

# JANIS IAN

## It's Different For Girls

Many artists emerged in the 60s claiming to be “confessional”, but few were as painfully honest as Janis Ian: “I talk about things that are hard for people to say, and that’s what people love about my songs,” she tells Jonathan Wingate

**J**anis Eddy Fink was born in Farmingdale, New Jersey in 1951, where she started playing the piano at the age of two. She changed her name to Janis Ian and was discovered playing on the New York folk scene when she was 13. After signing with Verve-Folkways, she released the astonishingly mature *Society’s Child*, which chronicled a doomed inter-racial romance and caused a storm of controversy that culminated in death threats for Ian, and a radio station in Atlanta being burned to the ground when they played the song.

*Society’s Child* failed to chart twice before finally reaching the *Billboard* Top 20 after she appeared on Leonard Bernstein’s television show, *Inside Pop – The Rock Revolution*, with Bernstein gushing: “How did you ever write such a thing at the age of 15? You’re a great creature. I think that’s quite a remarkable job for a girl of your age, and I congratulate you on what’s going to be a brilliant career.”

Having become a teenage star and made friends with the likes of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, Ian was nominated for a Grammy for her self-titled debut album in 1967. She cut a handful of well-received albums before deciding that life in the spotlight was interfering with her songwriting and announcing her retirement at the age of 17. She relocated to Philadelphia “to find out if I had it in me to be a good songwriter or if I should just go to school to become a veterinarian.”

After a three-year hiatus, she signed a new deal with Columbia and returned with the *Stars* album in 1973. Over the next few years, she released a run of career-defining records including *Between The Lines*, *Aftertones* and *Miracle Row* and became famous throughout the world thanks to a clutch of achingly beautiful, timeless numbers such as *Stars* and her signature song – *At Seventeen* – one of the most ineffably moving and articulate appraisals of teenage loneliness ever written.

Although 1979’s *Night Rains* sold well internationally and featured collaborations with Giorgio Moroder, Chick Corea and Miles Davis alumnus, Ron Carter, Ian was beginning to feel as if she was no longer a priority artist for Columbia, and she walked away from her contract after 1981’s *Restless Eyes* album.

In 1983, she disappeared from the spotlight once again, studying acting and “in general,



learning how to be a person.” During this period, she got married and divorced, lost her home and her savings to an unscrupulous business manager, and moved to Nashville at the end of the decade, “penniless and hungry to write.”

Janis Ian re-emerged in 1992 and received her ninth Grammy nomination for her comeback album – the aptly-titled *Breaking Silence* – which among other themes, chronicled her recent coming out as a lesbian. Although her recent work has not received anything like the attention she enjoyed in her 70s heyday, she has continued to tour and record regularly ever since.

**You started writing professionally aged 12. You once said that at that age, you are always aware that “the talent is helping to mask your inexperience”. What did you mean by that?**

You are born with talent and you gain experience over the years, so if you start that young and you’re born with enough talent, it hides a great deal of the inexperience. I think that if you listen to my first three or four albums, you can really

hear the inexperience. The talent comes through in songs like *Society’s Child*, where I still don’t know what I’m doing, but by then I had a dozen songs under my belt, so I’m starting to get a little bit of experience. It takes a long time to understand that pure talent is just there when you’re born, but you reach a point where talent is no longer enough and you really need the experience and the craft.

**How did you feel when Leonard Bernstein heaped such incredibly high praise on you when you appeared on his television show?**

I really don’t think it hit me, because I was barely 15, it was Leonard Bernstein and he was so exalted. In retrospect, I wish that it had, because I would have loved to have got advice from Bernstein on a couple of things. I also had no idea of the impact television would have. *Society’s Child* had been out for a year, and it had been re-released once already, and apart from a couple of stations, nobody would play it.

I received tons of hate mail and death threats because of that song, and a radio station in Atlanta got burned to the ground for playing it. It was a very volatile time in America, and it was an extremely volatile song that really became a flashpoint for people, so I really went through the Bernstein show in a haze. It was pretty extraordinary, but I was so young and I didn’t really understand what it would mean.

**You recorded four albums as a teenager in the 60s. Is it true that you gave away most of the money you had earned to friends and charities?**

Yes. I suppose they needed it and I didn’t. It was very much a 60s ethic. I wasn’t too worried about making lots of money and hanging on to it. That ethic stayed with me to a point, but I lost everything in the mid-80s when I got ripped off, so after that, I took a different approach to money.

