyum” a cappella. Her voice is aggressive and in sharp contrast with her young age. The chorus has an interjection of “William, William, William,” that Janis sings low in her range with a quivering vibrato and pronounces “Will-yum,” making it more suggestive. She jumps up to “Yum, yum, yum” with a guttural growl and peppers the song with blues notes. During Chet Atkin’s guitar solo, she energetically holds her own by interjecting “William, William, William,” with the second one coming in on an offbeat, highlighting the syncopation of the shuffling drum beat. Janis’ energy sounds as if she’s dancing while she’s singing, transforming “Will You Willyum” into an infectious song.

“Will You Willyum” was coupled with a song Janis wrote herself called “Drugstore Rock ‘n’ Roll.”⁷⁴ Janis was not known as a songwriter, but she had written multiple songs during her time at RCA. She only recorded two of them, “Drugstore Rock ‘n’ Roll” and “Blues Keep a Callin.” According to Janis, additional songs she wrote were recorded by other artists on the roster, but she was never given credit or compensation because she naïvely gave them to the label without a contract.⁷⁵

⁷³ Stutz, Carl. 2003. Lyrics. “Will You Willyum.” *Love and kisses*. Hambergen (Allemagne): Bear family, LP.

⁷⁴ Fox, Randy. 1998. Our Gal Janis. *Nashville Scene*, December 3.

⁷⁵ Milewski, 1993.

Despite youthful oversights, Janis' career was off to strong start. Several more singles were issued, such as "Ooby Dooby," "Let's Elope Baby," "My Boy Elvis," and "Little Bit." Janis also made appearances on *American Bandstand*, *The Tonight Show*, *The Today Show*, *Ozark Jubilee*, and the *Grand Ole Opry*.⁷⁶ In 1957, she dropped out of High School during tenth grade to start touring, but was able to finish her studies on the road.⁷⁷

While on tour, Janis had to contend with professional jealousy and prejudice. Rockabilly was a fledgling genre and Janis often toured with country artists, some of whom were less than happy with rockabilly music, especially coming from a sixteen year-old girl. Janis recalls, "Some of the established country artists... I went on tour with were very unpleasant to me."⁷⁸ Because of her age, Janis' mother traveled with her, but that did not insure a problem-free tour.

"My trouble began when I went out on the road. The male artist had monopolized the music industry... When I got out on the road, naturally they were just starting to promote me. They had the big stars going on last... I would do my fifteen or twenty minutes and they wouldn't let me off the stage. And when the guys, was time for them to go on they'd start booin' 'em. And they'd say 'we want Janis, we want Janis.' And they hated me. They fought, me, tooth and nail. I will not call names, but I went out on my second series of thirty-one nighters... then you just got in a car and traveled. This real nice gentleman that was with RCA [said] 'oh she can ride in the limousine with me, her and her mother'... ok. So we go out, he had the number one song in the nation. I go on right before him. By that time I'd moved up to right before the main attraction. He comes out and they said 'we want Janis' and booed him and whatever. And I'm standin' there innocent, I just went out there and did my thing, I was just bein' me. That night when we got ready to leave the hall where we were doin' the show, he said 'you will have to find other transportation.' Then I was stranded... By that time I was getting aggravated. Then some of the other girls artists that were comin' along, they were jealous. To me what I was

⁷⁶ Crane, John R. 2008. "Rockabilly queen gets hall of fame honor." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, July 22.

⁷⁷ Garbutt, Bob. 1979. *Rockabilly Queens: The careers and recordings of Wanda Jackson, Janis Martin, and Brenda Lee*. Toronto: Ducktail Press, 32.

⁷⁸ Fox, 1998.

doin' was natural. I mean I had a strong, powerful voice. I was full of the devil hisself.”⁷⁹

After the touring incident, Janis started to become more aware of gender bias in the recording industry. RCA signed Janis just three months after Elvis Presley and the label tried to exploit a similarity in their performance styles. They began to bill Janis as “The female Elvis” to help promote her. At one point, Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis’ manager, also wanted to manage Janis, but she turned him down based on advice from Steve Sholes, her record producer at RCA, and her own observations of Elvis’ grueling schedule.

At the same time Janis was being promoted as a female counterpart to Elvis, RCA also insisted on playing up her fresh-faced, pony-tailed teenager image. Publicity photos show her in a red and white gingham dress, clutching a record and smiling sweetly. Janis, like many other women rockabilly performers, was thrown into a confusing binary; be sexual, but unthreatening.



Janis Martin, 1956, Age 15
Image courtesy of the WRVA Collection, Library of Virginia

⁷⁹ See Appendix A.

The attempt to connect Janis with Elvis was something she was never really comfortable with. In a 1993 interview with Randy Fox for *Nashville Scene* she told him, “I think ‘The Female Elvis’ bit was a hindrance—the audience expected a lot of hip gyrations like he did, and I got tired of being called vulgar.”⁸⁰ Janis also got tired of being treated like a child.

Unbeknownst to RCA and her parents, Janis had eloped at age fifteen with her childhood sweetheart Tommy Cundiff. Janis and Tommy met four years earlier when they were both performing on *The Old Dominion Barn Dance*; Tommy was also a singer. Janis told her mother three months after the elopement, and her father found out three months after that.⁸¹ Her parents attempted, unsuccessfully, to have the marriage annulled. Ultimately, they insisted that Janis keep the whole affair a secret from RCA.⁸²

A year later in 1957, Martin went on a USO tour to Europe and had a clandestine meeting with her husband, who was stationed as a paratrooper in Germany at the time. When she returned to the United States, she was already three and a half months pregnant and her secret was out. In an in-depth interview with Greg Milewski, Janis talks about the label’s reaction, “It was suggested very strongly... that I have an abortion.” Martin chose to keep the baby. She had two more recording sessions with RCA. “Alright Baby” and “Billy Boy” were recorded when she was eight months pregnant. This was followed up a

⁸⁰ Fox, 1998.

⁸¹ See Appendix A.

⁸² Milewski, 1993.

few months after the birth of her son, Kevin, with an attempt at pop music, with singles such as “My Confession” and “Half Loved.”⁸³

Her producer, Steve Sholes, tried to promote a more mature Janis, but social stigma against working mothers, as well as the stigma associated with the rockabilly genre, and Janis’ desire to have a life outside of show business made this next to impossible. Janis was dropped by RCA in 1958, a few months before her eighteenth birthday. At the time, she was not upset about it. “I missed being a typical child. I kind of resented the fact that I was tied up in this. I just wanted to settle down and be normal.”⁸⁴

Martin divorced her first husband in 1960. She tried to get back into music briefly and recorded two singles for Palette records, “Teen Street” and “Cry Guitar.” During that time she met and married her second husband, Ken Parton. Despite the fact that Ken was also a musician, he did not support Janis’ music career, going so far as to sabotage her professionally by keeping her from communicating with her label.

“He didn't like the show biz world, he was very jealous... So after about five months [on tour] he told me it was either my career or him, and I was deeply in love with him. Foolishly I gave up the music for the second time and he moved me to Richmond. And the record company was tryin' to find me, mother would make the calls to Ken, he would not even let me have a telephone... he'd come home and I would say, ‘did you hear anything Ken? Did you hear anything?’ ‘No, no one’s called, I guess you bombed after all.’ And so I was black balled because they had shows lined up for me and I wasn't there.”⁸⁵

⁸³ See Appendix B.

⁸⁴ Milewski, 1993.

⁸⁵ See Appendix B.

Janis tried to be content with a life without music, but in 1967 she got the itch again. She talked her husband Ken into playing drums in a newly formed band and they played local Richmond venues and events, such as a *Moose Anniversary Program* in 1972.⁸⁶ The next year, Ken gave her the ultimatum again to quit, but this time Janis chose music. Her son, Kevin, joined Janis' band on drums. She moved to Tennessee in 1978 to try and make a comeback, but found there was a lack of interest in rockabilly music. This was when her old friend, rockabilly guitarist Chet Atkins, told her about the rockabilly revival in Europe.

Interest in rockabilly music and culture in Europe, particularly Great Britain, had motivated fans to create events, often called "weekenders" because they usually take place from Thursday to Sunday. Weekenders allowed people who were interested with the rockabilly genre, known as Rockabillies, to appreciate the culture, music and fashion first hand. Once established, the events began to seek out original, first-wave musicians to perform and Janis Martin was particularly popular. Her first weekend at the *Perranporth International Rock 'n' Roll Festival* in Cornwall, England, was played in 1982 on her forty-second birthday.⁸⁷ Janis was ecstatic about the experience, "When I hit the stage, it was like I'd come home."⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Bee, The*. 1972. "Local Moose Anniversary Program Set." April 20.

⁸⁷ Burgos, Bob, and Janis Martin. 2007. "Janis Martin, R.I.P., Monday, September 3, 2007/ Dear friends and fellow rockers." *BlackCat Rockabilly Europe*. <http://www.wildbobburgos.co.uk/wbb/janis.htm>, accessed July 30, 2012.

⁸⁸ Fox, 1998.

By this time, Janis had met and married her third husband, Bradley “Wayne” Whitt, who she married September 29, 1978.⁸⁹ For Janis, the third time was the charm and Wayne was very supportive of her music career. In fact, he saw her perform at a barn dance in Richmond, Virginia as a teen and remembered her as a “cute little old gal in a ponytail just belting out that music that nobody else was doing.”⁹⁰ The two settled in Danville, Virginia and Janis worked as a manager at the Danville country club when she wasn’t performing.

Janis had various projects in the works, as well. During her 1993 interview in *Cat Tales*, Martin mentioned an autobiography she was writing called *So You Want to Be a Star?*, which was never published.⁹¹ She also hinted at a possible live recording on Hydra Records, which was eventually issued as *Here I Am* and consisted of tracks recorded at the Star Club in Vienna, Austria in 1992 and *The Grand Ole Opry* in 1957.⁹²

In 1995, Janis recorded two tracks with singer Rosie Flores for her album *Rockabilly Filly*. It was her first studio work in thirty years. This led to another recording project with Flores and drummer Bobby Trimble in April 2007; I will discuss this project in more detail in Chapter Five. The project would be her last, as Janis was diagnosed with

⁸⁹ Taylor, Kyle. 2007. “Cancer claims singer at age 67.” *Danville Register & Bee*, September 5.

⁹⁰ Schudel, Matt. 2007. “Janis Martin, 67; teen rockabilly star was ‘the female Elvis’ of the 1950s.” *The Washington Post*, September 5.

⁹¹ Milewski, 1993.

⁹² Martin, Janis. 1992. *Here I Am* CD album.

<http://www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/2043606/a/Here+I+Am.htm>, accessed July 30, 2012.

stage four lung cancer just a few weeks after the recording sessions.⁹³ Janis Martin died September 3, 2007 at the Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina.⁹⁴

Janis Martin continues to receive awards and honors posthumously, which speaks to her enduring talent and influence. In 2008, Janis was inducted into the Danville Museum Hall of Fame⁹⁵ and was honored in the *Virginia Women in History* project in 2010.⁹⁶ Most recently, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame paid tribute to Janis.⁹⁷

⁹³ Baker, Cary. 2012. "The Final Album by Rockabilly Legend Janis Martin, Produced by Lifelong Fan Rosie Flores, to See the Light of Day" Cary Baker's *Conqueroo*. <http://conqueroo.com/janismartin.html>, accessed July 30, 2012.

⁹⁴ Schudel, 2007.

⁹⁵ Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History. "Janis Martin Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony July 20, 2008." <http://www.danvillemuseum.org/exhibitions/150-janis-martin-bio.html>, accessed August 3, 2012.

⁹⁶ Library of Virginia, The. *Virginia women in history 2010*.

<http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/vawomen/2010/honoree.asp?bio=8>, accessed August 3, 2012.

⁹⁷ Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, The. "An evening with Rosie Flores and 'The Female Elvis.'" <http://rockhall.com/event/rosie-flores--a-tribute-to-janis-martin/>, accessed August 3, 2012.

Chapter Five: After the Rockabilly Revival

As aforementioned, there was a rockabilly revival in Great Britain in the late 1970s and the United States in the 1980s. The biggest benefit of the revival was the explosion of interest in rockabilly and 1950s culture. Many original rockabilly performers, like Janis Martin and Ruth Brown, were able to resurrect their careers through numerous social events hosted around the world, like the *Viva Las Vegas Rockabilly Weekender*. At these events, Rockabillyies gather socially and exchange their knowledge while they support artists in the genre. People who communicate online can meet in person and those who are interested in learning more about the genre can immerse themselves in it for three to four days. Artistically, musicians and artisans can exchange ideas, swap wares, jam with each other, and meet the people that inspire them.

Social media has also been a monumental tool in developing interest in rockabilly music and culture, in general. The internet allows people to reach out to others, regardless of location, to cultivate and disseminate information on rockabilly, ensuring its growth and sustainability. A search for “rockabilly music” on Google Blogs resulted in 655,000 blogs that are dedicated to rockabilly and its sub-genres, like psychobilly, punkabilly, swingabilly, etc. Tutorial videos for obtaining a rockabilly style are extremely popular and forums where people discuss various aspects of the genre, like favorite bands, have hundreds of members. Online sites featuring women in rockabilly, such as the performers’ personal websites and the supplementary website to the documentary *Welcome to the Club* at *pbs.com*, are thriving and drawing attention to women performers that were previously unknown.

