

MONUMENTAL MISTAKES

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As I gaze upon the faces of Mount Rushmore, I am struck with a sense of wonder. These four men, so instrumental to our country's history. Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and some other guy whose name I can't remember. Great orators and thinkers all, paragons of virtue whose names will live on for centuries to come.

Did they ever make mistakes, I wonder. Big ones, little ones? Mistakes that changed the shape of their lives, and forced them to reconsider their very destinies? Were they advised by a Higher Power that kept them from making fools of themselves in public? Or were they just, like me, merely accident-prone in the minefields of life?

We all make mistakes. It's in the nature of human beings to err, and having erred, to learn from the mistake and continue onward. The longer the career, the more mistakes, or so one would assume. Yet sometimes I wonder how my life would have been if I'd avoided the various catastrophic blunders that re-shaped my career.

There are good mistakes and bad mistakes; I've made my share of both. However, in this interests of those of you who may spend late nights thinking to yourselves "I can't believe I didn't want to write with some unknown act because I had to get my dry cleaning in, and then Alannis Morissette turns out to be huge, and I could have had three cuts on the record! Instead I'm taking my vacation on tar beach, while Glen Ballard sits in Malibu enjoying the ocean sun", I will list my most serious blunders and the circumstances surrounding them.

That way, next time you make one of your own, you can read mine and take heart. After all, as stupid as they were, I'm still here – still writing, still recording, still performing, still able to earn a living in music after 33 years on the job. It could be worse.

Mistake # 1

- The scenario: An office at The William Morris Agency, circa 1967.
- The players: Myself, my former manager, and my agents David Geffen and Hal Ray.
- My situation: *Society's Child*, written and sung by me, is top ten on the Billboard Chart; my album is also top ten. I'm fifteen years old, and very much in demand.
- The issue at hand: Whether to accept a three-month project scoring an as-yet-unnamed film for very little money.
- The discussion: The agents: "This film stars some short, big-nosed unknown kid with bad hair; it's got an untried director as well. The story line is silly – Up With People guy graduates, has an affair with his mother's close friend and neighbor, falls in love with the neighbor's daughter, and runs away with her on a bus after breaking into the church where her wedding's being held. Oh, and he locks everyone else inside the church with a big cross, while he and the chick make their escape by bus."
- The decision: Pass. Doesn't sound like a winner.
- The result: *The Graduate*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft, comes out and breaks all box office records. I, meanwhile, go off to Spain and score a film called *Four Rode Out*, which is occasionally shown on late-night Turkish television.
- The consequences: Paul Simon goes on to win a multitude of Grammys for his work. I win a multitude of Grammy nominations for my work.

What I'd do now: Insist on seeing a rough cut of the film, ignore my agents and manager, and take the project precisely *because* it was so full of unknowns.
My current take: Maybe I could have written *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, but it's doubtful.

Mistake # 2

The scenario: The back room of a recording studio in Los Angeles, 1967.
The players: Myself and Jimi Hendrix.
My situation: Jimi and all the performers I knew had been kicking me out of the room when drugs were being used; I was tired of being “treated like a child”. I had smoked my first joint a few months before and promptly fallen asleep. I wanted a second chance at playing grownup.
The issue at hand: Some very good cocaine Jimi had obtained earlier in the day.
The discussion: Whether sixteen is old enough to take personal responsibility for your actions, or whether Jimi should continue to protect me from myself.
The decision: “Just breath deep through your nose and snort it up – forget the runny nose, don't blow into a tissue now!”
The result: My heart goes into tachycardia, a strange condition where it beats so fast and hard that it feels like it's coming out of my chest. Jimi freaks. I slump to the floor in a half-faint, pale as a ghost, causing him to mutter that “all those people who wonder if the curly-haired girl who wrote *Society's Child* is really black wouldn't wonder if they saw you now”.
The consequences: It turns out I am violently allergic to anything with speed in it, whether cocaine or the novocaine with epinephrine that your dentist customarily uses on you. I spend the rest of my life avoiding dentists and any powders that don't come in a bag marked *Martha White Flour*.
What I'd do now: Taste it, wait five minutes, then try it. I didn't say I got smarter, just older.
My current take: Drugs were different then, purer and safer. Jimi died and I didn't. I miss him still, but I'm grateful I learned early.

Mistake # 3

The scenario: A four-way phone conversation in the mid-to-later sixties.
The players: Myself and the afore-mentioned manager and agents, plus one amateur concert promoter.
My situation: Total fatigue, brought on by two years of touring, during which I also managed to write, arrange, and record four albums, get through 10th grade, and live through my parent's divorce.
The issue at hand: Whether to accept headlining one night of a three-day music festival no one's ever heard of..
The discussion: Promoter: “This festival is going to be the biggest thing ever! A real chance for the Love Generation to congregate together and show the whole world what we're about!”
Agent: “You don't have a site. You don't have any confirmed performers. You don't have any transportation. You don't have any advertising.”
The promoter: “None of that matters! It's all cool.”
The manager: “My artist is only sixteen; she can't go wandering around in the mud for three days.”

The artist: "Don't you think this peace and love thing is getting a little out of hand?"

