

Janis Ian: a good-humoured survivor.



# Hard left

A "star at 15 and a has-been at 17". Janis Ian's life's had endless ups and downs. By Merrell Noden.

## Society's Child: My Autobiography



Janis Ian JEREMY P. TARCHER £12.50

JANIS FINK sure was precocious. She began talking at seven months, took tests at age 11 that suggested she was a genius, played her first Greenwich Village "hoot" at 13 – getting a standing ovation on a bill that included Tom Paxton – and had her first national hit, *Society's Child*, at the ripe old age of 14. Indeed, the book opens with 15-year-old Ian – she was smart enough to have already borrowed her brother's middle name – standing alone on-stage in California, enduring chants of "Nigger lover" from a few in the audience, this their answer to *Society's Child's* plea for racial tolerance. That song seemed to bring out the worst in people: she got razor blades in the post and had strangers spit in her food. And so it would go for pretty much the rest of her now 57 years, with the pleasures of stardom tempered again and again by the cruel disappointments of life. As Ian writes in this candid autobiography, she has endured strange illnesses, betrayals

### JANIS IAN



*Society's Child*  
my autobiography

both personal and professional, and a lot of unwanted attention from a vindictive tax-man. Somehow, she survived with good humour mostly intact.

There's good material throughout, but it's hard to beat Ian's account of her childhood as a red diaper baby in the conservative '50s. "We might have been atheists, but we believed in Judaism," writes Ian, who shocked her parents the only way she could – telling them she believed in God. Her father was a high school music teacher in suburban New Jersey. Every two years he would be denied tenure (his political convictions, presumably) and the family would move, followed by their FBI tail.

This rootlessness would be tough on anyone, but those years were extra painful for Ian because she was very much the "ugly duckling girl" she wrote about in her biggest US hit, *At Seventeen*. She was short, with kinky

hair and breasts so large they made her uncomfortable: a "rat terrier with a perm", as someone so kindly put it.

She took refuge among the folkies of the Village and at Camp Webatuck, a summer retreat for the children of left-leaning families in upstate New York, where guest musicians like Pete Seeger and Richie Havens routinely visited to perform for the children, and FBI agents hid in the trees, monitoring the campers' activities.

The FBI you could mess with, but the music business was another matter. "I felt like a cornered mouse," she writes of the pressure she felt to tour while trying at the same time to write and record new material. She came down with chronic fatigue syndrome and lost virtually everything to the IRS thanks to forgeries by her accountant.

You'll admire Ian's persistence as well as her talent. As she points out in the funny autobiographical song lyrics she appends, she's also that rare person who's been legally married to both a man and a woman. Unusual as that may be, it's only a very small part of what makes Janis Ian so intriguing.