A surge of second wave women rockabilly performers also came out of the rockabilly revival. These performers, such as Kim Lenz, Marti Brom, Rosie Flores, Candye Kane, Devil Doll and Mary Ann, all cite original first wave rockabilly women as their inspiration. Through the various rockabilly weekenders and other events, they have been able to perform alongside their idols, as well as making an impression on them. Janis Martin talks about the resurgence of women in rockabilly music:

“I’m very proud that the young girls that are coming along like Kim Lenz and... Rosie Flores...I love Rosie. Kelly Willis. Now those are the girls I’m proud of. I really am. I wish they could have lived in the '50's, but that time is gone and’ll never come back.”⁹⁸



Kim Lenz, 1998
Image courtesy of Tip Top Atomic Shop

Singer/ songwriter Kim Lenz has been performing rockabilly since the 1990s and cites Janis Martin as an influence, particularly her strong voice and personality, “Janis was the real deal, a rockabilly rebel.”⁹⁹ Lenz recalls how Martin reacted to the band hired to back her at the 1999 *Viva Las Vegas Weekender*, “They [the promoters] want the band to learn the song exactly on the record. She wanted to get up there and rock. ‘You guys aren’t rockin’,’ she told them. She had that wild streak in her.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ See Appendix A.

⁹⁹ Homer, Sheree,. 2010. *Catch That Rockabilly Fever: Personal stories of life on the road and in the studio*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.

¹⁰⁰ Daliege-Pierce, Denise. “Kim Lenz: 20th century rockabilly meets 21st century woman.” *Jumpin' From 6 to 6*. http://www.jumpingfrom6to6.com/kim_lenz_article.html, accessed August 3, 2012.

Lenz feels that rockabilly is still a male-dominated genre, but uses prescribed social “boundaries” as guidelines to create new songs from within them.¹⁰¹

"To me, it's really just a positive thing (to be a woman in rockabilly). Because there really aren't that many people doing it we're able to get more exposure. I wish there were more women doing it. I think it's a really great type of music for women to be singing..."¹⁰²

Imelda May, a singer from Dublin, Ireland, shows the range of geographical influence the first wave singers have had. May has eclectic musical tastes, from The Clash to The Pretenders, but lists Wanda Jackson as her idol. “She’s like the ultimate girl power... you think she’s going to come out and sing a nice soft number, and she just rocks it.”¹⁰³

As mentioned in Chapter Four, Rosie Flores went one step further than just performing with her idol Janis Martin at a show; she talked Janis into recording a full studio album.

For Flores it was a labor of love, as she posts on the fundraising page for the project:

“Not long ago, I had the great fortune of producing the final recording sessions for legendary rockabilly artist Janis Martin who was an inspiration to me musically and personally... Janis Martin was one of the few women working in rock and roll during the 1950s, and she proved to be one of the early innovators... Martin’s trailblazing career has influenced countless female artists myself included. After she agreed to sing with me on two duets for my *Rockabilly Filly* CD (1995/ Hightone Records), Janis and I became close friends. This was Janis’ initial return to the studio after a 30 year hiatus and followed on the heels of a session I’d done with Wanda Jackson. Recording with both of these legends was not only an honor for me, but it was also a dream come true... Janis passed away in September,

¹⁰¹ Wilonsky, Robert. 1998. "Everything old: Rockabilly queen Kim Lenz moves ahead by looking backward." *Dallas Observer*. <http://www.dallasobserver.com/1998-04-23/music/everything-old/>, accessed April 17, 2008.

¹⁰² Johnson, Jon. 1999. "The one and only Kim Lenz belts out 'billy music.'" *Country Standard Time*. <http://www.countrystandardtime.com>, accessed April 17, 2008.

¹⁰³ Johnson, Andy. 2011. Rockabilly Never Died: An Interview with Imelda May. *PopMatters.com*: August 3. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/144519-rockabilly-never-died-an-interview-with-imelda-may/>, accessed August 3, 2012.

2007 and her dying wish was to see these recordings released. This is a wish I am determined to honor.”¹⁰⁴

Flores succeeded in raising the funds for the album, which is titled *The Blanco Sessions* and is due to be released in September 2012.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Flores, Rosie. 2012. “Janis Martin “The Female Elvis,” Final Recording Sessions.” *Kickstarter.com*. <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1383637978/janis-martin-the-female-elvis-final-recording-sess>, accessed August 4, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, 2012.

Conclusion

Nearly everything about rockabilly music in the 1950s was controversial, from sexual and race connotations inherent in the very origin of the name to the driving backbeat that made people want to get up and dance. Women in rockabilly had to deal with the same negative social reactions as male performers in the genre, as well as the added pressure of conforming to the domestic ideal and battling race issues, which often led to the end of promising careers. Janis Martin was voted *Billboard's* "Most Promising Female Vocalist of 1956"¹⁰⁶ and LaVern Baker was listed by *Billboard* as one of the most played artists in 1955,¹⁰⁷ but both Martin and Baker spent nearly twenty years in almost complete obscurity. However, less successful male performers, like Johnny Horton (who was more country than rockabilly), are consistently listed as rockabilly influences in literature like *The Rockabilly Legends* by Jerry Naylor and *What It Was Was Rockabilly* by R.E. Jandrow. These books mention very little on women in the genre, if at all.

If one aspect of research should be emphasized it is that interviews should be a priority while original performers are still alive. Doing so not only highlights the important contributions of women performers, but helps to support the importance of rockabilly music itself. Janis Martin and LaVern Baker were major performers within the genre, yet most of the literature on them is scattered throughout primary sources or consists of a brief mention in a few secondary sources, most of which are not academic. It is fortunate that both Martin and Baker were eventually recognized for their musical contributions

¹⁰⁶ Fox, 1998.

¹⁰⁷ Gart, 77.

and interviewed multiple times before their deaths. Some performers, like Jean Chapel, have passed away with no known interviews.

Delving into the personal stories of the performers can reveal themes that link the women to each other, whether they were aware of it or not. Janis Martin and LaVern Baker both list Ruth Brown as one of their main influences. Janis Martin and Lorrie Collins, of The Collins Kids, were dropped by their labels when they got married. Like LaVern Baker, Wanda Jackson dealt with segregation issues when she toured with Big Al Downing, an African-American piano player.¹⁰⁸ These common threads, so important to piecing together the history of rockabilly music, become more apparent as vital research is done.

Aside from interviews and gathering together data from various primary sources, the next step in understanding women in rockabilly music would be to highlight their musical accomplishments within the genre. As pointed out in my select literature review, the bulk of scholarship available focuses on their relationship with male performers, life struggles, etc., and rarely on their music.

A discussion of vocal styles, genre crossover, and struggles within the music scene will provide a deeper understanding of the many facets which make up rockabilly music, in its original and current form. It is through the personal stories of the women of rockabilly that a more complete and balanced history of the genre is formed. Doing so not only highlights the important contributions of women performers, but helps to support the importance of rockabilly music itself.

¹⁰⁸ Harrington, 2004.

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APPENDIX A

Appendices A-C are transcripts of a series of interviews with Janis Martin and her mother, Jewel Martin, done by filmmaker Beth Harrington for the documentary "Welcome to the Club: The Women of Rockabilly," and are included with permission. Transcripts have been edited to remove superfluous words like "ah" and "um" whenever possible for length.

Janis Martin Transcription 1/2000 Part 1

Beth:...your background, where you grew up, your folks...your father was musical...

Janis: Music became a part of my life when I was so young that I couldn't even remember not doing...

Janis: I can't remember a time that I didn't sing. My uncle lived with us on my mother's side and my father and they both worked at a dairy. They would come home at night and my uncle played a mandolin and my father played a guitar and I just grew up with it. I started playing guitar, trying to, when I was four years old. I would go through the house singing real loud and they were saying shut up...whatever, you know... When I started school in the first grade, I would go out at recess and I would ask the other little children..I said, well what do you play? And they'd look at me, and they thought that I was talking about games. I thought everybody played music. I thought everybody sang...whatever. I mean it was, it was just...I'm a firm believer that it's born in you...that you can't cultivate it. And so my mother, when I was eight years old, started entering me in all sorts of talent contests, she was very much the typical show biz mother. I had to go to school lots of times with my hair rolled up in curlers because I had a show to do that night. I couldn't go out and play with other children because I might hurt my hands and couldn't play the guitar. But it was all part of it.. I think I wanted it as bad as she wanted it and it was so natural to me. And it just developed, it was my whole life.

Beth:...so tell me...you won over two hundred talent contests?

Janis: Ya, I used to walk in...now this may seem egotistical, but I used to walk in and some of the other contestants would say, "hell we might as well leave, Janis Martin's here." And I won all the lamps and the prizes, and sometime it was five dollars and whatever. Then I entered a state wide contest that was held in Lynchburg Virginia. There were over two hundred contestants and this thing went on for a week. And they mowed it down to four contestants and I was in the top four. And then on the final day, I won the whole thing. So that really is the first professional, that I consider professional...because after then I started getting paying jobs. Ya know everybody wanted the little girl on the cover of the Virginia Magazine...pictures taken with the governor and the whole bit. I mean they were really proud of me...and I just kinda took it in stride 'cause I'm the type...don't challenge me...because if you do I'm gonna come out on top whatever it takes and I'm still that way fifty-nine years later...you know (laughing)...and that's just me. I felt bad for 'em, but I wasn't gonna let them win, ya know? (laughs)...and like I say, I mean it's been my whole life, it was from the time I was eight years old 'til I was twenty-one, I knew nothing else.

Beth: ...that's great...that was going to be one of my questions...are you competitive Janis?

Janis: Oh yes...very much so. In my job that I've had for twenty-one years also...I'm competitive in everything.

Beth: ...when you started getting those paying jobs, where did the radio stuff start fitting in...WDVA...

Janis: Well, the WDVA thing, that was another talent contest that I'd been in before the state wide contest. And they disqualified me on that talent contest because the crowd carried on so and hollered and whatever, they thought it was fixed...they thought I'd brought a lot of relatives there and everything. So they disqualified me, I didn't even place. So after I won the state wide contest they had a barn dance, a local barn dance in Danville, and Glen Thompson, the one that disqualified me, wrote me a letter because I didn't have a telephone, but he had my address, so he wrote me a letter and asked me to come to Danville to sing. And he said "I'd like for you to become a regular cast member of the WDVA Barn Dance," which was broadcast over the radio. I stayed with him a couple of years until I was eleven years old and then he left town and I went over to WBTM. They also had a barn dance. I played tent shows, whatever was part of that package show. Sunshine Sue came up from Richmond Virginia...she was the hit of The Old Dominion Barn Dance. They had Cowboy Copas on the show that night and Sunshine Sue...'course I was the local talent and they put me on there. She offered me a job right then and there. She said "I'd like for you to become a regular cast member of The Old Dominion Barn Dance." And Cowboy Copas was there and he says "no she's too young, she's too young," he says... "finish your education, live a normal teenage life," or whatever, "and then go into show business." I didn't listen (laughs) ...right to Richmond I went. I was there, let's see, at thirteen 'til I was fifteen. The Rockabilly, the Sun sessions were beginning down in Memphis, I think in '54. I discovered Ruth Brown. I did not like the slow country music where everyone stood up before a microphone in like plastic, or whatever. So I used to travel back and forth to Richmond and I listened to this Black Rhythm and Blues station. And I heard Ruth Brown sing "Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean"...Oh God, I was in heaven. I pulled off the highway to listen to that and I had to know who she was. And I just fell in love with her style of singing. We started doin' the up tempo stuff on a completely country stage when they didn't even have a snare drum...the only thing electric was the guitar. And I started doing "Mama He Treats Your Daughter Mean" ...I did some just Black Rhythm and Blues songs. So when the Rockabilly thing hit, Carl Stutz was the staff announcer at WRVA which broadcasted over the CBS, every other Saturday night we were on network, he wrote the song called "Will You Willyum." So he came to me and he said "Janis I need a demo tape of this to send to New York, would you sing it from the stage of The Old Dominion Barn Dance this Saturday night, let me record it and send it up?" And I said, sure. So I sung "Will You Willyum." I think it was two weeks later I was In Nashville recording it.

Beth:...and that was with Steve Sholes right?

Janis:...ya, well they said Chet Atkins is the one that contacted me, because again we did not have a telephone. I went to school...when I got off the bus that day my "show business mother", quote unquote, met me at the bus and she says "we've got to go to Jake Owen's store right now." And I was drivin' (chuckles) and so we got in and I went down and he had the

number. He closed the store that day when the call came in 'cause that's the only phone number they had, and drove up and told mama that Chet Atkins had called and wanted to talk to me...so I went back down and called him. He says "can you be in Nashville on March the 8th?" And I said, March the 8th? Ok, I can be there. And so my mom and dad and I sat up all night long...my dad did not want me to do it. He says "she's too young." Mom says "but this might be her only..." So anyway, we did it and that's how that came about.

