

Janis Ian on 47 years of gigging

The singer-songwriter started doing gigs at the age of 13, and 47 years later there are more musical adventures to come

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On the road again for her UK tour
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, JAMES GLOSSOP

Janis Ian stands just 4ft 10in tall, yet she towers over her peers. Indeed, she may be the most important and accomplished singer-songwriter you've never heard of, each song a miniature as polished and perfect as a song by Schubert or Gershwin, and as melodically and harmonically adventurous. At the 1976 Grammys, Ella Fitzgerald, who had described Ian as "the best young singer in America today", led the ovation.

You may know some of her songs: *At Seventeen*, a cri de coeur of teenage angst with which she recently reduced Jenni Murray to tears, has been covered by Céline Dion. *Society's Child*, championed by Leonard Bernstein, tells the powerful story

of a black boy and a white girl. President Johnson had scarcely signed the Civil Rights Act — Ian was spat at in the street, sent razor blades in the mail. Then there's *Fly Too High*, the jazz-disco hit co-written with Giorgio Moroder for the film *Foxes*.

Ian's writing — and playing — knows no stylistic boundaries yet every song is uniquely hers. In lyric after lyric she stands naked and vulnerable, “though not every song is 100 per cent me, even *At Seventeen*. My goal is always to write universally, to write something that cuts across borders and religion and gender and age and goes to the heart,” she reflects, during a long chat in an anonymous hotel on an anonymous estate in Dunfermline.

She's just arrived off the overnight ferry from Holland to Newcastle, travelling in a van with two guys and two guitars to begin a UK tour. A troubadour, playing solo in modest venues where once she'd have flown first class with a band and crew, stayed in five-star luxury and played the rock circuit. In her twenties, during her second career, she was “a Beatle in Japan and Australia and Holland ... I couldn't leave my room”. Once again, she walked away from the tour/record/tour tyranny that came with platinum albums.

Along the way, she found herself married to a psychotic who beat her and pulled a gun; endured serious illness; and lost everything to a crooked accountant who turned out to be “thick as thieves” with an IRS agent. She sold everything, including her beloved Bösendorfer grand piano, the latter to support her mother, slowly dying of MS. “It took me 13 years to climb out of debt.”

So when Janis Ian sings *Stars*, her unflinching examination of fame, the loneliness of life “in sad cafés and music halls”, of “the pain of living with a name you never owned”, it's from the heart. “That is pretty much 100 per cent me ... It's time-consuming, emotionally and mentally, if you've been very famous to come to terms with not being famous, yet still be doing what you do ... In *Stars* I was trying

to look with a long lens at what I'd been through. It's regret and nostalgia and the avoidance of bitterness that's important to that song ... To be that open and vulnerable — I don't think anyone had done it."

Ian knew fame young, indeed wanted fame, but as a means to an end. "I wanted to perform and I wanted enough money that I could stay home and write. Those were the two big goals, still are." The "retirements" were an attempt to regain control of her life, to create space to write. These days, she aims to spend half the year in Nashville, where she's lived since 1988. Not the obvious place for a Jewish, intellectual, gay Jersey girl, yet a place she's proud to call home. "The South has a tolerance for eccentricity that the North doesn't have." She's since recorded with Dolly Parton ("God almighty, she's bright!").

It's a long way from her roots, born "into the crack that split America" in 1951 to left-wing idealists who suffered financially for their views. Her father was a high-school music teacher who couldn't get tenure because of his association with communists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed for spying. She and her brother grew up listening to classical music, jazz and folk, and to their father's retelling of stories by Dostoevsky and Wilde. "That's what informs your morality as a kid, not lessons in the US Constitution." Janis showed precocious talent. At two, she asked her father for piano lessons, but he said she was too young — she first needed to learn her letters and numbers. So she demanded her mother teach her and, 24 hours later, was sitting down at the keyboard. "I loved playing but I hated lessons — it made me crazy that I could only play other people's stuff."

At the summer camp where her father taught and his friend Pete Seeger sang and taught banjo, Janis began to play guitar. It was 1961. "Everyone was in love with Joan Baez. Then there was Odetta, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Phil Ochs . . . I was just the right age." She began writing songs and sent them to *Broadside*, the magazine that launched the career of Bob Dylan. By the time it published *Society's Child*, Janis was a regular on the Greenwich Village club circuit. Robert Shelton, the *New York*

Times critic, heard her and pressed a copy of the record on TV producer David Oppenheim, who was working with Leonard Bernstein on a TV special about “the rock revolution”.

By 15, Ian was on tour, her album nominated for a Grammy, her face on *Life* magazine. “The Village was a great learning ground. Cream played there the first time they came to America — I remember sitting about 10ft away from Clapton. Frank Zappa sat next to me, watching the show in silence, totally focused. You could go club-hopping in a way that I don’t think has existed before or since.” She jammed with Jimi Hendrix and remembers his “grace” and his “huge, beautiful hands” around the guitar. Janis Joplin was “very protective”. Ian was a decade younger than all of them, “but the cool thing about artists is they don’t give a shit”. Ian’s wish for adventure remains: she’d love to make a jazz album, play with Herbie Hancock; she wants to write a musical and to finish a book her father began, about teaching music in schools. “Everyone should make music. It teaches you discipline and self-confidence and how to work with others.”

Meanwhile, there are gigs to play. “I started professionally when I was 13. That’s 47 years ago. It’s astonishing that I’m still here. So when I’m whingeing about touring I think: ungrateful sod. I’ve plenty of contemporaries who can’t earn a living while I can go anywhere in the world.”