



JANIS IAN: TEEN STARDOM, LIFELONG CAREER

Janis Ian wrote her first folksong at age twelve, began performing at age thirteen, and wrote and released a hit by age fifteen. It was an amazing start to a major career, and no one was more amazed than her.

“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,” 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 in 1951 in Farmingdale, New Jersey, Ian developed “the goods” as a youngster. She took piano lessons, taught herself the guitar, and tried to copy the music she heard on folk recordings. In 1964, she published her first song in a folksong magazine and was discovered by a record producer at a New York City folk event. She signed a recording contract before she turned fourteen. The next year, she wrote and recorded “Society’s Child,” a special kind of love song about two people of different races who fall in love.

The song stirred strong emotions during the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, and many radio stations refused to play it. Though Ian often heard boos when she performed the song, it attracted millions of fans and is now considered a major work of its time.

Ian struggled with fame, though, and her next recordings weren’t as successful. For the next four years, she 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 years of almost constant performing and recording, Ian took another break in 1983 to study

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LISTEN

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



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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. . . . [R]emember to take joy in what you do. . . . Don’t lose that!”



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. How old was Ian when she wrote her first song?

2. What event in Ian’s life most helped her become successful? Explain why.

3. What do you think Ian means when she said that songwriting is “the business of failure”? Explain in your own words.