Beth:...that's great...back up a little... the Ruth Brown, Laverne Baker stuff,, how did that go over when you were playing at The Old Dominion Barn Dance...

Janis: They... at first when I started doing the Black Rhythm and Blues, I mean I just went out there and I said I'm gonna do it. The audience I'd say the first couple of Fridays and Saturday nights, they didn't know what to make of it, they said...but then they loved it...and then the ads started comin' out in the paper...Janis Martin is somethin' to see and hear, you don't never know what she's going to do and all of this. And they really started lovin' it.

Beth:...now this is what year we're talking about?

Janis: ...'53, '54.

BREAK

Janis: Ya, I'm Janis Martin, the Female Elvis, the Girl With the Golden Voice...uh Little Miss Elvis, Queen of Rockabilly...Little Miss Hillbilly...bitch (laughs)...that's not allowed? No...but I mean I've had a lot of names. I think the one I'm the most proud of was the Female Elvis. But, I've been called a lot of things, ya know (laughs)

Beth:...will you tell me that again...the problem wasn't getting there it was...marker...

Janis: For me getting into show business, getting the record contract, being promoted by RCA, I mean God, RCA on your first try, you can't beat that. But that wasn't the struggle, it fell in my lap, it was very easy for me, it was just as natural as breathing for me. My trouble began when I went out on the road. The male artist had monopolized the music industry. At the time you had Patti Page doing her thing. You had Wanda Jackson doing country music. I was doing the Rhythm and Blues. Elvis was in Memphis doing Rhythm and Blues. When I got out on the road, naturally they were just starting to promote me. They had the big stars going on last. That's how you knew you're a star, if you're the last person to go on. I would do my fifteen or twenty minutes and they wouldn't let me off the stage. And when the guys, was time for them to go on they'd start booin' 'em. And they'd say "we want Janis, we want Janis." And they hated me. They fought, me, tooth and nail. I will not call names, but I went out on my second series of thirty-one nighters... then you just got in a car and traveled. This real nice gentleman that was with RCA [said] "oh she can ride in the limousine with me, her and her mother" ...ok. So we go out, he had the number one song in the nation. I go on right before him. By that time I'd moved up to right before the main attraction. He comes out and they said "we want Janis" and booed him and whatever. And I'm standin' there innocent, I just went out there and did my thing, I was just bein' me. That night when we got ready to leave the hall where we were doin'

the show, he said “you will have to find other transportation.” Then I was stranded. So I picked up the phone and called my father, he got some time off from work, he come and we finished the tour. By that time I was getting aggravated. Then some of the other girls artists that were comin’ along, they were jealous. To me what I was doin’ was natural. I mean I had a strong, powerful voice. I was full of the devil hisself. I got the reputation of being vulgar because I sang bare footed. I was a sweet little fifteen year old girl with an innocent face and a ponytail, but when I got on stage, I moved. I couldn’t be still. So I was vulgar. They compared me, well Elvis was vulgar. They would only film him from the waist up...because you moved your hips a little bit. Come on, this is the '50's, ya know? You're supposed to be free spirit and all of this? I've been married three times. I married the first time when I was fifteen because in the '50's you didn't sleep with anybody unless you were married. All of this free love...we'll go out and have a good time if I meet this guy and I like him. Well, that's why I married so young. The kids these days they don't start out 'til 11:00 or 11:30 at night. I had to be home by 10:00 o'clock. I mean we had curfews. We didn't lock our doors at night. And it was a good, simple time in life. But we obeyed our parents. We didn't curse. We didn't smoke. We didn't drink. If you did, I don't care how old you were, you got your butt spanked and you were grounded.

Beth: ...and your reputation was hurt too...

Janis:...ya, ya. But here I was out on the road doin' my thing and all and I went back to high school. I was in the tenth grade. I was out on the road; in one terms six week period I only attended school eleven days. So they called me into the counselor's office and they said “ if you don't attend school more often, you're going to have to repeat this year” ...and I was making good grades. So I not only had the jealousy among the musicians I played with, I had the jealousy of my peers, I had the jealousy of my teachers. I would go in maybe and do three days in a typing class and my teacher would throw it in a trash can in front of the class.

Beth:...what was going through.

Janis:...so I quit...

Beth:...the minds...

Janis:...they were just jealous...home town girl made good...so they were jealous. It was rough.

Beth:...you were/are not just "the female Elvis"...you were signed only 2 months after him...you were just coming up the same way...in your own right,.

Janis: Well as I said earlier, I was doin' the Black Rhythm and Blues on a stage since I was thirteen years old. I'd never heard of Elvis Presley. I knew nothing about him. In fact one of the fans took me across the street from The Old Dominion Barn Dance one night and said you've got to hear this. And they had I think “I'm Right, You're Left, She's Gone” on the juke box and I wasn't too impressed. I really wasn't. And she said, “oh he's great, he's great, oh wait 'til you see him” or whatever. But I was doin' my thing. And he was doin' his. He's five years older or was five years older than me. But no, I didn't know who Elvis Presley was. I just knew I loved the up tempo music, I knew I liked to move or whatever. And so when I started recording for

RCA, I think he signed in January of '56 and I signed in March of '56. Well then you had to do a series of publicity shows. So they sent me out on a ten day tour with a gentleman named Brad McCuen, who was a public relations man for RCA out of New York. So he accompanied me on these shows and he went back, he didn't say a word to me, but he went back to Steve Sholes and he says, "my God," he said, "she moves like Elvis, she's got the same rhythm as Elvis...what a publicity thing." So they talked about it and they approached me and I said no way. No, I don't want that title. And I didn't want it...

Beth:...why not?

Janis: ...I felt like I'd never really seen him perform or whatever, but as I said, I wasn't too impressed. I wanted to make it on my own. But they got together and they talked to Colonel Tom and to Elvis. By that time he did come to Danville and I saw him perform. And I thought my God, he spells his name with five letters...ELVIS...JANIS...we could have been twins. And the parallels were just there. I mean, never met him before the night he played in Danville, yet he loved the same type music I did. When he went in the studio and they were trying to get him to do stuff like "My Blue Heaven" and all...I mean he wasn't happy with it so when he broke loose and did what he wanted...so I mean it was there. I certainly didn't copy him. All the Rockabilly people will probably shoot me, they're into the Sun Session work. I started appreciating Elvis after he came to RCA...and when he really rocked and did his stuff. So after I got to know him a little bit better and saw him on TV, I was really proud. But still it was a lot of pressure on me when I went out to perform because then I felt like I can't be natural because this crowd is gonna expect me to do what he did. So I really didn't push that title too much. RCA used it more than I did. I very rarely mentioned it when I went on a show. It made me mad if they billed me that way. So they finally came around and most of the posters and stuff that went out on me I was called The Queen of Rockabilly. It was a lot of pressure being called The Female Elvis, it really was.

Beth:...tell me about those sessions...

Janis: Ah, well the first one on March the 8th, 1956. We all went down...my brother-in-law, my sister, my daddy and mother and all of us, and we checked into a hotel...and I was scared to death. Abso [sic]...the first time in my life I was scared. But I walked in the studio and met Chet Atkins and he says "well this is Floyd Cramer, and this is Buddy Harmon, and this is Grady Martin, and this is Hank "Sugarfoot" Garland." And I'd heard all these names, and I thought, oh my God. What am I doing here? But, I don't know, once they put the microphone in front of me and we picked out the songs, I mean it came natural again. The guys in Nashville were a great bunch of guys. But they fretted me because they wouldn't let me record what I really wanted to. They picked out all the material for you. They said "this will sell, that will sell." Some of the songs I recorded, I didn't like. I'd go in the bathroom an holler and scream and cry and swear I wasn't gonna do 'em. But of course, I had to. They'd, you know, artists today can pick their own material, we couldn't. When I went to New York to record, I recorded 'bout half in New York and half in Nashville, it was a very cold atmosphere. They didn't like Rockabilly music. You were this little hick from Danville Virginia. And they lay down some good sounds, but it was just cold and impersonal. I preferred Nashville. I really did.

Beth:...”Drugstore Rock ‘n’ Roll”...tell me about that...

Janis :Ok, “Drugstore Rock ‘n’ Roll.” I love that song naturally because I wrote it. My mother told me, when we found out I had to go to Nashville she said “now you know they’re gonna want you to write somethin’.” So they jumped in the car and went to the store to pick up some Pepsi Colas and when they come back I had written “Drugstore Rock ‘n’ Roll” because that was the life of a teenager...the drugstore, the soda shop and, and all of that. I needed that to go on the other side of “Will You Willyum.” It's one of my most requested song today, they love it.

Beth:...it's a killer song...

Janis...ya...

Beth:...here's one of my favorites...”Bang Bang”...

Janis: “Bang Bang” was a song that was picked for a session for me after my son was born and they put it out under the name of “Janis and Her Boyfriends,” because that was becoming the end of the RCA deal. I loved it. I loved it because it moved. “Bang Bang Bangitty Bang Bang...” (laughing)...kinda vulgar for the '50's, ya know? Hidden messages and all of that, but I mean I liked the song, I didn't think about the words then, I just liked the tempo, the tune of it, how it moved...

Beth:...did you catch any flack for singing that song?

Janis: ...no, because I didn't go out on the road and promote it. That song only became popular in the resurgence of rockabilly music.

Beth:...tell me about “Billy Boy”...tell that story

Janis: “Billy Boy” was cut when I was eight months pregnant with my son. I was in the studios in New York and Steve Sholes was in the control room. At this time they'd found out I was married secretly and I was expecting a child...eight months pregnant and doin' “Billy Boy, Billy Boy.” If you listen to the record, if you study it, you will hear the heavy breathing, because I was full of child. I cut “Good Love” on that session, “Billy Boy,” “All Right Baby”... “All Right Baby,” I loved it. That, I guess was one of my favorite sessions even though it was done in New York. And Steve Sholes was standin' in the rec, control room with my mother and tears were pouring down his cheeks...because I had burst the whole teenage image that they had created for me. How do you promote, huh, a sixteen year old girl, seventeen year old that is expecting a baby? Everything that they had promoted me and built me as...was just destroyed.

Beth:...let's back up and pretend you didn't tell me all of that...

Janis:...ok....

Beth:...you were fifteen...tell me how it all unfolded...

Janis : Uh, I met this little guy named Tommy Cundiff when I was eleven years old. He played on the same show I did on WBTM, when I went with them. He started courting me when I was twelve. I thought he was just coming by on Sunday to play music. When I became thirteen I had my first date with him. He co [sic], he joined the paratroopers and he come, took a little weddin' band and, and diamond ring one Christmas...he was getting ready to be shipped out to Germany and he wanted to marry me before he left. So, we eloped. I didn't even tell my parents because my father was ooh, ya know (laughs)...I had one of those. So I waited 'til Tommy was safely shipped out to Germany. I guess I'd been married about three months before I told my mother. And she waited 'bout another three months to tell Dad. And for about a year there he didn't even speak to me to pass the salt shaker or whatever at the table. He was very upset. So, I kep' it a secret from RCA, I kep' it a secret from everybody but my parents. Even my cousins, people didn't know I was married. So then I get this USO tour to go to Germany. It was the first time that they did not allow my mother to travel with me because they said "she'll have plenty of chaperones." I was lost, ya know? I had Hank Locklin and The Browns, Dale Wood, Jim Reeves and all of them. And I was a mama's baby. I wanted mama. So when I landed over in Germany, I found out that Tommy was only stationed a little ways from where I landed. So I said, ooh, ya know (laughs) 'cause I loved the little guy. So, we put in a call to the base, me and Bonnie Brown (laughing) we conspired to do this. We got a hold of the people over there and he got a thirty day leave and went with me on the tour. And I came back with a little package. Well, before he could travel with me the tour manager's saying "what the hell is this? Who is this guy?" I said, he's my husband. Oh, well my God. So they put in a call to New York...oh God, they were mad. Oh, they were upset. They were havin' a fit. Well that was bad enough, but then when I came back they chose me out of all these big name stars, [to] go on the Today Show. And I mean that career was just poppin'. It was poppin' like you wouldn't believe. And then about three weeks later I said oh, oh (laughing). But they tried. They took me to New York and did the EP doin' Pop music... "I Don't Hurt Anymore," "My Confession" and those songs. I was out of my element. And actually, by that time, bein' in show business since I was eight years old, I wanted to live a normal life. I wanted that little baby that was there. And so when he was seven months old they let me go. And I was happy. I was really happy because it was the first time since I was eight years old that I could live a normal life. So I became a little housewife and mother. Two years (laughs). Then it struck again. I had this guy. I mean it's always been my fortune. I don't know what it is...like a lot of artists go out there and you try, and you sweat, and you, 'oh God I've got to make it.' I mean I'm sittin' down there with a little two year old boy, that I love with all my heart and Nat Tannen calls me up and says "I want you to come to New York. I will become your manager. I will not take any commission or anything until you make ten thousand dollars." Now that doesn't sound like anything now, but in the early, late '50's, and the '60's, I mean ten thousand dollars was a lot of money. So I signed with him and we went around to all the record companies and I chose Palette [Records], got back on record. In the mean time the marriage wasn't workin' too good. So I dumped him (laughing) met my second husband, another musician. That was my second mistake; married him. Got a divorce, married him. Finally gave in to Nat and went to New York and cut the Palette sessions. "Hard Times Ahead," "Gone Tomorrow Love," "Cry Guitar"...little mixture of everything. By that time I wanted to maybe do a little bit of country in there. They promoted the heck out of it. My husband took me to

Richmond, hid me out. I didn't have a telephone again. I thought nothin' was happenin'. They had me on American Bandstand. They had me booked for a tour in England. They had all this stuff happenin' for me and I didn't know it. So then we come back to Danville and he gives me an ultimatum. It's either your marriage or your music. So at first I held out. He traveled with me for five months and gave me a headache. He could not understand this end of show business. He thought every guy that come up and hugged you, you know... Feron Young and all the people that I traveled [with], oh I mean... "did you sleep with them?" and all. I mean ridiculous. But anyway, I opt for the normal life. Gave it up for the second time.

