



Pearl's car

As Janis Joplin's fame and fortune grew, she treated herself to a Porsche 356, and had it painted to her own unique style. This is that very car

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IN SATURDAY 3 October 1970 singer Janis Joplin returned to Hollywood's Landmark Motor Hotel after a day at the Sunset Sound Recorders studio. She left her Porsche in the hotel car park and headed for room 105, her base for the previous six weeks. She was never seen alive again.

THIS is Janis's car. Not a copy. The real thing. It's been loved, it's been unloved, it's been loved all over again. It's not been driven for 20 years. Now it's for sale.

And that, of course, is why we're here, for an exclusive pre-sale drive of the 1964 Porsche 356C SC Cabriolet that Janis bought in September '68, the ultimate symbol of her disbelieving acceptance that she had finally made it. And notice that, even then, she didn't buy it new.

Janis, or Pearl to her friends, loved her 356. You'll have in mind her famous lyric 'Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz; my friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends', but she only recorded that on 1 October, four days before her death.

She referred to the car in a letter written home on 28 September 1968, saying that the previous week she had bought a Porsche, 'very fancy, high class and a great car too'.

She'd found it at renowned Beverly Hills car dealer Estes-Zipper, paid \$3500, and quickly handed it over to Dave Richards, her band's roadie, for its psychedelic treatment.

Richards wasn't given much in the way of art direction but, in return for \$500 from Janis, he set to work on 'The History of the Universe' artwork, taking a month over it at home in the San Fernando Valley while he experimented with different ideas. First, he covered the Oyster White paintwork in Candy Apple Red before painstakingly painting on a wild selection of images and graphics, some of them easily translatable, others not.

On the front left wing are portraits of Janis and her band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, amid a swirl of what looks to be a dinosaur print, which itself is topped by butterflies, mushrooms and shadowy figures along the left side. The right side is completely different, dominated by a Californian valley scene, with a dark figure following a winding road into distant mountains. Ahead of this, though, is a gory wrap of raw flesh, made human by the distinct presence of two bare breasts, while above the blue skies of the valley, Sputnik flies beneath the dark, starry universe.

At the rear it's all different again, with two skull faces facing out either side of the licence plate, topped by a

rainbow, Janis's astrological sign (Capricorn) on the right wing within a large happy-face sun, and a scattering of eyes across the entire back end.

And the bonnet? That's dominated by the Eye of God, overseeing all else, butterflies and all. The mix of joy and darkness in the decoration seems so appropriate now to the life of Janis Joplin, who was bullied at school, who struggled with alcohol and drug addiction – eventually succumbing to an overdose from what was thought to be an unusually strong batch of heroin – but who found happiness in her family, her powerful performances, her flamboyant wardrobe and this little Porsche, which she used as her daily driver. Janis and her 356 became a common sight, speeding along Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles and around the Bay Area of San Francisco, multi-coloured coat and her hair billowing as she tore past. Few of her friends or band members would ride with her, so enthusiastic was her driving...

Incredibly, this well-known car was stolen one night in 1969 while Janis performed at Winterland, San Francisco, and by the time it was recovered some of its already-famous paintwork had been sprayed over in primer – but Dave Richards had protected his artwork with a clear coat, and the new paint was removed without too much damage by a local body shop. It was returned to Janis, whose response was to drive it ever more enthusiastically up and down the West Coast, between gigs, recording studios and her 'getaway' cottage in Larkspur, just outside San Francisco.

When she died, aged only 27, the Porsche was rescued from the inevitable media scrum outside the hotel by Janis's attorney, Robert Gordon, and garaged away from the public eye. Along with all her effects, the car became the property of Janis's parents, who gifted it to Albert Grossmann, Janis's manager. He kept it on his estate in Bearsville, New York, and proceeded to loan it to friends and clients, with little regard for its longevity, before leaving it to sit, uncared for, in his garage.

Seeing this, Janis's parents requested that Grossman return the Porsche, and in 1973 Janis's younger brother Michael collected it from New York. It hadn't been serviced, the tyres were flat and the interior was strewn with rubbish. A shocked Michael returned it to running order before driving it home to Ohio. It has remained in Michael's and sister Laura's ownership ever since.

'It was in pretty bad shape by that time,' says Michael, who along with Laura is keen to reminisce with us about Janis and her Porsche. 'It had been sitting for a couple



Above
Janis and her beloved
psychedelic Porsche in front of
the Palace of Fine Arts, in San
Francisco's Presidio Park.

JIM MARSHALL





of years, that was the main thing. I had to do rubber, tyres, battery, that kind of thing. 'We traded it back and forth – Laura would drive it a couple of years, I'd drive it a couple of years, Laura would drive it a couple of years... It was our car, it wasn't an icon at the time. We were enjoying the car daily, getting groceries and stuff. We were just maintaining it as our vehicle – and it was totally fun driving it.