The decision: Pass. How important can one festival be?

The result: Woodstock.

The consequences: *I'm not in the film. I'm not in the books. I didn't get to pal around with Joni Mitchell, David Crosby, or any of those other Love Generation icons. And they re-filmed most of the performances, so I could have looked great even after three days in the mud.*

What I'd do now: Ignore the fatigue and treat the whole thing like a camping trip.

My current take: Maybe the old saying is right: "If you can remember the sixties, you weren't really there." Maybe I really *was* there, and just too stoned to know it.

Mistake # 4

The scenario: A financial meeting in 1969.

The players: Myself and my soon-to-turn-rogue accountant, Sam.

My situation: The owner of the apartment I'm sub-letting is returning from Paris in three months, and wants his home back.

The issue at hand: Whether to buy and renovate a brownstone on the Upper West Side of New York, which will cost \$9,000.00 all in.

The discussion: "You're seventeen years old, you don't need to own property yet. Spend your money, have a good time. Besides, New York real estate is going downhill, the city's in terrible financial shape, it may never recover."

The decision: To find another rental apartment.

The result: That brownstone is worth in the neighborhood of two million dollars now. The neighborhood, by the way, is one of the trendiest in New York, which shows no signs of going under.

The consequences: Years of pouring rent money down the drain.

What I'd do now: Buy it anyway, even if it did mean I couldn't get that fabulous leather jacket I wanted.

My current take: If I'd bought it, I'd still be living in New York. I prefer Nashville.

Mistake # 5

The scenario: A high-rise office in New York, late 60's/early early 70's.

The players: A record producer, a manager, and myself.

My situation: I have not had a hit record since *Society's Child*.. I want one. I need one.

The issue at hand: My record company and the producer would like me to sing the vocal to this song on a pre-recorded track, which they proceed to play for me. It will then be released and re-make all our fortunes.

The discussion: It's obviously a hit record; it reeks of commerciality. But I didn't write the song, and I've never recorded anything I didn't write. Besides, I'm not sure I like the lyric.

The decision: Pass. It will be a hit, but at least I won't have to sing it for the next two decades..

The result: *You Light Up My Life* is not only a hit, it's a *monster* hit, and Debbie Boone is featured everywhere from *People* to *Newsweek*.

The consequences: I don't have another hit in the United States for years.
What I'd do now: Insist on re-writing the lyrics, then record it.
My current take: On the other hand, I also didn't have to get baptized by my father in a swimming pool.

Mistake # 6

The scenario: A telephone conversation from my apartment in New York, late 1970's.
The players: A star living in California who's so well-known that when I pick up the phone and she says "Hi, it's me", I immediately know who she is.
My situation: I would like to start scoring and writing songs for films, but I'm arrogant enough to assume the world will come to me. This call proves it.
The issue at hand: Whether to write the songs for her upcoming film, a musical adaptation of an old movie that happens to be a personal favorite of mine.
The discussion: Star: "So when you get an idea, call me and we'll talk about it."
Me: "Why would I want to do that?"
Star: "So I can have some input."
Me: "Why would I need input? I'll be writing songs."
Star: "Well, so we could work on them together."
Me: "Why would you want to work on songs? You're an actress and a singer. I'm the songwriter."
The decision: Other people wrote the songs for the film; the star had lots of input.
The result: *A Star Is Born*, with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson.
The consequences: A long time before I worked on another major film.
What I'd do now: Tell her that was a great idea, I'd be calling her soon; walk her through the songwriting process, add her name to the credits, take the money and run.
My current take: Live and learn.

Mistake # 7

The scenario: A private party at a bathhouse in New York City in the late '70's.
The players: Myself and several hundred others.
My situation: I'm trying to pass a short, dumpy cross-dresser who's appeared in front of me and is blocking my way, giggling nervously.
The issue at hand: Whether to smack him or call security.
The discussion: "Who are you and why are you here? This is a private party. How can I talk to you with that boa covering your face? Get out of my way!"
The decision: To avoid this obvious lunatic for the rest of the night, and make a joke of the whole situation with my hosts. Particularly because I own part of the bathhouse.
The result: J. Edgar Hoover, dressed in a beautiful strapless pink evening gown, did not think I was funny.
The consequences: Who knows?
What I'd do now: Ask him for an autographed picture, signed "To Janis, with love".
My current take: And we thought Clinton was amusing...

Mistake # 8

The scenario: A meeting at Magna Agency, New York, 1980's.
 The players: My new agents, my old manager, a commercial producer, the head of a tape manufacturing company, and myself.
 My situation: I am strapped for cash and have decided to go into commercials.
 The issue at hand: Whether to star in a commercial featuring their tape.
 The discussion: "You want me to sit in a chair that gets blown clear across the room by a huge sonic blast from gigantic speakers? with my *dog*!?"
 The decision: Pass. At 98 pounds, I'm not heavy enough to survive it.
 The result: That fantastic Memorex commercial where the guy gets blown across the room by a huge sonic blast from gigantic speakers. With a dog.
 The consequences: *I'm* not the one featured in full-page ads everywhere in the world. *I'm* not the one peering out from the pages of *Rolling Stone*. *I'm* just another grunt trying to get my latest release on the charts, and wondering why no one recognizes me on the street any more.
 What I'd do now: Insist on a seatbelt and do the commercial.
 My current take: Would have been fun, but as my grandmother would say, "What kind of way is that for a nice Jewish girl to earn a living?"