Beth: ...was that harder?

Janis: ...oh, yes. I don't talk about this much but at first I was happy with it. He sold my guitars. He got everything out of the house. He wouldn't let me have a record in the house or anything. I stood it until I was twenty-seven and had a complete nervous breakdown. Because all those years I thought, even though I loved doin' it and I was out on the stage doin' it, I always thought this was mama; mama pushed me into this. Mama made me do this. All along it was me, but I wanted to blame her. And when I really realized that part of your life is gone, I mean you'll never get up before anybody and sing again and... I just couldn't take it. And I just completely broke down. When I came out of that though it was bad news for the second husband, because then he gave me the ultimatum again. I started bringing myself back. I started thinking about Janis. I formed my band. I got a little bit too popular to suit him. I was travelin'- Richmond, Washington, different places with my band playin'. So he sits me down a second time and he says, ok, it's your marriage or me. I said, get the hell out. And I never looked back. Music is it.

Beth: ...what's the song "Let's Elope Baby" mean to you?

Janis: I cut that in Nashville while the marriage was a secret. And it was really funny because Chet Atkins would go with me, he was the A&R man of the Nashville branch, so he'd pick the songs. And we'd go in and he says "I got a great song for ya. It's called 'Let's Elope Baby.'" And you talk about almost crackin' up...

Beth: ...just back up and say, so Chet Atkins came to me and said...

Janis: Chet Atkins came to me, we were goin' in and listen to demo records, and he said "I got a great song for you." And I said, ya. He said "here let's go in here and we'll play this" and it started off 'Let's Elope Baby.' And the words, if you ever listen to "Let's Elope Baby" about Pa, huh...I had that Pa (laughs) and Dad didn't know I was married, nobody knew I was married. So I had kinda a little chuckle when I was standin' up there recordin' that one. I thought if you only knew, ya know (laughs). Ever listen to Let's Elope Baby... ? That was pretty ironic. And then also "Two Long Years" because that kinda came into it too because I knew he was gonna be over there for about that length of time, So it's "Two long years. You never did write. You never did call..." and that happened too. But, anyway... (laughs). (BETH says something here) So a lot of my songs kinda paralleled what was happenin' in my life.

Beth: ...what do you need to tell the young women who are coming to see you and they're dressed in a certain look and they're kinda coming historically from where they think you were at...what do you want to tell them about where you were at?

Janis: I think imitation is the greatest flattery anybody can give you, but, the girls today don't have a clue...as to what we lived through. That attitude today is if it feels good, do it. We didn't dress like the girls are dressing now. We didn't. We didn't have the garish red hair. We didn't have the tattoos. We didn't go into a hall and throw our dress over our heads. And I mean we were really laid back, little girls with a Christian background and, of course, I was a rebel, but anyway. We just didn't, it's not even related. I know they love the '50's, that is great, but they've gotten so far away from what I call true Rockabilly...

Beth: ...when you talk about that you were a rebel...

Janis: ...ya...

Beth: ...tell me about what you were doing that was so rebellious...

Janis: I was considered a rebel because I sung barefoot on the stage. That's how innocent things were in the '50's. I would be singin' and I'd kick my shoes off and everybody goes "oh!" (laughs) The music back in the '50's, you would have to maybe do eighteen takes, because every word you said had to be distinct, there couldn't be any hisses in it at all. And the modern day music, my God you can't understand a word they're sayin'. It's distortion. That's why I am thrilled that the Rockabilly scene is coming back in The States, because it's raw. It doesn't have all these sound effects in it that's distortion, that covers up lack of talent. I'm very proud that the young girls that are coming along like Kim Lenz and Molene (spelling?) and different ones...Rosie Flores...I love Rosie. Kelly Willis. She made the statement one time if she ever started recordin' that there would be nothin' she put out that wouldn't have my name on it. The first album she put out, I don't know how she did it, but they found a ticket stub when I appeared in Texas back in the '50's and it's on that album. Her second album was titled Bang Bang. Now those are the girls I'm proud of. I really am. I wish they could have lived in the '50's, but that time is gone and'll never come back. I just wish they'd tone it down just a little bit.

Beth: ...shows you were on...TV...

Janis: Let's see, shows I did. The Ozark Jubilee, that came out of Springfield Missouri. That's the first time I ever met Johnny Cash was on that show. First time I ever met Brenda Lee was on that show. I did a show out of Chicago called The Howard Miller Show. I did The Today Show, when Dave Garroway was the host. I did The Tonight Show, I think the host the night I was on was a guy named Jack Lescoulie.

Janis Martin Transcription 1/2000 Part II

(Answer continued from Part I...TV Shows Janis did).

Janis: I did the American Bandstand out of Philadelphia before it went nation wide. Grand Ole Opry. Oh God, I mean so many, I can't remember all of 'em. But I know I was asked a question one time on The Howard Miller Show. They said "what do you think of all the screaming and crying and hair pulling that the girls have?" I said, it's no different than what they did with Frank Sinatra. But they tried to make out like we were such demons. We were influencin' their children to do bad things. So, uh, I had to set 'em straight (laughs).

Beth: ...Brenda, Wanda...did you meet them on the road? What kind of relationship did you have with these women? Did you have a relationship with them...another one of those questions?..

Janis:...Brenda Lee more so, ya. I met Brenda Lee, she was kind of a...Red Foley kinda took her under his wing. And when I was appearin' out there, I appeared on his show several times. He told me one night, he said "Janis, you gotta hear this little girl." He said "you just gotta hear her." She came out, she had a little blue dress on with ruffles around the bottom of it. She had on little patent leather shoes and socks, and the little hair. And she was the cutest thing you've ever seen, and confident. Let me tell you, she was good and she knew it. But I hadn't heard her. And she went out and did "Jambalaya." Knocked me wide and she hadn't even started recordin' then. Wanda Jackson...we were kind of competitive, going back and bein' competitive again. I was the tall, skinny girl, with the little, skinny legs and no shape and big nose. And Wanda had the curves and the glass heels and the fringe and I was very intimidated by her. Later on not so much, but to begin with I wanted to be glamorous, like she was. I've never really had a real conversation with Wanda. We've been on a couple of shows together, but I think she felt competitive towards me and me against her because she tried to be called The Female Elvis, her decision, and I had the real permission from Elvis and the Colonel. In fact, he sent me two dozen red roses and a card that said he wished me all the luck in the world. When I appeared before all the RCA people worldwide in Miami, Florida, when I got off the plane you know they didn't have a little shoot you went through now, and they met me and they handed me the roses. Well I thought they were from somebody there. And they said "no I think you better look at the card." And it said "love Elvis." Ya... So no I didn't get to know the other ladies, well there wasn't anybody but Wanda and me and Brenda Lee to begin with...

Beth: ...did you get to meet any of the Rhythm and Blues singers?

Janis: No, but before I die I want to meet Ruth Brown. She is my all time idol. I mean I would be just as nervous to meet her as I would be the President of the United States. And I'm gonna meet her one of these days. She's got to know how much I love her because that's all I've talked about since I was thirteen years old. I think she is the greatest. (I think Beth laughs a bit here) Wonderful, nobody can top her.

Janis: I've led an interesting life. I've got the best of both worlds. I can be the professional business woman six months out of the year. Then I can come back and be a little rockabilly gal every now and then. And music business, I didn't know that we weren't being treated right. I

was just happy to be out there doin' it. We didn't get our royalties in the '50's like we were supposed to. I guess I've made more money from royalties in the past like ten, fourteen years than I did the whole time I was out there, which was only two little short years with RCA. But I ask myself, which I'm sure I'll ask myself tonight a thousand times, why are you sitting here, fifty-nine years old, with a wig on, out rockin'? It's because of the fans. They're there. And as long as they want to see you and as long as you can still do it, I think you owe it to them. When I get to where I can't do it, I won't do it. But the love that you have for that hour you're on that stage, and those kids lookin' at you, it's worth it all. I'll keep doin' it...every six months (laughs). I had some bad experiences from fellow musicians, but really not from the record companies as far as my treatment. It was pretty easy.

END part II

APPENDIX B

Appendices A-C are transcripts of a series of interviews with Janis Martin and her mother, Jewel Martin, done by filmmaker Beth Harrington for the documentary "Welcome to the Club: The Women of Rockabilly," and are included with permission. Transcripts have been edited to remove superfluous words like "ah" and "um" whenever possible for length.

Janis Martin Interview 2000 (TAPE 5)

Beth: Hi

Janis: Hey Beth: How ya doin'?

Janis: (laughs)

Beth: What I'd like to start off with is, what's Rockabilly? Tell me...people seem to have a hard time defining it, what is it?

Janis: What is Rockabilly? O.K. back in the 40s they had a music that they called Hillbilly music, which they call country and western now. And then you had the black artists that did rhythm and blues, there was no such thing as rock and roll. So when we came along and started doing the up tempo music they wanted to give it a name and they just came up... from the hillbilly and rock, and then they called it Rock-a-billy and it was all up tempo stuff, driving hard raw music, greatest music there's every been.

Beth: What did you do in it?

Janis: What did I do in it? I was a rebel. I'd been singing since I was eight years old and I was kind of bored with the slow stuff, everybody standing behind the microphone not moving like sticks or whatever and I wanted to move. I wanted to do somethin' with a little rhythm in it and really I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't have a name for it. Oh I think when I heard Ruth Brown the first time that music just stuck in my mind and it was up tempo and it was lively and it was somethin' happenin' rather than just gettin' out there with a guitar and gettin' behind a microphone and just standing. And I really didn't know what I was doing.

Beth: Tell me about when you mentioned earlier today about going off to that field and listening to the music that was there?

Janis: Oh yes, I had two little cousins that lived real close to me and there was a black church up the road and we would go out on a Sunday afternoon because they had church services all day long. They would have the morning service then they'd have dinner on the ground and then they'd go back and have the evening service and some of the prettiest singin', I mean rollicking music. I mean it was somethin' happenin' and there was no air conditioning, the windows were open in the church, and so we would go out there and hide in the weeds and listen to them sing, oh I loved it. I mean it was really, really good music.

Beth: Tell me more about when you first heard Ruth Brown. Tell me that story again you mentioned to me before about the first time.

Janis: 1953, I was part of the cast of the Old Dominion Barn dance and we traveled from South Boston to Richmond each Saturday. And I was fiddling with the radio tryin' to find somethin' I liked and I ran up on this song Ruth Brown's "Momma He Treats Your Daughter Mean." I said that's it, that's it, my God this is great, and it was on my mind after that. I went into the record store in South Boston and asked the lady there could she get me any of Ruth Brown's records, and she did. They were on the Atlantic label and I started buying her records. It wasn't long after that till I told the guys and we'd go down Old Dominion Barn Dance. I'd say have you heard Ruth Brown, do you know? "No, no, we don't know who Ruth Brown is," and then I would play it and pretty soon I was doin' Ruth Brown's music on this all country show.

Beth: Tell me about it. How'd that how'd that go over?

Janis: At first I think people looked at me, well this is strange you know, this is an all country show, but they loved it. They would just tear the place down and we had two shows a night. You know they'd empty the theater and come back and they might go outside and say "O.K. Janis did this song, I've never heard it before but you gotta hear this", then they'd come in, they loved it. Because it was somethin' different, out of the ordinary and of course I was having a ball with it. (laughs)

Beth: That's great. Who are some other influences on you like what other kinds of music were you listening to around that you really liked?

Janis: Well, when I first started listening to music you had Eddie Arnold and Hank Snow, Hank Williams. Now really he was the first rockabilly artist, with "Lovesick Blues" and all of that, and I loved him; he was a big influence.

Beth: Describe your family for me, who's in your family, you know, tell me their personalities and how they fit into your...

Janis: Of course there's mother and dad, I have a sister that's three years older than I am. I had a little brother that died before I was born. I get emotional, but they're wonderful people. I can't do this, I can't do it. (laughs)

Beth: Let's stop. Do you want to stop?

