



Ian, Janis (b. 1951)

by Linda Rapp

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Janis Ian in concert.
Courtesy Rude Girl's
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Janis Ian burst onto the pop music scene at the age of fifteen with her controversial hit tune "Society's Child." After dazzling early success came some fallow years, but she revitalized her career in the early 1990s, when she also came out publicly. Her musical talents have brought her nine Grammy nominations.

Janis Eddy Fink was born in the Bronx, New York on April 7, 1951 but spent her early years on her parents' chicken farm in southern New Jersey. The family home was filled with folk and classical music and jazz. Ian's interest in music was precocious: she began learning to play the piano at two and a half and later taught herself guitar and French horn.

She wrote her first song, "Hair of Spun Gold," at the age of twelve. Dreaming of a career in show business, she dubbed herself Janis Ian, adopting her brother's middle name as her stage name.

Ian achieved fame with "Society's Child," a song about interracial love, penned when she was fifteen. Because of its controversial topic, some two dozen record companies rejected it before Verve Folkways put out the single, which hit number fourteen on the pop charts despite the fact that many radio stations refused to air it.

The song elicited a certain volume of hate mail, but it also earned Ian many fans, including Leonard Bernstein, who featured her on an April 1967 television special, "Inside Pop: The Rock Revolution."

"Society's Child" was on Ian's self-titled first album (1967), for which she received a Grammy nomination for best folk performance.

Although Ian had found artistic success and recognition, her personal life at this time was difficult. She dropped out of New York's High School of Music and Art to pursue a demanding schedule of recording and touring. Ian's parents were divorcing, and she was having problems with her record producer. She had a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide when she was seventeen.

After she recovered from the breakdown, more albums followed. The most successful was *Between the Lines* (1975), on which she sang her biggest hit, "At Seventeen." Described by Timothy Finn of the *Ottawa Citizen* as "a universal ballad for the unwanted," the plaintive yet comforting song spoke of the pain and loneliness of a teen-age girl unable to find romance because "love was meant for beauty queens."

"At Seventeen" rose to number three on the pop charts and went platinum, selling over a million copies. The song and album garnered five Grammy nominations in 1975 and won two awards.

Ian stated in a 1995 interview published in *The Advocate* that she realized at the age of nine that she was a lesbian. Although she made no public acknowledgment of her sexual orientation, Ian described herself as out in her daily life in the 1970s, often bringing her girlfriend along when she toured. *The Village Voice* publicly outed her in 1976, which caused her considerable anxiety since, like many entertainers, she feared

a negative public reaction that could damage her career. At the time, she refused to confirm her lesbianism.

Ian also dated men, and in 1978 she married Portuguese filmmaker Tino Sargo. The union was happy at first, but Sargo became abusive, and the couple divorced in 1983.

While she was extricating herself from the marriage, Ian also faced emergency abdominal surgery and a long battle with the Internal Revenue Service since the trusted accountant who had been managing her finances from the beginning of her career had failed to pay her income taxes for seven years. She largely dropped out of the music scene, taking time to study dance and acting.

In 1988 Ian, bankrupt after the tax proceedings, moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where the cost of living is lower than in Los Angeles or New York and where music is a valued part of the life of the community. There she met Patricia Snyder, who was working in the history department at Vanderbilt University and who has subsequently become a criminal defense attorney. Together since 1989, the couple married in Toronto on August 27, 2003.

Ian explains that she and Snyder decided to marry because "As a couple, we wanted the same rights and the same social recognition our heterosexual friends have. We also got married because, just like coming out, public figures need to do that to make the rest of the world aware. I think it's important that people are made aware, because at the end of the day it's a civil rights issue. It's the right to marry who you want to marry regardless of color, regardless of religion, regardless of gender."

In 1993, Ian entered into a new phase of both her personal and professional life. She came out publicly and also released the aptly titled *Breaking Silence*, her first album in over a decade. She was rewarded with a Grammy nomination--her ninth--for best folk album.

Ian had recorded three more albums by 2000, and in 2003 brought out *Working without a Net*, a well-received double CD of concert performances over the course of the previous decade.

Ian's latest album, *Billie's Bones* (2004), pays tribute to singer Billie Holliday with its title cut and memorializes Matthew Shepard, the victim of a vicious homophobic murder, in "Matthew." The album also honors Woody Guthrie with "I Hear You Sing Again," which combines Ian's music with lyrics written by Guthrie and provided to her by his daughter Nora.

Ian's songs have been covered by a long list of artists including Joan Baez, Cher, Bette Midler, Nina Simone, and Dusty Springfield.

In addition to her songwriting, Ian has worked as a writer, contributing a column to *The Advocate* for five years beginning in August 1994.

From the earliest days of her career Ian has been a voice for tolerance and personal dignity. She continues to use her artistry to further the cause of social justice.

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