Mistake # 9

The scenario: A meeting in Los Angeles.
 The players: My agents, two television producers, and myself.
 My situation: I've been studying acting for a while and have begun looking for a vehicle to show off my fabulous, though untested, talent.
 The issue at hand: Whether to accept a bit role in a "promising" television pilot.
 The discussion: The producers: "See, there's this waitress at a bar in Boston - that's you, the waitress, not Boston - anyway she has a big mouth, see, you'd be perfect - she's not getting any younger, pretty frumpy, not a babe at all - we have another girl who'll be the babe - the rest of the cast includes a neurotic shrink - isn't that funny? - who can't get a date so he hangs out at the bar, and an unemployed drunk who talks about his wife all the time - funny, right? And the bartender, did I mention him? he's an obsessive-compulsive type, a real sexaholic. It'll be really funny, you'll love it!"
 Me: "???"
 The decision: Pass. All those acting classes for *this*?
 The result: *Cheers* is still one of my favorite shows, and I think Rhea Perlman's fantastic.
 The consequences: Hah!
 What I'd do now: Take the part and make it my own; suggest to the writers that early in the season I get a free makeover at Bloomingdale's and become "the babe".
 My current take: I wouldn't have time to do any music... on the other hand, I could probably buy people to write songs and make records for me.

Mistake # 10

The scenario: A phone conversation from Los Angeles, 1986.
 The players: My tax attorney, myself, and my IRS collection agent, Mr. Granite. That's his name, honest.

My situation: I've just discovered the accountant I'd been with since the age of fourteen has been keeping two sets of books, and I have unpaid taxes going back to 1979, plus interest and penalties. The IRS says they've spent seven years trying to find me, and are about to put me in jail.

The issue at hand: I've begged my lawyer for the chance to speak with them directly. I'm sure that if I explain the double-entry system, the large amounts of money he's stolen, and the fact that I never knew and am blameless, they'll be reasonable.

The discussion: Me: "Mr. Granite, my name is Janis Ian."
 The agent: "F—k you."
 Me: "But sir, I'm calling myself to explain all this to you. Also, I'm sole support of my wheelchair-bound mother; you'll leave me enough money every month to continue paying her rent and food, right?"
 Mr. Granite: "F—k you. All you people are alike. Legally I have to give you \$75 a month and \$50 for each dependent. That's it."

The decision: Fet off the phone and burst into tears. Hire more lawyers.

The result: I finally finished paying them off this year. We managed to negotiate with Granite's supervisor (Mrs. Bear – do you really think I could make these names up?) and provide minimally for my mother. (Since they couldn't legally take my instruments, I was permitted to sell them and use the money for her support).

The consequences: I lost everything I'd spent the previous 20 years building, and remained in the hole for another thirteen years. The accountant, Sam Weintraub, turned out not to have a license; he died of a brain tumor sometime after telling my lawyers that if we sued, he'd inform Mr. Granite that I'd hidden assets all over the world, and I could then spend the rest of my life trying to convince the IRS otherwise.

What I'd do now: I had always believed that as a second-generation American who'd "made it", my country deserved my full financial support. I'd never hidden assets, cheated on my taxes, or socked away cash for a rainy day. I leave the rest of the thought to you.

My current take: I now know a lot about living like a thief, disappearing at will, and leaving no trail. These are good things for a musician to know.

Mistake # 11

The scenario: A shop in historic Provincetown, Massachusetts.

The players: Myself and my partner, Pat.

My situation: I've lost a contact lenses, and am spending the afternoon in an orgy of near-sighted window shopping.

The issue at hand: I spy some lovely leather shirts in the window and wander in, with Pat pulling at my arm and trying to dissuade me. I am intent, so she follows in my wake.

The discussion: "Those are not leather shirts. And *those* are not candles. And *those* are *definitely* not music magazines!"

The decision: I walk through the shop, wondering where the candles' wicks are and why the shirts don't smell like leather, marvelling at the bright color graphics magazines use nowadays.

The result: The owner of the store has to be called when I try on a pair of what I think are children's play handcuffs, and can't be extricated.

The consequences: I am chained to a rack of rubber fetish costumes for almost an hour while the owner searches for the handcuff keys. The only reading within reach is a back issue of a magazine called *Debbie Does Dallas Redux*, and a field guide to various uses for long cylindrical objects that can be found in any produce section.

What I'd do now: Casually lean against the rack and pretend to be a mannikin.

My current take: Beware of tourist traps, in all their guises.

Well, in looking over these mistakes I can only come to one conclusion: it could have been worse. I could have decided to go to veterinary school and done music part-time, as I planned when I was ten. I could have stayed with the French horn, instead of learning guitar. I could have let my errors overwhelm me and turned bitter, which is hell on your writing.

Instead, I just kept going. Was that a mistake? I hope not....