Janis: I can't, I can't, not that part of it, I get real emotional.

Beth: Let's stop for a second

Janis: Simply because my...

Beth: Tell me about your Mum?

Janis: About my mum. Mother and I have always been real close from the cradle to now. She's the first one I think that noticed that I had talent, if I had any. But anyway, she has told me how I would be playin', doing my school lessons even before school. And when my dad and my uncle would come in they'd start playin' the guitar. She said I would stop dead whatever I was doing and go in there and be listening and watching. My uncle taught me how to play guitar, and all and she noticed somethin' about me, I guess. She started puttin' me in talent contests and all and dressing me up and coaching me. And one thing that was funny, when I was growing up my dad, because he lost a son before I was born, kept my hair cut short like a boys, dressed me like a little boy. I have pictures you know that I look exactly like a little boy. And so Mama told him "you know well she's a little girl, she's gonna' have to start school, you're gonna' have to let her hair grow out." And she just took over and just groomed me, taught me how to dress and I mean she was just wonderful. She was always there for me even almost to the point of sacrificing the family life, but in a good way. She was totally wrapped up in me and what I was doing and she was, no matter what came up, she was always there for me and she just, she saw the musical talent I guess. I thought it was just fun to do, but she saw this and she started grooming me for later on. Very spitfire little woman. She wasn't like the typical women of the 40s and 50s, whereas my father being the head of the household "you do this, you do that, you do the other." Oh no, she had a mind of her own. And dad wasn't too thrilled with the idea of his little girl goin' in show business, but mother was very adamant and she never was like other women. She had a little temper, she had spunk, she stood up for what she thought was right, and she was just a woman of the 80s in the 40s and 50s, she really was.

Beth: Can you talk a little bit...I know we said this might not exactly fit, but can you talk about your religious upbringing in music and how that...what influences there are there if any?

Janis: Really my mother, father and myself, our religion is the Jehovah's Witnesses. I never had any conflict with religion and music simply because as I've explained to so many people, Jehovah's Witnesses are not as uptight as people think they are. They believe in having a good time. They believe in enjoying life, they believe people are talented. I never really had a conflict with it as far as saying O.K. I'm sinnin', you know this is bad, and I know in the early, let's say about 1949 and 50, we had bible studies at our house and...
(clock chiming in background)

Janis: So we had bible studies at our house weekly and after the bible study I know there was a man there that led the bible studies, his name was Bruce Yates. And he would say "Janis I wanna' hear you sing" and you know I would get the guitar, I was a little bashful always though to do it just in front of a few people. So what I'm tryin' to say is that even though I think we were deeply religious we didn't feel the restrictions that a lot of religious sects have that you can't do this, you can't dance, you can't wear lipstick, you can't go to movies, or whatever. So I never had a conflict with religion and the music, and I know my mother would probably shoot me but if there had of been a conflict, the music would've had to come first. I'm sorry.
(laughter)

Beth: Well we'll get back to her later on Janis. (laughing) Right?

Beth: O.K., how we doin' here, are we still...can you describe the old Dominion Barn Dance for me? Can you tell me what that was like?

Janis: It was on the corner of 9th and Broad Street.

Beth: Can you say the Old Dominion Barn Dance?

Janis: Yeah, the Old Dominion Barn Dance was on the corner of 9th and Broad Street in Richmond Virginia, which is the capital of Virginia, and it was a theatre style place. It had a balcony or two balconies. I believe it was on the main floor, a big stage, recording booth over on the right and uh...

Beth: O.K...um

Janis: The Old Dominion Barn Dance was on the corner of 9th and Broad Street in Richmond Virginia where the country music shows were held every Saturday night, two shows a night, main floor, two balconies. Kinda wrapped around like the old Apollo Theatre in New York. It had a huge stage with a country backdrop, it had little benches that were set out all over round the back of the stage so when you weren't performing you would go back and sit down on the bench and you would applaud everybody else. And they were really country music fans that traveled from all over to come to this. It was a highlight of their week to come to the Old Dominion Barn Dance and see what was happening and who was gonna' be there because we had some big name artists that appeared there, Hawkshaw Hawkins, Jean Shepard, the Carter Family, Sonny James, Louvin Brothers, just to name a few. I mean it was a pretty big deal to be on that show, I was very proud of it. Mostly just good country people you that worked hard all week and then Saturday came and they went to the Old Dominion Barn Dance and then on Sunday they went to church.

Beth: How did you go over on the Old Dominion Barn Dance when you were doing rockabilly you know? What was that like? Was there any...

Janis: It was when they had the head in the Richmond paper, they said that Janis Martin is somethin' to see and hear' and I said what's this? I think when I first went down there to do my first guest appearance on the show, the crowd reacted so, I mean they just applauded and applauded and carried on so, that Sunshine Sue offered me a permanent job that night. And of course I did country. I did a lot of Ray Price songs, Hank Williams songs and whatever. But then when I started introducing Ruth Brown stuff and some of the other artists on Atlantic records, I did some little Richard stuff "Rip It Up," "Good Golly Miss Molly." I was doing all this on a country show. At first I think they thought it's odd but then they would come back just to see what I was gonna' do next, and I tried never to disappoint 'em. (laughs)

Beth: I bet you didn't. Tell me about what you were like on stage? What were you wearing and how did, how were you moving and your whole stage persona? What was that like?

Janis: Oh I had real long blonde hair which my mother had to curl every night, had no natural curl in it whatsoever. I wore, as in the 50s, everybody wore the big full skirts with the

crinolines under 'em. The more crinolines you had on the better you looked and sometimes they were almost standing right straight out in front of you. We wore off shoulder blouses, were real popular then...sun dresses, what you would call sun dresses now with the little bolero jackets, all flat shoes, ponytails. I hated to put mine in a ponytail but that was the thing to do, so I started wearing my hair in a ponytail. Little bows in your hair, dangling earrings, necklaces or either a scarf like I've got today, you know that's a hold over from the 50s, just typical teenage dress. The guys wore hip hugger jeans, what we call the rev...its come back around now, but everybody's jeans was low on the hips. They wore the white man's T-shirt, ducktails, penny loafers with no socks, and of course the leather jacket. It was just what we wore like the kids now wear the baggy pants and that was our dress. Course mama dressed me up a little bit more to go on stage, it was a little more frilly...

Beth: How'd you move when you were on stage?

Janis: I started out being very stiff. I was shy, I was very shy, but it was just somethin' about when I started doing the rhythm, the music, I moved. Of course, back then you didn't have the boom mikes and different sound systems that you have now, so they put the microphone there, you had to go to that microphone. They didn't have hand held microphones that you could move around like I do now. But when the band would take a break, then I would cut loose. I'd be standin' in front of the microphone, I was still doing somethin', movin' somethin' because the music was just to me, I just thought it was great. I couldn't be still.

Beth: Was that O.K. to be moving like that?

Janis: No one really said anything about it, wouldn't have done 'em much good. Take me as I am you know? (laughs)

Beth: Tell me about some of the other places you played like the Opry. Tell me a little bit about that and maybe some of the TV shows you mentioned, Ozark Jubilee...tell me about that.

Janis: I did the Ozark Jubilee, which was out of Springfield Missouri, several times. I did a lot of talk shows, I can't remember all of them now. There was a big one out of Chicago, Howard Miller show. I did the Today Show, I did the Tonight Show before it was, I think the guys name was Jack Lescoulie. I did that, gosh, so many, I can't remember, but as far as actually performing on a TV show, I did what was originally, I don't know if it was called American Bandstand then, but the dance party that they had in Philadelphia, before it became the American Bandstand that went on network, I did that. So many I really can't remember, but the Grand Ole Opry was a big thrill because even though I was doin' rhythm and blues and rockabilly is what it came to be called. I guess it's every little girl and boy's dream that has ever sung or played the guitar that one day "I'll appear on the Grand Ole Opry," and this happened in June of 1957. And Chet Atkins backed me on the stage along with Jim Reeve's band. The audience was great. It's on an album of mine now, they pulled it out of the archives and it's great. It's fun for me to listen to it. I sound so little and young. (laughs)

Beth: But strong, you were really strong

Janis: Yeah, I always had a big mouth, always (laughs)

Beth: Tell me a little, we'll get into a little more, but just tell me a little about Chet Atkins and maybe tell me the story of how you got discovered. Maybe tell me about the "Will You Willyum" line up too.

Janis: O.K. Well, "Will You Willyum" was sent to New York as a demo tape for the song only to the publisher, Tannen Music. And when he played it he took it over to Steve Sholes at RCA, and Steve said "well, who is the girl singin' it?" And so they had to call back to Richmond to find out. Actually they contacted Carl Stutz that wrote the song and I had recorded it live from the Old Dominion Barn Dance stage in the little control booth that was over there. So they call Carl back and I think he wrote to us and said meet him in Richmond, he wanted to talk to us. And he said that RCA was interested, but nothin' concrete at that time. So I came on back and I went to school, doin' my little thing. I got off the school bus one day and my mama come running out the front door and she said "we have got to go to Jake Owen's store and return this phone call. Chet Atkins has called and they want you to come to Nashville and record 'Will You Willyum'". So that's how I met him, I went down and he was about twenty eight years old then, pretty young. He was really complimentary of my talent. Of course, I was scared to death and he put me at ease, he was just a wonderful guy. He taught me a lot about a guitar, he spent time with me other than in the studio. I went back in '78 and the secretary said "no one can get in to see Mr. Atkins without an appointment." Well I got in to see him. He was always just a good country boy and he liked what I did. Sometime at the session, he would just start laughin' because this music was coming about and he was having to cut it with me, he was having to cut it with Elvis and the Jordanaires there, I mean he was having to do this stuff and he really liked it. He didn't do it because it was just a job, he really liked it.

Beth: And at the same time you've also got Steve Sholes working with you?

Janis: Yes

Beth: And, tell me about that, tell me about the significance of both Chet and Steve and the people you're playing with in relation to Elvis.

Janis: Well Elvis did most of his recording at the old RCA studio B in Nashville, but they would send me up to New York and I would record part time in New York, part time in Nashville. I don't know whether it was the availability of the studio or what that they might say "well O.K., it's time to record her again" [and] they would send me to New York. I hope I don't offend anybody but the New Yorkers weren't into rockabilly (laughs) and they had to have sheet music. Everything had to be read off, it was kind of stiff. But man, when you went into Nashville, those guys sittin' around, they go in, O.K. you know they'd hear the demo tape or whatever, and they said "well let's try this, let's try that." And I mean it was comin' from the soul, it was raw, it was what you felt. I did some good recordings in New York, but I prefer it in Nashville. The head man in New York was a big gentleman, he weighed about three hundred pounds, named Steve Sholes and he fell in love with me and I fell in love with him, and he was just gunhoe for me. He's the one that actually came up with the idea of the female

Elvis through a publicity gentleman that he had sent out on the road with me named Brad McEwan.

Beth: So Brad-

Janis: Brad McEwan was the publicity man for RCA. You had to go out...each time a record was released, you had to go out on so many appearances to promote the record like they do on TV now and talk shows. And he came back and he told Steve Sholes he said "this little gal moves on the stage you know and she's got a lot'a rhythm and whatever um, what do you think about the female Elvis bit..." or whatever. But, Steve Sholes was very protective of me, he didn't want me to get over tired in the studio. I mean he was just like a big daddy, great guy, great guy. Actually he gave me more freedom in the type of songs I wanted to record than they did in Nashville. Usually when I went into Nashville Chet had the songs picked out and then I would go listen to them and learn them, but Steve would say "well do you like this?" He'd at least ask me did I like it. And "All Right Baby," "Billy Boy," I wanted to record those and he let me. He was just a great guy.

Beth: Great. I didn't realize that about him.

Janis: Uh huh

Beth: Can you tell me the story you were telling about Colonel Parker's interest in you and what he said to your folks?

Janis: He didn't actually meet my parents, but after I recorded "Will You Willyum" it sold three quarters of a million copies and I was out on the road, especially after the female Elvis bit came out. Steve Sholes approached my mother and father and said that Colonel Tom had expressed an interest [in] also taking over the management of my affairs. I wasn't even in the room with 'em, it was just my mother and father, but he was talking to them and telling them "you know it's up to you, she's your daughter," and "it's there if you want it, but I wouldn't advise it." Because I was so young, the paces that Elvis was going through; again he was just very protective of me and so my parents took his advice and naturally I didn't sign with him.

Beth: And he, Steve actually thought that you'd just be pushed too hard?

Janis: Yes, Elvis was being pushed, I mean really pushed. \ He'd collapsed when I saw him in New York that time he was there for the per [sic]... I mean he was dark under his eyes, he looked real fatigued and he was just, he'd come in, spoke, sit down, went to sleep, he was just exhausted. And I think Steve figured well this little fifteen or sixteen year old girl, we can't take her, where as Elvis was five years older you know.

Beth: Tell me about what happened with Tommy.