I don’t know if I’ll ever feel secure financially. I still have to work and earn a living, because I’m not one of those people who made millions. I wouldn’t want to stop playing music, but I wouldn’t mind stopping touring. I’d like to make the jazz record that I never got to make when I was younger, but at this point, I’m looking at it as the last or next to last album. I’ll be 60 in a couple of years, and I wouldn’t mind going to Japan,



Janis Ian with Leonard Bernstein.



Australia, Europe and the UK again, but I'm not sure that I want to do that more than once or twice more.

**Looking back, would you say that life in the spotlight did not agree with you at that point?**

I don't think it was so much that life in the spotlight didn't agree with me so much as it interfered with writing. Being famous doesn't leave you a lot of time to be creative unless you stay away from the famous part and buckle down, because the more famous you are, the more people are pulling at you. I watched my songwriting go downhill as a result of never having any time to myself to sit down and write.

**You announced your retirement when you were 17, didn't you?**

This may sound pretentious but, by the time I was 17, I had already played Carnegie Hall, so by that age, I'd pretty much done what I'd originally set out to do. I remember walking off the stage at the Philharmonic Hall and telling my manager I was stopping, and she laughed and said, "Well, they all say that." I said, "Well, I'm actually doing it," and I finished out my contract. I moved out of New York, got some good therapy, put myself back together and became a songwriter. You need time, and that goes back to experience, because it takes an immense amount of time to become good at anything.

I attempted suicide when I was 18. It was a lot of pressure, and honestly, I'm not sure how much of that was adolescence and how much of that was me and just how I was born, and how much was actually the career stuff and the pressure I was under. Somebody overdosed me with acid when I was 16, and I think I started fragmenting after that.

**At the time, did you have even the faintest idea just how iconic people like Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin would go on to become?**

Nobody knew who was going to be a legend... You don't expect your friends to become legendary, you just expect to make some good music. They were just people who were very good to me when I was young. I was fortunate with people like that who saw that I was talented, they didn't let my age interfere and they taught me what they could. I've been fortunate enough to work with a lot of people

like that. I don't know how to explain what Janis and Jimi were like... They were my friends. I didn't look at them as icons, because they were my friends and because they weren't iconic back then.

**You played with Hendrix a fair bit, didn't you?**

I probably played with him 15 or 20 times during the time that I knew him. I got to hang around with Hendrix and play really bad organ in a trio, after hours... Him, my friend Carole Hunter and me. I just wish I had tapes of all of that stuff. A few years ago, I was talking to his engineer - Eddy Kramer - and I said, "Go back over your tapes, because in among the tapes you were running while they were building Electric Ladyland." There's some really bad organ playing on top of some amazing guitar playing by Hendrix. I would absolutely love to hear that stuff, because I certainly never heard it back then.

I have so many memories. I mean, I remember doing coke with Hendrix, but it was a mistake, because I actually turned out to be allergic to cocaine (*laughs*). I was really fortunate that I was allergic to it, because it would have been the perfect drug for me... More speed and more energy. I think I would have had some serious trouble with it, so it was more just sheer luck for me that I couldn't do it.

**Having become a star at such a young age, did you feel like you had missed out by not having a more conventional life as a teenager?**

It was good to start young and to learn, early on, that what matters is the music. I got most of my big mistakes over with before I was 21. When people say, "Didn't you miss having a teenage life?" I just say that I only know the life I lived. I was a teenager, working, but no one would have thought anything of it 100 years ago. At least I got to do something I loved, because I could have been working in a day-job where it's 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.

**What do you remember about writing Stars?**

I had been working at poetry and songwriting for about two and a half years and not doing anything else. In Nashville, they say you've got to keep your motor oiled, meaning that if you write

every day, when inspiration finally does strike, then you're ready for it. I think that's what happened with Stars, because I had been writing really bad songs, and for two months I'd set myself a task of writing a song a day, then I did two songs a week for a couple of months, and then a song a week for a while. I finally hit the point where I thought, "OK, now I'll just write when I feel like it."

I got hold of Don McLean's *American Pie* and I probably listened to Vincent 50 times and then I sat down and wrote Stars. Vincent was exactly the kind of song that I wanted to be writing. I think it took about two hours to write Stars, and it's my most covered song.

**So Stars took you a couple of hours to write, yet At Seventeen took you three months, didn't it?**

It just depends on the song and the time. With Stars I just had to be careful to tell the truth and to make sure that it held together musically and lyrically, whereas I had to be careful not to blow it with At Seventeen. I didn't know it would be a hit, but I was very aware from the first couple of lines that it was going to be an important song for me, and I really wanted to make sure not to get in the way of it. If you're writing something like At Seventeen, it's easy to just let your instinct and your talent take over and fuck off the craft, but for a song like that to work, you really have to marry the instinct, the talent and the craft.

