



JUST FOR THE RECORD

by Dennis Barker



Big Brother & The Holding Company: *Piece Of My Heart*

*"I met a girl who sang the blues, and I ask her for some happy news,
she just smiled and turned away".....*

Don McLean, American Pie

As usual, in 1968, Billboard published its annual hot 100 list, charting that years most popular songs. If you read the list, you'd better hold on to your socks, you're not going to believe your eyes. While the Beatles *Hey Jude* managed to captured the #1 spot, from there, the universe seems to careen into cosmic disorder. Paul Mauriat's *Love Is Blue* & Bobby Goldsboro's *Honey* come in at Number 2 & 3. Thereafter, with a few exceptions, most of what's left of the Top 20 is populated by such unmemorable nonsense as *Harper Valley PTA*, *Little Green Apples* and *Grazing in the Grass*. What the hell? Well, to be honest, in the 60's, we were all grazing in the grass a little bit. But still, I don't think I killed so many brain cells that I wouldn't remember spending all my time listening to Hugh Masekela.

Imagine my further astonishment when I discovered that the 1968 Big Brother rock/blues classic *Piece Of My Heart* not only failed to make billboards top 20, but had barely managed to sneak onto the list at #96, giving ground to the drivel produced by such rock & roll stalwarts as the *1910 Fruitgum Company*, the *Cowsills*, *Ohio Express* and other bubblegum bands. Apparently, by 1968, 14 year old girls were already entrenched as the dominant record consumers.

We were the established rock and roll band. We were heavy. We were like: all right, out of three or four bands in this city, we are one of them.....

Sam Andrew, guitar, Big Brother & the Holding Co.

Spawned in late 1965 by the evolving Haight-Ashbury music scene, and nurtured by San Francisco music promoter Chet Helms (considered by most to be the "father of the summer of Love"), Big Brother and the Holding Company epitomized the reckless indulgent qualities of San Francisco's psychedelic rock lifestyle. Amazingly, the new bands first gig would be to share the stage with the Grateful Dead at the 1966 Trips festival, a milestone in the emerging Hippie counterculture, organized by Stewart Brand, a member of Ken Kesey's Merry Prankster's (a group who formed around the author in the early 1960s, promoting the use of LSD as a means to break through conformist thought and change American society). Big Brother was soon working as the House band at Chet Helms famed Avalon Ballroom, which between 1966 and 1968 booked the entire pantheon of psychedelic rock bands, which also resulted in an anthology of psychedelic posters, produced to promote the shows.

*She came in and she was dressed like a little Texan. She didn't look like a hippie,
she looked like my mother, who is also from Texas*

Sam Andrew, guitar, Big Brother & the Holding Co.

In June 1966, Big Brother manager Chet Helms recruited bluesy Texan vocalist Janis Joplin to join the band, which had by that time gained a following in the blossoming Haight-Ashbury hippie community. The band was less than enthusiastic about her appearance.

They weren't bowled over, but neither was Joplin. It was more of a curious standoff. And smoothing out the edges would take over a year, with Janis sharing vocals and the band learning to meld their anything goes improvisational style to Joplin's more structured style. In the end, it was obvious that Joplin's gut wrenching vocals were key to taking the next step. During 1967, the band would release their first album, *Big Brother and the Holding Company*, along with two singles, first *Blind man*, and later *Down on Me*, both from the album. Although well received in the San Francisco area, they garnered little national attention.

The bands big break would come with their performance at the 1967 Monterey Pop festival. Big Brother would perform a five song set which would grab the attention of a national audience, bring them a new manger in Albert Grossman, and most importantly, a recording contract with Columbia Records.

*You can't always get what you want, you can't always get what you want,
but if you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need.*

The Rolling Stones

Sex, Dope and Cheap Thrills; the intended title, proved too much for Columbia executives, and what would become Big Brother and the Holding Company's breakout album was re-titled simply, *Cheap Thrills*. If the title seemed to much, the cover, planned by the band to be a photo of the group naked in bed, wasn't going to fly, and in one of those "happy accidents", the original cover was supplanted with artwork from underground cartoonist Robert Crumb, which had been intended for the albums back side. The original musical concept was for a live album, however, disappointed in the quality of the live material, Columbia sent the band into the studio, where four of the tracts (*Summertime*, *Piece of my Heart*, *Turtle Blues* & *Oh Sweet Mary*) were re-recorded, and combined with the live recordings of *Combination of the Two*, *I Need a Man to Love*, and *Ball and Chain*. The result of it all; a name we can live with, a classic album cover, and an exciting, sometimes raw, intensely original recording. The marriage between psychedelics and blues is unlike anything else ever produced. *Cheap Thrills* was released in the summer of 1968, and reached #1 on the Billboard Charts by October.

Well, that brings us back to *Piece of my Heart*. A masterful recording, that was seemingly given short shrift on the 1968 Billboard top 100 list. However, time has a wonderful way a making everything clear. I wonder, if we could gather those 14 year old record buyers in a room today, and offer them each an original copy of *Harper Valley PTA*, or *Piece of my Heart*, would any walk away without the Holding Company classic. I think not.

Janis Joplin performed with Big Brother and the Holding Company from 1966 to 1968. After which, she had a solo career with *The Kozmic Blues Band* and *The Full Tilt Boogie Band*. On October 4th, 1970, Janis Joplin died of a drug overdose at the Landmark Motor Hotel in Hollywood. She left an indelible mark on American music. Janis was 27 years old at the time of her death.

"All my life I just wanted to be a beatnik. Meet all the heavies, get stoned, get laid, have a good time. That's all I ever wanted. Except I knew I had a good voice and I could always get a couple of beers off of it. All of a sudden someone threw me in this rock 'n' roll band. They threw these musicians at me, man, and the sound was coming from behind. The bass was charging me. And I decided then and there that that was it. I never wanted to do anything else. It was better than it had been with any man, you know. Maybe that's the trouble."

Janis Joplin

P.S. I hadn't intended to comment on other versions of *Piece of my Heart*, Sometimes second best, is just that. However, in the gimme a break category; they don't all belt them out just the same down South. Just a warning to those with a weak constitution, Mississippi born superstar cow chic Faith Hill's upbeat, saccharin version of *Piece Of My Heart*, is a real stomach churner.

Big Brother & the Holding Co., Cheap Thrills

Columbia #kcl 2900 "mono" (RELEASED 1968)

Goldmine record album price guide values original mono copies of Cheap Thrills, with original cover & sleeve, in near mint condition, at \$300.00

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