Janis: Tommy, little Tommy Cundiff. My first husband started to come to see me at the farm at Southerland Virginia when I was eleven years old. We were playin' on the same show at that time with Jim Eanes and the Shenandoah Valley Boys at the Old Dominion Barn Dance,

everything was a barn dance. And Tommy was a singer and he would come down on Sunday and I thought well you know he's just comin' down, we're gonna' make music, and we'd sit around. Half the time he had to get me out of the play house or somethin' you know. And then when I became about thirteen he started lettin' me know what his real intentions were. He was in [the] service, he was older than me, not that much but about six years older, maybe, and he became a paratrooper stationed at Fort Bragg. And he came in one day and told me what his intentions were and we ran off and eloped when I was fifteen. Yeah. He's a great little guy, cute as he could be, my son looks just like him. He was really talented, he had a beautiful voice, but of course he was in the service and I didn't see that much of him, so it kinda worked out really well you know that he was away and I could do my thing musically.

Beth: And you hadn't...?

Janis: No we married, actually Tommy and I married, on January the 2nd of 1956. I did not record for RCA until March the 8th of 1956, so I didn't tell the record company, I didn't tell anybody 'cause we eloped. In fact, my father didn't know it for awhile. Of course mother havin' the ESP that she's got where I'm concerned, psychic, I think I kept it from her maybe a week, two weeks, and then she just come right out and ask me. "Did you and Tommy go get married?" And I didn't lie to her, I said yeah and then we had to figure out how to tell Pop. So I went to school that day and mum told me when I left she says "well I'm gonna' tell your daddy today, you know, that you went off and got married and he's gonna be furious." And that was the longest day at school, but I wished it had been another day long too cause I did not wanna come home to face daddy. So when I got off the school bus and got to the front door and started to put my hand on the knob, my dad opened the door. He says "well come in, Mrs.Cundiff", and that was the last time he spoke to me for months, he was that upset. But of course you do what you gotta' do. (laughs)

Beth: So then what happened when you hadn't...he was overseas now

Janis: He went overseas eight days after we married and then I was doing my little things still. I didn't see Tommy again until about fourteen months, he was stationed over there.

Beth: And meanwhile what's happening with you career at RCA?

Janis: Well, I signed with them in March and it just took off and the only communication I had with little Tommy was letters, and of course I told him what was happening and he was really proud of it. In fact, he got in special services when he was in Germany, and had a band went under the name of Tommy Ford. So I mean he was kinda proud but I kinda, I hate to say it, but I kinda forgot about him you know? I did this thing but he was over there and I was here and I was traveling all over everywhere, I mean I was really on the road. RCA was pushing me hard. They didn't hold anything back, they were really promoting me. And dad kinda got used to the idea after awhile, but he still didn't like it. He tried to have it annulled but we couldn't do it because he was serving on foreign soil. Without his permission, if he'd agreed to it but, anyway... He's still there, Maga Valley North Carolina, cute little guy.

Beth: What happened when you went... tell me about the tour that you took to Europe.

Janis: To Germany?

Beth: Yeah

Janis: That was a USO tour in March/ April of 1957 and Tommy was stationed in Augsburg, Germany and we landed in Frankfurt. So they didn't let mama go with me on that one. So I was with Jimmy Brown and Jim Reese and Dale Wood, Hank Locklin, Dick O'Shaughnessy- again an all country show. But I landed over there and I called him and he got a thirty day leave and came and traveled with me the thirty days I was over there. And then, when the rest of the troupe came back, I stayed a few more days to be with him. And when I got off the airplane at Fort Dix, New Jersey, my dad and mum were there to meet me. And mum said dad looked at me and he said "uh huh, somethin's goin' on here," (laughs) which it was. It was a little baby boy I had. (laughs)

Beth: Can you talk about the repercussions when people found out you were married at RCA and...

Janis: Well, naturally I kept it a secret from the record company because you just didn't get married at fifteen then, and they had all the teenage image going on me, the sweet little innocent fresh faced girl which I was really. But they didn't find out I was married until I did go to Germany and then the tour manager, actually I got him to contact Tommy's base, so he gets real upset and he calls back to New York and he asked Steve Sholes, he said "did you know Janis is married?" They didn't think I was married. Course he knew nothin' about it, he was shocked. But I was gettin' the little allotment thing you know that a wife gets, so they went through the commander of the base and actually... to prove that I was married before they let him travel with me. So we traveled, had a good time and all, come back into New York, or rather Fort Dix, and I know when I got off then they said "they want you on the Tonight Show, I mean the Today Show with Dave Garroway to tell about your USO tour and all." So I came down home, I stayed a few days then I went back up and did the Dave Garroway Show. And then I went over to Steve's to see Steve's shows while I was in New York, and he was very, very upset. He was upset, he said "you've destroyed our whole teenage image thing, we can't let this get out in public that you're married, I mean we just gonna keep this our little secret." And of course, the public didn't know it. And then I went back up to New York to cut the EP with the four songs on it and he asked me was I pregnant? And I said yes, and he really got furious then because I mean, then you can't hide it from the public. So he, I think he was not only mad, he was hurt because then when I went back when I was eight months pregnant with my son I was doin' "Alright Baby" and "Billy Boy" and you hear me breathing hard in it and all of that. And he was standin' in the control room with tears just pouring down his face and he told my mother, he said "my God, it's a shame."

Beth: So tell me what happened to your career after that point? What, you know, in those first few years after that?

Janis: I kept recording for RCA, did another session after my son was born in July, and they had an option each year to either pick up the contract or not pick it up, and they did not pick it up. They tried me in the pop field when I did "My Confession" and "Half Loved" and all, but I

was bored with that, it just wasn't he same. They didn't feel comfortable in putting me out there as a little teenage rockabilly star so they tried to make a more mature person doin' the pop stuff. He used to tell my I sounded like someone, I can't think of her name now, but she had a real deep voice. So I walked away. By that time my son was seven months old. I was perfectly content because I'd been in this since, counting the talent contest and all this and and really gettin' in music, I'd been in it since I was eight years old. I missed a lot. Because of the music I didn't have the teenage years of [?] and basketball games and pep rallies and all this because I was always "oh I might hurt my hand", "I might catch cold" and whatever, so I was really ready to become a mother to that little baby boy and so I did. And my husband come back from overseas and we set up house and I was still a child, but I loved playin' house and whatever. So Tommy and I, sad to say, didn't make it, so we separated. And then I met my second husband, and in this time period about two years had lapsed. And Nat Tannen, that had Tannen music that took the song originally over to Steve Sholes, said, "there's no way you're gonna' retire, there's no way". "You're depriving the world", now that was his words not mine. But I was ready to go a little bit by then and so I went to New York and we went around to different record companies and finally selected Palette Records. And again I cut "Teen Street" and again the up tempo stuff but on this time they backed it, like on the B side, they put "Cry Guitar" because they said you're gonna' go either rockabilly or country but you know you're gonna' be there. And I started goin' out on promotion tours with that, left the baby with my mother. And then I remarried and my husband went out on the road with me for about five months, and he didn't like it at all. He didn't like the show biz world, he was very jealous. I know he went with me down to the Opry one time, I just stopped by to see Faron Young, he was gonna' be there that night and I traveled with Faron. So Faron comes off the stage you know and he picks me up and he hugs and kisses me, and Ken gets mad and gets a taxi back to the motel, you know this jealousy thing. So after about five months he told me it was either my career or him, and I was deeply in love with him. Foolishly I gave up the music for the second time and he moved me to Richmond. And the record company was tryin' to find me, mother would make the calls to Ken, he would not even let me have a telephone. He was a radio announcer and she would call and tell him "you know Janis needs to contact Nat Tannen," and he'd come home and I would say, "did you hear anything Ken? Did you hear anything?" "No, no one's called, I guess you bombed after all". And so I was black balled because they had shows lined up for me and I wasn't there. And again I was really torn that time because I wanted to do it, but I wanted my second husband and I wanted a normal life for the home for my child. So...

Beth: So then what happens? You give up your career for a second time...

Janis: I gave up a career for the second time, sold my guitar, just wiped the music completely out. This was fine. As I said, I was deeply in love, my little boy was growing up. I went out and bought a second guitar though after about eight months. I couldn't stand it and brought it in. It was real funny cause my son, even though he was by this time about a year old, he started playing with spoons and things you know and that music was coming out in him too, only I didn't know it at the time. But I stood it 'til 1967 and I wanted the music back so bad. Then I realised it wasn't mama, it wasn't anybody but me that wanted this thing. It was like part of me was missing, it was like I didn't have arms and legs. I didn't know what to do with myself. O.K., I'd had enough of being the little housewife and cook., I wanted to go back. The adoration that you get from the fans, the love that they feed to you and all, I missed that, I

really did. I guess I got tired of being ordinary. So we went along and I formed a band. My husband was a drummer, he was also a musician, so he gave up enough to start playin' drums behind me and we were pretty successful. We played three state area every weekend and then in 1982, I mean 1973 I'm sorry, 1973 he gave me the ultimatum again. "This band is interfering with our marriage, we're gonna' give the band up, this is it." And I looked at him, and by this time thirteen years had passed, and I said well you gave me that ultimatum before and I chose you. I said this time I'm choosing music and I kept on with the band. And my son then stepped in and started playing drums, 'cause he started playing drums when he was seven. And then I just kept itching you know, wantin' to do somethin'. So in 1978 I moved to Newport, Tennessee and tried to make a comeback, but by this time country music had come you know, so rockabilly was out. I really couldn't find a little niche that I could get in. I love country music, but still even at that age I was bored with it. Then I went in to see Chet Atkins in 1978 and I told him "Chet I want it back, I want it back", and he says "honey the business is so different than it was when you were in it, and you know you had your mother to protect you." And he says "but you don't know about what's happenin' for you in Europe?" And I said "no," I didn't have a clue. He said "your fans over there, they're bootlegging the RCA stuff. They can't get a hold of it any other way so they're bootlegging it" which means you know they're illegally copying it and and sellin' it. And he said "you're making so much noise over there now." He said "who knows, down the road somewhere RCA's gonna have to sit up and take notice of what's happenin' for you over there". So that's how I... and this was '78. I still couldn't believe it until the guy met, I met him out of Baltimore, and he got to tellin' me about all the record collectors and whatever. So finally in 1982 I got up my nerve. Rock House Records contacted me, wanted me to come over and it was my birthday, my 42nd birthday, and I went over. And oh, it was fabulous, it was just like stepping back all those years. I was scared to death but when I hit the stage and those fans were there, it was just like the years rolled away and I was standing there. I said "here it is, I'm doin' it again" and they love it. That it really amazed me because they dress like we do in the '50s; the ponytails, the ducktails, the whole thing, and they love the '50s. That, I mean the '50s, were the decade that they wanted...they were livin' in the '50s. And I said "this this is so, so strange" you know, and I haven't looked back since.

Beth: Tell me about uh the Viva Las Vegas gig? How that felt? Describe that moment when you...?

Janis: Well, I used to make a joke after Tommy [Ingram?] contacted me and wanted me to do Viva Las Vegas. I sa [sic]... went in, looked at myself in the mirror one morning, and I said "hey you old gal." I said "it took you fifty nine years but you're going to Vegas." (laughs) And I was kinda nervous about it and he brought me out a couple of days early and I met Kim Lenz and went down among all the fans, and I could get away with it you know because I didn't have wigs and all this stuff that I wear on stage, I went incognito, and I was standing next to 'em and one little girl said "oh I wish it was tomorrow night, I wanna see Janis Martin". And I almost said "well hey it's me", but then I said oh no, I better not you know? I better not, they won't recognize me, so I kept my mouth shut. And then the next day came and I was really nervous all day long. I couldn't eat, I couldn't do anything, I get like that before I sing, especially not doin' it very often. But when they come and got me and I walk down that back hallway... Billy Poore opened the door and he said "they're there for you," and he opened that door. They were all crowded around the stage as far as the eye could see, and when they saw me then I was in

costume. And when they saw me, even though I was fifty-nine years old and they'd seen the little fifteen to sixteen year old, they knew who I was. And when I come through there and went up the steps and walked out on the stage and they just roared... and I said "my God, there's nothin' worth this". I mean you know I'd give up anything for this.

Beth: If you could advise young Janis Martin today, what would you tell her?

Janis: If I could advise Janis Martin today. You mean the young Janis Martin? A lot of things I would tell her to do differently then I did . I had the greatest opportunity in the world. I had the biggest record company behind me, uh, I fought it to a certain extent, I guess that was the teenage in me. But if someone came along now startin' a new raw music like I did and the only little lady that was doin' it at that time, I'd tell her go for it, don't let anything hold you back, live it to the fullest, get out there and do it. I really would because I think that I was my own worst enemy. I loved the music and whatever, but there was still that yearning to do what other teenagers were doin'. But looking back there's not a whole lot of I would change about the way I did things, for one simple reason- my son. You know if I hadn't did things that way I wouldn't have him, and he's worth all of it.

Beth: How has the role of women changed? I mean we know it has changed...

Janis: Oh God (laughs)

Beth: ...since you started singing.