'Then after a while just to maintain it became difficult – it was an old Porsche and they weren't making parts for it, you had to scrounge or buy used parts. I couldn't find anything, trim especially – that kind of stuff was especially hard to deal with.'

By the late 1970s the thickly painted psychedelic artwork was flaking off, and the family took the decision to have the car repainted back to original, pre-psychedelia condition to allow its continued use.

As the years went by and Janis's music gained new appreciation, Laura became involved in a play, *Love, Janis*, inspired by her best-selling book of the same name and first performed in Laura's home town of Denver in 1994. Discussions moved on to the car, and recreating its psychedelic artwork, and two artists from the Denver Center Theatre Company, Jana Mitchell and Amber Owen, came forward to help.

'What we did was provide them with a great deal of photographic evidence to help get a precise enhancement done.' I ask if she was pleased with the results, and Laura laughs out loud. 'Are you kidding?'

'We've been very pleased with it,' confirms Michael. You can't tell much [difference]; there are a couple of things but nothing at all of significance.'

'I think what it does,' says Laura, 'is it shines again, the car has its smile on again. It was showing signs of age before and now it's in dancing form!'

The Porsche, back in smiling, psychedelic form, was displayed in the lobby of the Denver Center while the play was running, attracting ecstatic attention.

'I saw the show a lot,' says Laura, 'and hung out in the lobby. The combination of the play and the car, it was

Above, from left
Janis and her band, Big Brother and the Holding Company, depicted on the front wing; stock 1600SC flat-four engine; surprise front wing fuel flap artwork.

sharing something that was very personal and very much family, and is now so clearly very much public. We saw the love for the car and for Janis. It was a life-changing experience for me.'

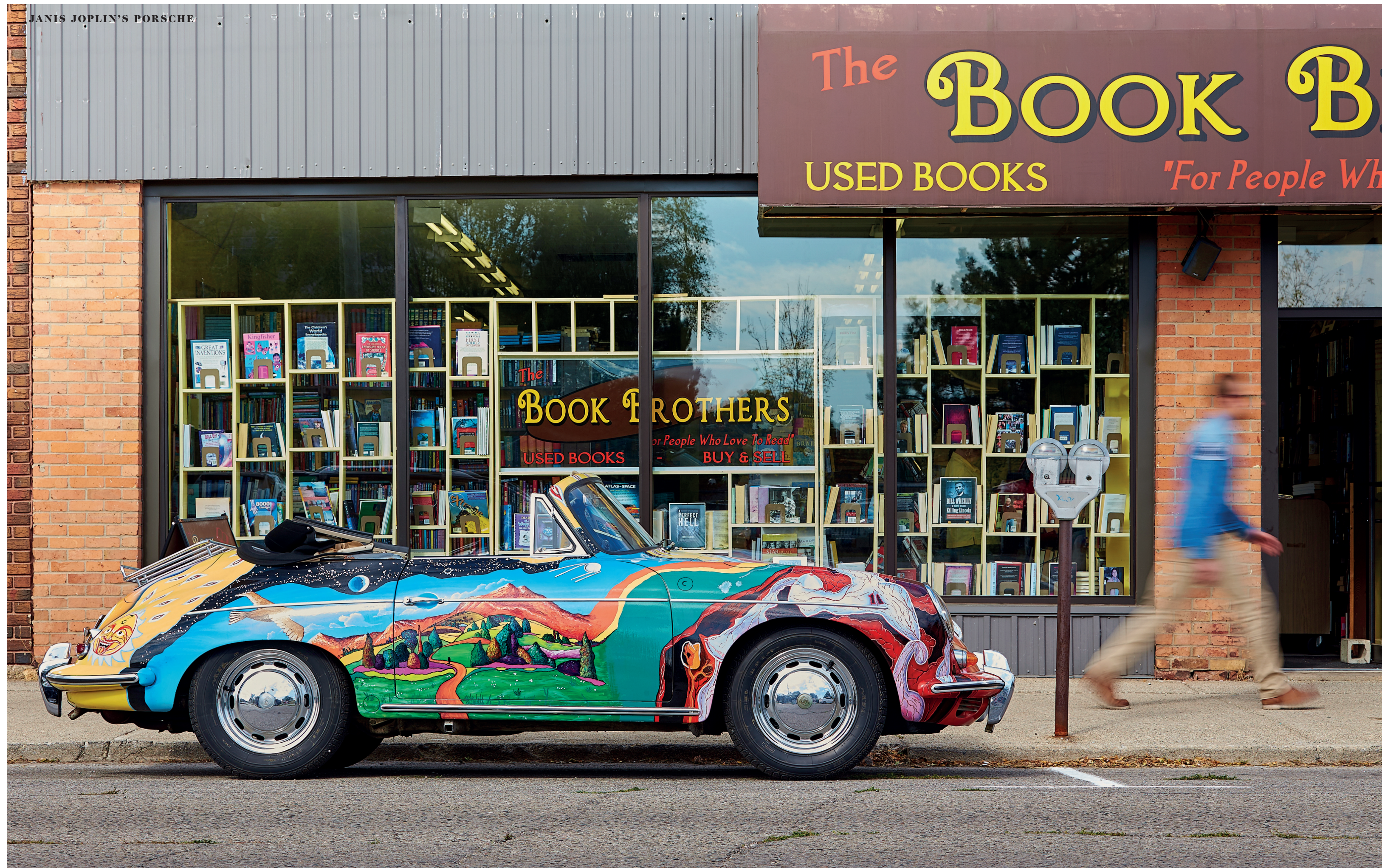
Back to Michael: 'I remember I was standing behind a group of older women, grey-haired women, and they're all talking and one of them is saying, "I saw her at The Fillmore", and another says "Oh I can't remember much, I was a totally assed on acid." It was so shocking to hear four grandmothers talking like that. But people were loving the car, and remembering it.'