**At Seventeen is so heartbreaking. Was it difficult to be that honest in a song?**

It is painfully honest, and I sang it with my eyes closed for the first six months because I was sure everybody would be laughing at me. In addition to the instinct and the talent, the craftsmanship and the experience, there's also the willingness to be open, and that's a lot of what creates the pathos in that song. People often come up to me and tell me that song saved them, so writing something like that comes with a certain kind of responsibility. The one thing that I do - the only thing that I do - better than most of my contemporaries, is talk about things that are hard for people to say, and that's what people love about a song like At Seventeen.



Of course, the whole point in the song is that ugly ducklings turn into swans, and people do often miss that. I think they get it on some unconscious level, because the people who love *At Seventeen* don't seem to see it as a depressing song, they see it as a hopeful song that convinced them that they weren't the only human being in the world who ever felt alone. I certainly felt like the only person in the world to feel like that when I wrote it, and I think that comes through too.

**How do you look back on *Stars* and *Between The Lines* as albums now?**

I think that *Stars* and *Between The Lines* are both wonderful pieces of work. It was a confluence of circumstances – we had the right musicians, the right producer and the right record company. I'd also had five or six years to do the writing, so it all added up to two very good albums. We were recording *Stars* and *Between The Lines* at 914 Sound Studios, and we had to rotate the studio time because Bruce Springsteen and Melanie were in there at the same time. The fantastic thing that happened after *Between The Lines* was that other artists started asking me for songs, so I suddenly had a career as a writer, which is what I had wanted in the first place.

**When you released *Miracle Row*, you said you were 'certifiably famous' by that point.**

I felt like I was in a goldfish bowl, but it was also great. I grew up a bit after Society's Child, and I was actually working to have my music heard. It was amazing the way everything happened, because *Between The Lines* really gave me my career in the US, although I'm not even sure if *At Seventeen* charted in the UK.

I had been hammering away at Europe and the UK with *Stars*, and then Shirley Bassey recorded Jesse and put me on her TV show, which was a big help. Then *Aftertones* came out and suddenly I had the No 1 record in Japan for a year and I had another No 1 there with *Miracle Row*. Then *Night Rains* came out, which was when I finally had a

career in Europe, the UK, Australia and Africa, so for five albums in a row, somewhere in the world, I was becoming famous.

**Did you always see yourself more as a writer than a performer?**

I don't know if it's more so much as first and foremost, because it all comes from the writing. In my head, I think I have always separated the writer

**“I got to hang around with Hendrix and play really bad organ in a trio after hours...”**

from the performer and the musician. There's nothing schizophrenic about it, it's just that in order to keep my own sanity, they really need to be separate. I don't bring the performer part of me home if I can avoid it, because that part needs to be very self-absorbed and somewhat arrogant and humble in a different way. It's not a part that I would want to live 24/7... That part of me belongs on the stage.

*Miracle Row* was the first album which I received a production credit for, and I found that frustrating from the start. When I was 16, and I was working with George 'Shadow' Morton – who was aptly named – he'd disappear and I wouldn't be allowed to run the session because I was a girl and because I wasn't the producer. Brooks Arthur really was the producer for *Stars* and *Between The Lines*, but by *Aftertones*, we both knew that I was contributing as much on the production end of things as he was.

**You worked with Chick Corea and Ron Carter on *Night Rains*. What did they bring to your music?**

Chick is the musician you dream of being. He's an absolute gentleman as a musician and a writer,

because he makes you sound better than you would have sounded alone. We recorded Jenny in the old Columbia Studio in New York, which has since been torn down. It was an immense room and we had two 10 ft concert grands facing each other. I played it for him once and then we played it together twice and we were done. We were in the control room, and I heard one of the piano runs and I said, "Chick, that's a great run." He just said, "Oh, that one's yours." I really couldn't believe that I had played that, because it wasn't anything that I would have played normally.

Ron Carter is an amazing bass player who brings a unique sensitivity to your music. Most of the musicians that I've worked with are pretty much one of a kind, whether that's Hendrix, Chick Corea or Ron Carter. Then again, that's just luck on my part that musicians tend to like my music. Most of the musicians I've worked with since that time have been players who really listened to the words, and that is so important when it comes to my music. Having said that, when I worked with Giorgio Moroder, the words didn't mean anything to him at all.

