

Janis Ian: Teen Stardom, Lifelong Career

Janis Ian wrote her first song—a folk song—at age twelve, began performing at thirteen, and wrote and released a hit single by the time she was fifteen. It was an amazing start to a major career, and no one is more amazed than Ian.

“In this business, you can do all the right things, be in all the right places, have enormous talent, and still not get anywhere...,” Ian says. “It’s the luck of being in the right place at the right time, and having the goods to back that up.”

Born on April 7, 1951, in Farmingdale, New Jersey, Ian got “the goods” as a youngster, taking piano lessons, teaching herself the guitar, and trying to copy the music she heard on folk recordings. In 1964, her first song was published in a folk-song magazine, and she was discovered by a record producer at a New York City folk event. Ian signed a recording contract before she turned fourteen. In the next year, she wrote and recorded “Society’s Child,” a folk-rock song about interracial romance.

The song topic stirred heated emotions during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, and many radio stations refused to play it. Though Ian often heard boos when she performed the song, it still found millions of fans, and it is now considered a major work of its time.

Ian struggled with fame at such a young age, and her next recordings weren’t as successful. “Everyone thought ‘Society’s Child’ was a fluke,” she says, “and I was a has-been at eighteen.”

For the next four years, Ian stopped performing and recording to focus on writing. By 1975, she was back on top with a best-selling album and her all-time biggest hit, “At Seventeen,” a song about growing up that went on to win a Grammy.



After several more years of almost constant performing and recording, Ian took another break in 1983, to study acting. Five years later, she moved from Los Angeles to Nashville to restart her music career. Her next album, released in 1993, was nominated for a Grammy.

Over the years, Ian has recorded folk, rock, and country music; written for artists of every popular genre; and published a best-selling autobiography.

When she advises young songwriters, Ian says, “This is the business of failure, and you’ll fail a hundred times or more for every tiny success...Remember to take joy in what you do... Don’t lose that.”

Sources: *American Songwriter*; *A Guitar and a Pen: Stories by Country Music’s Greatest Songwriters* edited by Robert Hicks, John Bohlinger, and Justin Stelter; *Performing Songwriter*; *Society’s Child* by Janis Ian

LISTEN:

“At Seventeen”	“Jesse”
“Days Like These”	“Society’s Child”
“Fly Too High”	“Stars”

READ:

Performing Songwriter (April 7, 2011):
On the occasion of her sixtieth birthday, Ian reflects on her decades-long career in this interview. Go to PerformingSongwriter.com and search for “Janis Ian birthday.” (performingsongwriter.com/janis-ian-interview/)