Janis: Well, a whole role of women everywhere. They wanted to ban me because I sung barefoot on stage and women are very outspoken now. If they smoked at all they used to have to hide and smoke. They didn't curse, they didn't tell off colored jokes, they didn't admit that they liked sex. Now I mean women are really... I mean in my profession as a club manager I was reading an article over there, there's sixty five percent of clubs and they are managed by women. They've come so far, so far. When we were recording and going on different talk shows and all, you couldn't have a lisp, you know everything had to be clear. You had to dress a certain way, you didn't go anywhere and cross your legs, you know? Now, and my gosh look at 'em now. I mean my gosh everything's hangin' out and I mean these are kids. Maybe from my generation, I still look at it and say well you're...you can sing pretty good why you gotta show all that, but I think it's great that they can. I love where women are now, I really do, because I never paid any attention to anybody, so the rest of them are catchin' up with me now.

Beth: That's right. How are you different now as a performer and as a woman then the Janis that we hear on the records, that you know?

Janis: I am much more of a raunchy broad. As I said I was a little bashful on stage, I couldn't do any talking at all on stage, I would just go out there and go from one song to the other. I was real self conscious...I'm pretty confident now when I go. I start two or three months if I book a show because I don't do it as often. Like when I get ready to go to Europe, I'll come down in my basement and pick up my guitar every night and I'll get those vocal cords ready and I'm not worried about the voice so much. And its just taught me over the past several years,

since 1982, if these people waited all these years, then what are you afraid of? I mean you go out there and it's the fans, they're there. I hate to fly, I absolutely am horrified, I don't even want to go the rest rooms on a plane, but the reason I go is because I know they're over there and they're waiting to see me. And I have you know when I go next year, the first of next year, I haven't been to Europe since 1994. Its time, you know? And I am a very strong woman. I have a lot of responsibility in my job, it takes a certain type of woman to run a club like that, but I'm very confident in my life now, I know what I can do. If there's something I think I can't do I won't stop until I can do it. I like challenges I really do. It's a great time in my life, it really is.

Beth: That's great. Can we cut for a second? Beautiful

Janis: I'm sincere

CLAPPER

Janis: Didn't you go back to the question of, well suppose I hadn't retired, suppose I had kept on? The rockabilly, which became rock and roll, from which all the other rock and roll came...show business is very gratifying. It's, as I said, the love you get from your fans, but it's also very grueling. Like the travel, the distance between shows and all, because you didn't have the exposure back then that you have now with television. So you had to get out and be seen by people, which meant a lot of travel. You get tired, worn out, along comes the speed to keep you going. And then when you get somewhere and you're tired then and you can't go to sleep, then the downers come in and all...I shiver to think about that. So many people I loved got into that and passed away because of it. I probably, being the type of person I was, I might have got into it. Then again I would like to think because of my religious background that I would not have, but who knows? It was a hard rough road, but still I like to fantasize. I think that one of my greatest dreams in, which will probably never come true, it came close to it in Germany when I did the "Hear I Am" album and I went off the stage and the band just spontaneously started doing the Elvis bit, you know that they brought Elvis on with. And I've always fantasized about doing a concert with his group, his band, his back up singers and everything, because several people had asked me, "We don't have Elvis now, would you do it?" I'd do it in a heartbeat. There's there, I mean you can't hindsight is always, but it affected me so deeply when I gave it up. You used to be ashamed to admit something like this but I had a total nervous breakdown in 1967, and did not know why I was in this situation. But with the therapy and the analysis I got and everything, it was this music way down deep in me that did not have an outlet. And yeah I'd like to go do it again and go all the way with it, just see what would happen. I'm tough. I think I could maybe handle it.

Beth: And you are doing it now.

Janis: Well you know some people don't get the chance first time, I feel like I'm pretty lucky. I can live the ordinary life by my, of course my job isn't nine to five but what I'm sayin' is, I have a career which I'm thankful for. If the music hadn't went well and you'd have been up in your 30s and 40s without a profession, then what do you do? So there's a lot of pros and cons, advantages and disadvantages to what happened to me, but I look at it this way, I get calls all

the time, "can you play Atlanta and then go on down to New Orleans?" "O.K. when is it?" And then I've got to go the club and check my little calendar because I mean that is my profession, that is my livelihood. This is a blessing on the side, but when I can work it out I can go and do it anytime I want to, and it's always fabulous. I've never been disappointed. I've never looked at it and said oh God I've got to go do this. I mean I anticipate it, I look forward to it and as I said I like a challenge. I like to go out there and see if I can still do it. And usually I can.

APPENDIX C

Appendices A-C are transcripts of a series of interviews with Janis Martin and her mother, Jewel Martin, done by filmmaker Beth Harrington for the documentary "Welcome to the Club: The Women of Rockabilly," and are included with permission. Transcripts have been edited to remove superfluous words like "ah" and "um" whenever possible for length.

Jewel Martin Interview (TAPE 6)

Beth: O.K. good just like a movie star. How you doin'?

Jewel: I'm doin' fine

Beth: Yeah. Will you tell me how you, when you first realized how talented Janis was? Like how old was she when you first said "oh my God she can really sing"?

Jewel: Well around six years old, I could tell because my husband played the guitar and my brother, and I noticed Janis would always stand around and listen intently, and watch. She'd watch what they were doin'. It went on for awhile, and it became so surpri...uh...repeat things, she just...

Beth: O.K. Mrs.Martin, we'll try that one again. Tell me about when you first...what you realized when Janis was, when you first knew she had talent.

Jewel: Well talent for music, it's because that there was two guitars in the house where we lived. It was my husband and my younger brother. My husband played guitar, but not professionally, but my brother was very talented. He sang and played real well. And whenever they got those guitars out you gonna see Janis going into the living room where they were, and she would stand there and then watch them so intently and she wouldn't move, she's just stand there and look. And you'd see her watchin', where they's puttin' their fingers on there. And didn't think too much about it, I though it was just a child fascinated or somethin'. They continued that she would just have to be in there while they were playin'. So finally my brother noticed that, and he says "'well Janis"...and you know how I felt when he asked her that, he says "would you like to learn to play the guitar?" There a six year old child? And she said "yes but I don't know how to do it". So Gene says "I'm going to teach you some of the former chords..."

Beth: I'm sorry, can I just interrupt you for just a second? We just ran out of some film now.

Jewel: O.K.

Beth: So you were sayin' that your brother taught Janis how to play?

Jewel: Yes and I couldn't believe, I says...that won't happen, she's just too small. But you know she couldn't pick that guitar up, she's little, but she set it down on the floor and sat down there and try to make those chords. I didn't think she ever do it but it wasn't very long before he

could make the line of chords that so that he could accompany herself on the little songs that she was singin'. And I remember the first thing that she learned to play and sing with the guitar was that old song "Don't Fence Me In." And from that she kept practicing and practicing and practicing, and pretty soon she could accompany herself with anything that she...the tune that she knew and she could sing. And so it come to the point where the neighbors would be there and Janis would get her guitar and show 'em what she could do. And they were just fascinated and so. Well the neighbors came in one night and they said, "why don't you take Janis down to WCUE?" and I says, "this is havin' a contest for anybody that wants to sing". And I kinda hesitated but Janis wanted to do it, so they said you'll have to go down and audition. We took Janis down and when he heard her, little sing he put her on the air that night with the others contest. And the song that she sung that night was "China Doll." Slim Whitman had that out, it was a beautiful ballad. And so she sang that song, they just let 'em sing one song you know, there was just others to sing. Low and behold, she won that contest. And of course I'm her mother, I was tickled to death and my brother you know he loved music and he said "I told you she could learn, she can learn, she's gonna' be a good musician". And not too long after that we moved back to Virginia and so she would play around. Then some of the church, she said, want[ed] her to come in with a guitar and sing. And then they started having contests around at the schools, [to] make a little extra money, and Janis was ready for everyone one of 'em. And of course I, by that time, was ready too because I began to believe in her. And she would win every one that she got into, and it was come to the point for the others, especially mostly there was younger people was in the contest. And they'd come around behind the stage, they say, "there's that Janis Martin." They think well now we're, not gonna win, Janis Martin's here. Sure enough. And then the first big show was a state farm show in Linsburg, Virginia and they had grown [?] dance and then some children. Well Janis got up there and sung and she won that state contest, and her picture was put on the state farm magazine that month. And she just, she just went wild, she just wanted to play and sing all the time. And fair comes around and she was gonna sing down there, they wanted her to sing at the fair, and Ernie [Ernest] Tubb and, I believe, Sunshine Sue from Richmond and it was the Old Dominion Barn Dance. It was the third rated music show at that time. And so Sunshine Sue was actually...Oh Ernest fresh got up and said "that girl, that little girl's voice should be out in the public more so they can hear you". And then Sunshine Sue approached her and said "Janis would you like to try out for the Old Dominion Barn Dance?" Oh, she readily agreed. So we took her down there and she sang that night, she got such a response that whoever hired the people to be on that Dominion Barn Dance, they wanted her every week.

Beth: How did that make you feel when she was...when she was just being so well received by people that were you...how, how were you feeling?

Jewel: Well, to tell you the truth, she was the cutest little thing you've ever seen. And them costumes on her you, and she had that long blonde hair, and Janis is [an] outgoing person and the crowd just went crazy over her. And so, as you already know, that two of the men that worked on the radio, they wrote a song and sent it to I think Nev [Nat] Tannen's music, and he took it over to that man on RCA...

Beth: Steve Sholes?

Jewel: Steve Sholes yeah. And so we didn't even have a telephone, out in the country didn't have a telephone. So they called around until they found someone that knew in Richmond where we lived. Well they called the country store and so Janis had gone to school that day, and when I got...when she got back home, got off the bus and come in I said "Honey," I said "We have got to go to New York tomorrow". And oh she was just so happy. So we, that was, listen, you know a day of...we had to get ready to go and we went up there and she had not met...in the meantime she had written herself the "Drugstore Rock and Roll." So she went up there and Steve Sholes put "Will You Willyum" on one side and "Drugstore Rock and Roll," and that record I think it was seven hundred and fifty thousand on the first one she put out.

Beth: That's great

Jewel: And it was just, the thing just went fast you know, and I couldn't believe my ears. And I was so proud that I couldn't think of anything that Janis' and what I'm gonna' make for her to play, get on the stage. And when she'd go to rehearse for contests before the contest come up, she would put her costume on and go there and sing (laughs). They'd say "You're ready aren't you Janis?" and so it just went on and on and on and she got that record, as I just said, and it just snowballed.

Beth: That's great. Can I ask you what about, did you... Can I ask you a little bit about you? Did you sing when you were Janis's age?

Jewel: I could sing, I could sing real well, but my fascination was dancin'. And I danced the Charleston see, when I was little the Charleston was in style. And everybody came down [to] the house and wanted to see me dance and so papa would say, "Dance Jewel and I'll buy you a pair of shoes" and I just wore out more shoes you know that? But I wasn't into singin' like I was dancin'. But I could sing.

Beth: But you didn't like the idea of performing?

Jewel: Uh uh. I didn't care about that, I wanted to dance, but I began to live my joy through Ken...through Janis because I could never believe that I have a child with that much talent.

Beth: Was it hard for you to convince your husband that you sh...that she should pursue this?

Jewel: He was proud of it but he thought she was too little, thought she was too young so she ought to be plain' you know.

Beth: So what did you do to convince him? How...what did you say to him?

Jewel: Well I told him, I says that child has an unusual talent and I feel like that she has a right to go on because it's what makes her happy. And so then he would take us then, and sometime he would take us on a tour, if he could get off from his job. But there was just no stoppin' Janis. It would have broke her little heart and it would have broke mine. And so it has... Janis has had a good life with it, she enjoys it, she's made much money. Of course back in the 50s you didn't get to work the country rockabillies anyone else that gets now. And uh, but the people still

likes that rockabilly, and when Janis went out to California and sing on the show, and those kids in the audience were singin' right along with her, they knew them songs and I said I didn't think that the songs only got out of Halifax County. But the rest is just history, you see how she is now.

Beth: I asked you this earlier but, because we wanna do this for the camera. On what...I think you're a very unusual woman yourself. You know I know Janis is a very talented person but I think you are really unusual to say my daughter's talented, I'm gonna make sure she you know gets her due. How do you explain that?

Jewel: Well I'll tell you. I was a very intelligent person and I got a little of it yet. I love school and I want[ed] a good education but my father was a farmer and all I ever got to do was to get a business course. But I love to read, I want[ed] to widen my knowledge and there was somethin' in me that I wanted to accomplish somethin'. So my happiness came through the accomplishments that my daughter accomplished.

Beth: That's great

Jewel: Because I didn't get to do as much as I would like to do, but Janis made up for all of it

Beth: What do you think about all of Janis' success now, the fact that people are so interested now?

Jewel: Well it's unbelievable because there's a young man down in our neighborhood that has a great voice, he went to Nashville, he couldn't get anywhere, and he can really sing. But what fascinates me [is] that year after year somebody discovered Janis, found out where she lived in Halifax County and it started all over again. And then someone saw her goin' overseas and she can just sit [at] home and that telephone ring and they want Janis. And so when she went to Las Vegas and did that show and I saw the response, then I knew that Janis was not gonna be able to sit at home all the time, they're gonna be after her all the time. And I think as long as Janis' health will suffice so she can do that she'll be happier doin' it, and she's got a good job to fall back on and they work with her real nice. And she's just, she's just doin' wonderful.