**What was Giorgio Moroder like to work with?**

He was great... And very funny. I had originally wanted Nile Rogers to produce me, but he wasn't available. I wasn't the kind of artist that Giorgio normally worked with, but he and his arranger – Harold Faltermeyer – listened to enough of my music so that they realised that they shouldn't make a Donna Summer record. We went into the studio and I sang through the song once and he said: 'Good. OK, goodbye' (*laughs*). He let me sing it once more and we

were done. Working with him gave me a huge amount of respect for Donna Summer... The fact that she could go in and do those vocals in one or two takes is astonishing, because I certainly couldn't.

**By the time it came to recording *Restless Eyes*, you'd got married, yet you had previously always been attracted to girls, hadn't you?**

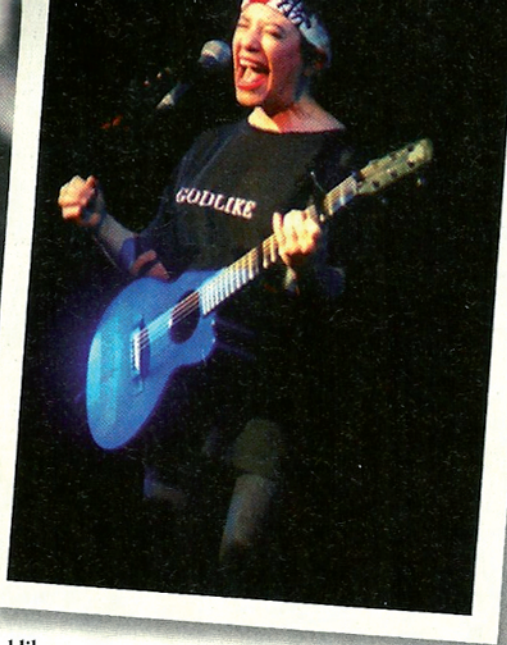
Well, yes, but I was also attracted to boys. I just think you either tilt one way or the other. Some people tilt more towards the same sex and some people tilt more towards the opposite sex. I tilt a bit more towards the same sex, but not so much that it precludes falling in love with a man.

**Would you call yourself a political singer?**

No, I think I come from more of a social perspective. Phil Ochs is a political singer. In general, my songs tend to be more about what's going on socially, like *At Seventeen*, *Society's Child* or *Jesse*. I think that I'm much more fascinated by human beings than I am by politics.

**Who have been your biggest influences throughout your career?**

As a singer, Billie Holiday, Edith Piaf and more recently an astonishing American-Mexican singer named Lhasa de Sela. As a player, Chet Atkins and Joan Baez – both so clean and clear – as well as Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock. And as a writer... Bob Dylan – that would be the formation – plus all of the folk music I grew up on. I grew up on folk, jazz and classical music, and I'm sure all of it crept in there somewhere.



**You asked to be released from your CBS contract after *Restless Eyes*. Did you feel like the label had lost faith in you by that point?**

Oh, definitely, because the regime had changed completely by that time, so it was a very different company from when I had started there. The focus was completely different... Bruce Springsteen and Michael Jackson sold so many records, and the whole music business was getting very heavily involved with cocaine, and that didn't help matters. I had five or six albums left on my contract, but it was a good time to walk away from CBS because it was interfering with my writing.

I could have stayed there like Billy Joel and Leonard Cohen did, and maybe I would have if I'd been smarter. I regretted leaving the safety of CBS, because I think a record company is a pretty good safety net. It's hard not to regret a million and a half, which was about what I walked away from, but if I'd stayed, I wouldn't have been given the freedom I've had since I left. Right now, being signed to a major is something that's for kids. It was probably just as well that I left, because I think I would have been old news there, no matter what I did. It's different for a girl.

**In what sense is it different?**

I think it's still different, but certainly back then, boys were allowed a lot more latitude. You can be Bruce Springsteen and be in your 60s and nobody thinks anything of it, but if you're a female pop singer in your 60s, it's a taboo. If you don't look younger, it's just not acceptable.

**How much has the music business changed since you first started?**

It's night and day. For a start, it's gone from being a business to being an industry, and that in itself is enormous. I don't think it's entirely the fact that people don't want to pay for music, I think it's more that we're overwhelmed. It seems like you can't go anywhere without hearing music, and if anything, that's what's diluted its value. I'm constantly amazed that I know all the hit records, because I'm hearing them everywhere I go, yet I don't even listen to the radio.

The music industry developed an extremely unrealistic attitude about sales, and it was fuelled by cocaine. Every album is not going to be *Thriller*, but it's a lot cheaper for them to have one album like that than to have 20 albums that only do half a million each. It was unrealistic and they expanded and expanded and merged and merged and now they're paying the price.