The play went on to run at locations across the USA, right until 2008, but the Porsche needed a safe base, and Laura and Michael took the decision to lend it to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, which is where it has stayed since 1995 – until now.

WHO ARE WE, then, to drive this piece of rock and roll history? It's been gently recommissioned by RM Sotheby's in readiness for its Driven by Disruption sale in New York on 10 December, but it's otherwise unchanged since Michael and Laura last used it. No-one else will be allowed to drive it more than a mile or so but, with Michael and Laura's approval, we're handed the keys, with permission to drive as far as we need. What a privilege.

First things first; a look around the car. It's a lovely little thing, a long way off concours, thankfully; no rust, no dents but with a sense of use to it that evokes Janis's ownership. Leaning into the passenger side, I idly pull the fuel-filler release cable and get a surprise when the front wing-mounted flap pops open in front of me to reveal an angry painted face. Agh! I don't suppose many people have seen that over the last couple of decades.

Round to the driver's side, and I drop down into the comfortably used seat to that familiar 356 feeling of sitting deep in the car. The steering wheel is delicate in feel but huge in diameter, the top-hinged pedals springy and offset to the centre. There's a co-axial aerial cable connector on the dashboard – was this added for Janis? – and the radio features lovely, stylised quaver symbols ➔



JANIS JOPLIN'S PORSCHE

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JANIS JOPLIN'S PORSCHE

on the two control dials. I attempt to tune it, hoping against hope to find a station blasting out 1960s tunes, but it remains disappointingly silent.

The engine fires up, sounding for all the world like a noisy Beetle's. It's still on Solex carbs, and the spec is standard so it sits at a nice even idle and pulls away with minimal fuss. The gearlever movement is typically sloppy but within it there's a precise shift to be found, as odd as that sounds, so it is possible to whip through the gears as quickly as you'd ever want to.

But why would you? This is the most relaxed any sports car could be, as gentle and benign as the off-stage Janis that her family knew so well. Sure, it will rev but there's no real need because there's such a steady flow of torque. So we whisk along, just as Janis would have whisked along, engine bumbling away behind, and that torsion bar suspension soaking up every bump. We're so used to modified 356s, it's all too easy to forget how good a stocker is.

This being a 356C SC Cabriolet, it's got all the right bits. The C was the final iteration of the 356, and sold only from '64 to '65, alongside the newly introduced 911.



Above
The Cabriolet's lined hood folds down easily – and that's how Janis kept it, driving it top down between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The SC part denotes the highest-power engine option ever available with the pushrod-engined 356s (distinct from the four-cam Carreras), offering 90bhp. And the Cabriolet came with a lined or 'padded' hood and full windscreen, rather than the single-layer hood of the Convertible and the cut-down screen of the Speedster. As a daily driver, this was about the best spec a 356 could be. Janis chose well.

What's funny is that, when you sit deep in that cockpit, it's easy to forget how outlandish is the exterior – until yet another open-mouthed onlooker points and waves. It's encouraging how many recognise it as Janis Joplin's car though.

So what happens next? And why have Laura and Michael decided to sell?

'We've cared for it for 40-odd years,' says Michael, 'and it makes sense now to turn it over to new hands who will be responsible for its future.'

Driving Janis Joplin's 356 and talking to her family turned out to be quite an emotional experience. It's a car that deserves to be cared for. **CAR**

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