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ARTIST BIO: Janis Ian “A Life In Song”

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Who are the great songwriters in America today?

Not the most popular. Not the richest. Simply the greats.

Ask any student of the form, and Janis Ian will be counted among them. The writer of “Jesse”, a song recorded by so many others that few remember Ian wrote it; “Stars”, possibly the best song ever written about the life of a performer, recorded by artists as diverse as Mel Torme and Cher; and the seminal “At Seventeen”, a song that brought her five Grammy nominations (the most any solo female artist had ever garnered) in 1975, and which is now reaching its third generation of listeners.

Ian is a formidable talent, a force of nature. Ella Fitzgerald called her “The best young singer in America”. Chet Atkins said “Singer? You ought to hear that girl play guitar; she gives me a run for my money!” Reviewers have called her live performances “overwhelming to the spirit and soul”, and “drenched with such passion, the audience feels they’ve been swept up in a hurricane.” Not to mention her short stories, her songs for film and television... and oh, yes. She also runs a foundation, named for her mother, that works with various universities and colleges to supply scholarships for returning students; they’ve raised over \$300,000 to date!

The glowing reviews come as no surprise to Ian’s loyal fan base, who give her website a stunning quarter million hits per year – even though she hasn’t had a top twenty record here in three decades. Nor to the computer community, who adopted her article “The Internet Debacle” as their Bible against the RIAA’s fight to stop downloaded music. Nor her international fan base, who flock to her concerts and allow her to play sold-out concert halls in Holland, the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan, and others too numerous to mention. Nor the science fiction community, who embraced her anthology “Stars” with glowing reviews like the one from Publisher’s Weekly that begins “This dazzling, highly original anthology....”

Quite a broad spectrum of interests and communities, for a woman who started her life on a New Jersey chicken farm in 1951.

2008 sees a double-whammy: *Society’s Child: My Autobiography*, released in North America by Tarcher/Penguin, has already gotten stellar reviews; *O Magazine* called it “Hugely readable” and recommended it as one of 27 “must-reads” this summer. *Mojo Magazine* gives it a four star review, and *Booklist* a starred review that ends with “painfully candid, and hard to put down.”

The accompanying double CD-set, *Best of Janis Ian: The Autobiography Collection*, contains 31 tracks, and is the first “best of” Janis has ever released in North America. From start to finish, it unearths such gems as Ian’s very first demo recording (“Hair of Spun Gold,” sung into her father’s tape recorder when she was thirteen years old), and features all the classics, completely re-mastered from the original sources, as well as never-before-heard bonus tracks.

Ian is not an artist for the faint of heart, for timid souls who prefer Britney Spears’ auto-tuned vocals to the voice of real experience. Both the book and the CD set offer an outspoken look behind the scenes, not just of her life, but of the music industry as well. Her story of an agonizing “showcase” for Clive Davis makes you appreciate your own day job. The harrowing years she spent watching her ex-husband decline, from loving partner to threatening her life, are as truthful and straightforward as they are painful to read. And don’t forget the good! The end of *Society’s Child* is particularly poignant, as Ian finally meets the love of her life, Patricia. The two were married in Toronto in 2003, and celebrate nineteen years together this coming December.

For the record, Ian was born April 7, 1951, and started playing the piano at two. Far from being a child prodigy on that instrument, she hated scales and studying, and switched to guitar at age ten. (“I figured out that while you couldn’t carry a piano, you could carry a guitar, and that was it.”) Her first song was written at twelve and recorded on her first album for Verve-Folkways in 1965, which also featured her first hit, *Society’s Child*. The song ignited controversy from coast to coast, resulting in the burning of a radio station, the firing of disc jockeys who played it, and a generation hungering for the truth finally having a female songwriter to stand beside Bob Dylan.

Ian took a break at the age of eighteen, retiring to Philadelphia for three years “to find out if I had it in me to be a good songwriter, or if I should just go to school and become a veterinarian.” She returned with the stunning “Stars” album in 1973, and went on to cover the decade with number one records worldwide. Her follow-up to “Between the Lines”, titled “Aftertones”, was #1 in Japan for an astonishing six months, a record still unbroken by a female artist. “Night Rains”, featuring the Giorgio Moroder collaboration “Fly Too High”, managed to go platinum throughout Europe, Africa, and Australia.

In 1983, after ten unbroken years of making records and touring, Ian took an unprecedented nine year hiatus from the visible music world, studying acting with the legendary Stella Adler and “in general, learning how to be a person”. During that period, she married and divorced, suffered two emergency surgeries, lost all her savings and home to an unscrupulous business manager, and moved to Nashville, TN in 1988 “penniless, in debt, and hungry to write”. She returned to the music business with 1992’s “Breaking Silence”, which immediately garnered her ninth Grammy nomination.

“It was good to start young,” says Ian. “It was good to learn, early on, that what matters is the music. I got most of my big mistakes over with before I was twenty-one. When people say ‘Didn’t you miss having a teenage life?’ I just say ‘I only know the life I lived. I was a teenager, working. A hundred years ago, no one would have thought anything of it. At least I got to do something I loved! I could have been working in a factory, or a day job where every day is the same thing, day in and day out. Instead, I got to deal with everything from doing coke with Jimi Hendrix to death threats. I lived an entire life in my teen years, and I don’t regret a second of it.”