Beth: What...let me ask you this, it goes back again, but what do, what did you... I'm curious about what you thought of the female Elvis? The idea that she would be the female Elvis and tell me a little bit about what do you think of Elvis too, while you're telling me about that?

Jewel: Huh. I was tickled; I was tickled because I had already seen that Janis had the same rhythm. If she want to sing one of Elvis' song, she can get down to it you know? And well, it was, she didn't go so far as to do them, you know, giraffes with his hips and all, but I could see the similarity between Elvis and Janis, and I was tickled to death because I knew she could do it.

Beth: That's great. Did you ever think you'd see your baby turn sixty years old?

Jewel: I didn't think she'd still be singin' but I'm so happy, that's why she wanted her son to come up for this but he got sick and he had to go to the doctor today. And he's got a little problem with his thyroid. But I wouldn't have missed it for a million dollars, anything that I can do for Janis. And I appreciate you so much givin' her this opportunity.

Beth: My pleasure, thank you. Is there anything else you want to tell us about,? You know, that there's somethin' I might have missed that you'd like to say?

Jewel: Well the only thing that I can think of is when we traveled so far and so long, and the experiences we had. I can remember one distinctly. The first Cadillac that she bought, it was a second hand, but it was a beautiful car and she said she had to have a Cadillac. Said "if you're singin' you've got to have a Cadillac." So we were out up in the New England states and one night we started out and the lights went out. Well she had three band members but they didn't know what's the matter, so Janis pulls into a place and sees a brand new Bentley. And we hadn't gone twenty miles before the lights went out again, and it wasn't that... it wasn't even the battery, it was the alternator. So there we had two batteries in the car and we had to get an alternator. But things like that you know it just helps people to see that what can happen, especially a woman out on the road. And it appears to me that that man should have looked farther and found that it was an alternator in this first place, and she wouldn't have to have bought that. And Faron Young followed right along with us and he tells Janis, he said "Janis don't let them play drive your car, say they're gonna ruin it". But Janis would get tired of driving you know and the boys would drive and they thought they was in heaven, that old Cadillac, white Cadillac. But then in, I believe, it's in '57 and she bought a new pink Cadillac convertible for the price of six thousand and five hundred dollars, can you imagine?

Beth: Wow

Jewel: She's got the picture in, down there on the Post you know.

Beth: Did you enjoy touring with Janis or was that...?

Jewel: Oh boy, listen. After she slowed down and I had stayed home, every time I heard her playin' I wanted to be on that airplane. (laughs) I just, but I got used to it and I got kinda back in the routine that I was used to.

Beth: What did you like best about touring? What was the thing that you liked about it?

Jewel: The best thing I liked about it was seeing that little girl up there singin' and those people just raving and standin' up and everything, and it was just like I was out there doin' that you know? That's my baby and... Well I enjoyed goin' on the Country too because I was so fascinated when I saw Niagara Falls first time, and then Canada, and then all the Midwest and everything. The mountains and up in New York, by down around the Mountains and everything. I was just eatin' it up. (laughs) I was livin' the life like my little girl, so I've had a very happy life. My other daughter is entirely different, she is quiet, and she has no desire to have any kind of a career. But she's married to a contractor and she has everything she wants, but she's a good daughter, but she just don't have the talent. So God gave her [Janis] talent.

You got to be born with it in order to accomplish the things like Elvis Presley. Elvis Presley some people got to talkin' about him after he got big fat and everything, but I loved Elvis 'til the day he died.

Beth: You met him?

Jewel: Oh certainly, on two different times, and as I told you, he's one of the most polite sweetest thing. I won't, I'm not sayin' anything against Elvis, whatever happened to him it was, he was, just too much work put on him.

Beth: Well thank you so much, it was great to have you do this thing

Jewel: Well I appreciate it, and Janis wanted me to do this thing and if Janis, anything Janis wants me to do I'll do it, if I am able to do it.

Beth: Well thank you, I really appreciate it, I think...

Jewel: Well thank you Beth

APPENDIX D

Transcription of an interview with Janis Martin on October 11, 2003 for the documentary "Rebel Beat: The Story of L.A. Rockabilly" by Elizabeth Blozan, and is included with permission. The first interviewer is rockabilly drummer Bobby Trimble and Blozan is the second interviewer. It was on this night that Janis finally got to meet and sing with her idol, Ruth Brown.

Bobby: What's the stuff that drove you crazy and made you want to do what you do?

Janis: Ruth Brown. But I can't remember... not everything.

Bobby: It was a gradual process?

Janis: Six years old I was playin' guitar and singin'. Had my own radio show when I was eight years old. Turned professional, I guess, when I was about nine, and then I started recording when I was fifteen, retired when I was twenty-two (laughs). And was out of it for twenty years and went back when I was forty-two. So its been twenty-one years on a second go-round.

Bobby: You're doing good.

Janis: I'll tell ya, the fans are wonderful. I'll never quit as long as I can do it, and deliver.

Bobby: Yeah, you ain't lost nothing'.

Janis: Well, thank you darling.'

Bobby: Another thing I was directed to ask you was- what it was like playing your kind of stuff on some of the shows that you were doing when (unintelligible)? From what I've read you had the kind of country scene, the kind of rhythm and blues scene, and the jazz scene, and stuff like that... when people like you, and like Presley, and all the people that came along, they didn't know where to put you, they put you on the country stuff...

Janis: That's right...

Bobby: ...cause you're kind of like the most progressive form of country music at the time, its kind of like a hybrid music. What was that like, trying to play that for people who were least expecting it? You know, you're coming out and you're like -- Welcome Janis Martin, here you are! -- and you're like "Hello, here's my stuff!"

Janis: (laughs) They loved it. It was so new and different. Some of the guys that I traveled with, one in particular- I won't call any names, I think there's been some stories written about it- we went on a tour of thirty-one nighters. And I went on before him. And when it was time for him to come on, he had the number one song in the nation, in the country (bill?). They were booing him and hollerin,' "We want Janis, we want Janis!" So there was a lot of friction that way, but not with the fans...

Bobby: Sort of like a jealousy...

Janis: ...well, the music was so new and raw, and something that people hadn't heard before, that they just loved it. They got excited and they just loved it.

Bobby: You feel the energy off of the way they react...

Janis: Oh gosh yeah. And I've always been the type, I'm gonna do what I want to. You know, if you're gonna pay me, whatever, but I'm gonna do what I wanna do. And I mean...

Bobby: That's the sign of a true artist...

Janis: ... yeah.

Bobby: ...stand your ground.

Janis: Yeah, yeah. That's what I've done all my life.

Bobby: Of course, you have. That's why I love you.

Janis: (laughs)

Bobby: That's why you're a genius who brings (wisdom?) to me.

(BREAK)

Bobby: What was it like being a lady and trying to do what you're doing in a world that was not understanding to your situation for what you were doing? Like a man's world, like stepping over enemy lines, so to speak. Can you tell us anything? What your feelings are and your point of view?

Janis: It wasn't accepted at first, by the men. We were accused of being "spawned by the devil." I had a little innocent fifteen-year-old face, with a pony-tail and whatever, but when I got on stage I was... raunchy, I guess is the word you'd call it. And I sang bare-footed, I moved, and they tried to make me stand still, but I couldn't do it. Finally, they started accepting it, but it was a hard road. I've always said that maybe me and Wanda, and Brenda Lee, we started it for modern day women. You had Charline Arthur out of Texas, and I guess I was the second one.

Bobby: Patsy Cline had some up tempo kind of things too.

Janis: Yeah, yeah. And she liked it. I did a couple shows with her, and she liked that type of music.

Bobby: I'd definitely put you on par with her as a vocalist...

Janis: I do some of her songs when I do country shows...

Bobby: ...you've got the full-throated, soulful, big voice...

Janis: We're both from Virginia, again and, you know, the phrasing is kind of alike. On some country shows, I still do some country shows, and I always do "Crazy" and "Sweet Dreams," and stuff like that. They say we sound a lot alike on that type of music, so that's an honor for me.

Bobby: (gestures) you know... you've got your own heart and soul, and it's in there. And your full-throated delivery, you're very soulful...

Janis: It's in your blood, and uh...

Bobby: I couldn't put her above you, or you above her. It's like you've both got your own voice and you both, like... it's all there...

Janis: There's a lot of good talent...

Bobby: ...the vocal technique and the stuff you can't put a name on, call it ingredient X. You've got something inside you that... it is what it is and that's why it's great. And you've definitely got that by the truckload.

Janis: I think one thing that was said to me one time by Stuart Coleman in England. He said, "There's something in your larynx that when you hear 'Janis Martin,' she doesn't sound like anybody else."

Bobby: Mmhmm... it's like with the Everly Brothers or anybody who's great, they got it.

Janis: I think to make it, you've got to be yourself. Not imitate anybody, and that's what a lot of singers do.

Bobby: Yeah, you got your influences there that move you, but then you're kinda like, I always call it, like, you put it in a pot and you stir it up and kind of regurgitate it into your own thing.

Janis: Yeah, do your own version.

Bobby: Exactly...

Janis: Your own version.

Bobby: Your own spin on it, definitely.

(BREAK)

Bobby: How does it feel to have a huge fan base that is not based on listening to your stuff on the radio, that is like a word of mouth thing that is completely new and original? And they know all your songs and they love it; they go crazy over it. How does that make you feel? That's gotta, like, trip you out or something, like, "What's going on here? I didn't get no radio play."

Janis: (laughs)

Bobby: I mean, not even Merle Haggard, or Willie Nelson, or George Jones can get radio play. You're not getting radio play. And yet you can play a place and pack it out, and everybody knows all your songs. How's that feel?

Janis: Well, uh... 19..., uh, when I was forty-two is when I started doing this again. And I could not believe it. I could not believe that those kids were there. They knew every word to my songs. But I have seen it grow in the States. In Europe it's been steady, but each time I do something here in the States...

Bobby: There's a lot of young kids...

Janis: Oh it is...

Bobby: I mean, when I started, I think of myself as kind of a second generation. And I'm starting to be like one of the semi, kind of, old timers. It's kind of weird. I mean, we never broke up the band, we're not doing a reunion. we've been going all these years...

Janis: I think...

Bobby: But now, since I've been in it, I've seen it come and grow and it's been constant on the up and up.

Janis: Well, '50s music will never die, it will never be replaced. They can bring along the doo-wops and whatever they want to, but there's something about this music that is so raw, something that is unusual about it. It's not perfection. It's from the heart.

Bobby: It's emotion, yeah definitely...

Janis: It really is. You're not doing the music like someone else wrote it.

(BREAK)

Elizabeth: I heard that you were driving to your gig and heard Ruth on the radio and then you started going, "This is the way I want to go."

Janis: Yeah

Elizabeth: As a woman back then, did it make you feel sexy? I can't help but think it must have been a really sexy thing to do.

Janis: Uh... I didn't feel sexy (laughs). I was told I was. But, I don't know. The rhythm was there and I couldn't be still. I was accused of being wicked, or whatever, but I never thought of it as being sexy.

Elizabeth: What was it that you felt in that music that you just weren't getting out of country? Like how would you describe it to somebody that hasn't heard rockabilly?

Janis: I was bored with country music. I was bored with Bluegrass music. I was looking for something. I would go up the road, there was a black church right up above my house. My little cousins wanted to play on Sunday and I would want to go up and lay in the weeds and listen to them sing. It was that rhythm, that soul. It was just... and when I heard it I said, "That is my music." But still being white in the '50s, you couldn't really go out and do it, so we kind of tried to combine what they call hillbilly music in with the rhythm and blues. That's how it was born. I think that we in the '50s, and I was one of the first females to do it, I think we were the beginning of all the modern day rock and roll. Punk, psychedelic, whatever it is. If we hadn't took the blows... and it was hard. We were criticized, we were called vulgar, whatever, but we were just doing what we felt. But we paved the way for the modern rock and roll.

Elizabeth: Was it mainly teenagers?

Janis: Oh no. I was appearing on country shows where you had a mixture of children from seven-years-old to people in their sixties, seventies, whatever. It was a mixed audience, but they all loved it when they heard it. They loved it because to them it was something new too. It just grew from that. We just knocked Nashville on its ear. Country music was just knocked out for about six, seven years (smiles).

Elizabeth: So you were doing the typical country show were they'd have like a gospel song and they'd have like a whole typical kind of country format, and then you guys would come out?

Janis: Well, I was a member of that cast, The Old Dominion Barndance. I started as a regular there when I was thirteen, and you had a certain number of songs that you did. We did two shows a night; emptied the theater and they came back in. And mine was always Ruth Brown, Little Richard, LaVern Baker, and whatever, and I did some country. But even if I did country it had a beat to it. I was bored with slow songs.

Elizabeth: And you were doing that in a format of mixed audience in age too, right?

Janis: Yeah. No, they weren't teenagers, all of them. No. You had your teenagers, but, again, the older people liked it too.