

JANIS IAN: CONTROVERSY AND COMEBACKS

Janis Ian wrote her first folksong at age twelve, began performing professionally at age thirteen, and released her self-penned debut single—which became a national hit—by age fifteen. It was a remarkable beginning to a groundbreaking career, and no one knows how remarkable it was more than Ian herself.

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

Born April 7, 1951, in Farmingdale, New Jersey, Ian developed “the goods” as a precocious child, taking piano lessons, teaching herself the guitar, and trying to copy the music she heard on popular folk recordings. In 1964, she published her first song in a folksong magazine, and she accepted an invitation to perform at a New York City folk event, where she was discovered by a record producer. She signed a recording contract before she turned fourteen. Within the next year, she wrote and recorded “Society’s Child,” a haunting folk-rock song about a doomed interracial romance, after she saw a mixed-race teenage couple holding hands on a bus.

The topic was extremely controversial during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, and many radio stations refused to play it. Ian received hate mail and even death threats, and she often heard boos and catcalls when she performed it. But the song attracted millions of fans and is now considered a landmark work of its era.



Ian struggled with fame, though, and her next recordings failed to match her initial success. “Everyone thought ‘Society’s Child’ was a fluke,” she says, “and I was a has-been at eighteen.”

For the next four years, she stopped performing and recording to concentrate on writing. In 1973, R&B artist Roberta Flack scored a hit with Ian’s song “Jesse.” Two years later, Ian re-emerged with a best-selling album and her all-time biggest hit, “At Seventeen,” a piercing depiction of awkward adolescence that went on to win a Grammy.

After exhausting herself again with almost constant performing and recording, Ian took another break from music in 1983 to study acting. Five years later, she moved

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LISTEN

“At Seventeen,” “Days Like These,” “Jesse,” “Society’s Child”

JANIS IAN: CONTROVERSY AND COMEBACKS (CONTINUED)

from Los Angeles to Nashville to connect with that city’s lively songwriting community and re-establish her music career. Her next album, released in 1993, was nominated for a Grammy.

Over the course of her lengthy career, 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. . . . [R]emember to take joy in what



you do. It’s too easy, in this world, to only think business. We become writers and players and singers because it brings us joy. Don’t lose that!”

CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. In the fourth paragraph, what does the word “landmark” mean in this context? Circle the clue words and phrases that help you understand its meaning, and on the lines below, define the term in your own words.

2. In your own words, explain the controversy surrounding Ian’s song “Society’s Child.” What did Ian mean when she described the song as a “fluke”?

3. “This is the business of failure, and you’ll fail a hundred times or more for every tiny success. . . . [R]emember to take joy in what you do. It’s too easy, in this world, to only think business. We become writers and players and singers because it brings us joy. Don’t lose that.” Do you think that Ian followed her own advice? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