**Your workload in the 70s was astonishing. You recorded an album almost every year back then, didn't you?**

It's quite a workload, looking back on it, but that's what everybody did. I mean, in the 60s, they made an album every six to nine months. I think it changed a lot because of the singer-songwriter thing, because if you could draw on other songwriters the way they did in the 60s, then it was a lot easier because all you had to do was sing the songs. When you are writing, performing and recording, then one album a year is a lot. I tried not to let the quality of my work suffer, but I think it went down after *Miracle Row*, although it crept back up on *Night Rains* and *Restless Eyes*. If I'm honest, it still wasn't what it should have been.

I do look back at it and go, "Wow, this is a pretty cool body of work." I'm proud of a lot of it, and I'm

**"The music industry developed an unrealistic attitude about sales, fuelled by cocaine..."**

embarrassed by some of it too. I don't think there's an artist alive who's proud of everything they've ever done. Of all of the albums I cut for CBS, I think *Night Rains* is my personal favourite, but then I'd be hard pressed to choose between that one, *Stars* and *Between The Lines*... I'm very fond of all three of them.

**You were also touring relentlessly throughout that period, weren't you?**

Well, you sort of make a choice whether you're going to be on tour or whether you're going to stay at home and be a writer, and for that period, I chose touring. At my height, I was doing 240 shows in one year, and there's a point where you're just beating a dead horse. I'm doing 60 dates this year, so by my standards, it's slowed down a lot.

You have to also remember that I'm a second generation American and the people in my family didn't really get to travel anywhere, so that was a very exciting thing. America is so huge – your influences are all American – so getting out of America was very good for me as a songwriter. If you're going to be a musician and a writer, you're going to lead a fairly insular life, because the craft and the practice takes up so much time.

**Are you still as passionate about performing as you were when you first started?**

Well, no, that wore off within a matter of months (*laughs*). You can't capture the enthusiasm of your first time... It's like a first love. It's hard work. I love being on stage, but that's only two hours out of the day. Arlo Guthrie asked me to come over to Long Island to do a co-bill with him. It's gonna be great seeing Arlo and it will be great doing the show, but that will be about three hours, and then the days before and after are all travel. Ultimately, it's three days to play for three hours.

**Why did you not release anything for a decade after 1983's *Uncle Wonderful*?**

There are times when the world is receptive to artists like me, but the 80s just really wasn't a good time for me to be making records. I also stopped touring during that period. I had already made 11 or 12 records and I was only 30 years old. I needed time to look at my writing again, because I was becoming really boring as a writer.

**Have you found it frustrating that you don't receive the same level of attention that you did when you were on a major, or is it a relief to be able to work at your own pace?**

It's a combination of both. I think the harder transition is just going from being child prodigy to elder statesman. There are no maps for women in pop music, although to be fair, there's not really any maps for men either. People like Bonnie Raitt or me are just finding our way towards our 60s and trying to figure out how we continue as performers without keeping up that pace and how to continue to have lives. I have no idea how that's gonna work, so I'm really struggling with that myself.

**Do you still enjoy the writing process?**

Oh yeah, there is nothing better than writing. Well, there may be something better, but I haven't figured it out yet. I thought that writing songs would get easier as I got older, but in fact, it gets harder because my personal standards are higher and because I want to simplify my songs, and that doesn't come naturally to me. What used to take me three or four verses, I now try to say in two without losing any of the heart. Sometimes you sit there with a pen and a song just comes out fully formed, and sometimes it's like pulling teeth.

**How important is your own legacy to you?**

I care that my music touches people, but I'm alive to witness it. What do I care what happens once I'm dead? I can't believe that any other musician is arrogant enough to actually care about their legacy. I've created a body of work, but then somebody else will create another body of work, and it will go on. I can't believe Beethoven sat around worrying about posterity, and I'm certainly not gonna be remembered like Beethoven.

Here's how I look at it – my legacy goes back to the first caveman who told a story. If you look at that history, that's maybe 10,000 years, so this is all just a meaningless blink in the span of history. Well, it's not meaningless, but it really is just a blink. Ultimately, that's what I do – I just tell stories. ●

**Between The Lines + The Old Grey Whistle Test Concert... Plus (CD+DVD); Stars + Aftertones (2-CD); Miracle Row + Janis Ian (2-CD); Night Rains + Restless Eyes + Uncle Wonderful (2-CD); Revenge + Hunger (2-CD); Billie's Bones + Folk Is The New Black (2-CD) and Working Without A Net (Live) are now available on Edsel/Demon.**