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Echoes of 1968

Janis Ian Recounts Her Renegade Teen Years

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Peter Cunninghamham

Janis Ian's memoir, *Society's Child: An Autobiography*, will be released Thursday.

All Things Considered, July 23, 2008 · Janis Ian is known for the revolutionary hit song "Society's Child," which she wrote when she was 15 years old. It was a rock song in the voice of a white teenage girl, addressing her black teenage boyfriend. And it took on a serious social theme.

Then in the 1970s, Ian wrote and recorded another very memorable song: "At Seventeen." It was an anthem for the adolescent outsider. Ian was 17 years old in 1968.

In her latest creative endeavor, Ian's memoir, *Society's Child: My Autobiography*, evokes her childhood and musical career. The book will be released Thursday.

In a conversation with NPR's Robert Siegel, Ian says getting attention for her first song, "Society's Child," was a tough way to start her musical career — "with a song that everyone hates you for."

In writing her book, Ian says she flipped through press clippings to help her remember the details of that time.

Book Excerpt

Read an excerpt from [Society's Child](#).

"I had forgotten just how volatile it was — how at [Parent Teacher Association] meetings, they would be bringing up the song and opening up the subject for discussion," Ian says. "The amount of hate mail that I got, the amount of sheer being spit at in the street ... things like that that I had conveniently misplaced in my memory, came rushing back."



Merca Oser

In 1967, Janis Ian was getting attention for her controversial song about an interracial relationship, "Society's Child."

Ian says she was inspired to write the song when she was 14 years old, during a time when "freedom was in the air" and "anything was possible" for her generation. The gay rights and women's rights movements had started, and FM radio connected young people coast to coast, she said.

Then, on a school bus in East Orange, N.J., Ian saw an interracial couple holding hands. The boy was black, the girl was white. Ian says they were oblivious to the glares directed at them.

"I started thinking about how hard that was going to be, and wondering whether their parents even knew that they were dating," she says. "And if their parents didn't know, whether anyone on the bus was going to tell on them. And it sort of started evolving in this song where I wondered whether the girl would be able to take the pressure. And in the end I thought she probably wouldn't. It probably wouldn't last. And it was too bad, but it made for a great song."



Peter Cunningham

Ian became a superstar, ultimately hanging with the likes of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan. This photo is undated.

Hear The Music

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But the song set off a maelstrom of criticism — something Ian as a teenager didn't understand.

"To me the song had the ending that the conservatives or the people who didn't believe in mixing races wanted," Ian says. "The girl and the boy didn't ride off happily into the sunset at all. She copped out and she left and she says quite plainly: 'I can't see you anymore,' and then the last line was 'I don't want to see you anymore.' She shuts him off. So I didn't understand why everybody was so bothered and making threats against me and threats against radio stations and whatnot ... I didn't understand what a button I'd pushed."

Ultimately, Ian says 1968 "was the beginning of the end."

"It might as well have been [the end of the decade], because it sort of wrapped up everything that had begun in the '60s, and I think for those of us who had been active in civil rights and been active in the Vietnam War protests, it really became a very clear indicator that we had totally underestimated the powers that be," she says.

"I think all of us thought that by the '70s, at the latest the '80s, all the world's problems would be solved and everyone would be getting along fine," Ian says. "And instead we saw that Martin Luther King [Jr.] was assassinated that year, Robert F. Kennedy died. We saw that it was going to be a lot more difficult than I think we had thought."

Excerpt: 'Society's Child'

by Janis Ian



Under Surveillance by the FBI

The FBI had developed an interest in my family shortly before I was born. One morning, my dad attended a meeting of local chicken farmers to discuss the price of eggs. Two agents picked him up as he walked home, and questioned him about possible Communist ties. A few years later, after we'd lost the farm and moved into a rented house in Lakewood, they tried to interview him again. When Dad

refused to speak with them, the FBI placed us on the "watch list."

Those were the HUAC years, when a Communist lived under every bed. We were under surveillance my entire childhood, carefully stalked and photographed by men in dark suits and shiny shoes.

On Marriage

Whap!

I looked up from the floor into the barrel of a gun. A very big gun. A .45, to be exact. Tino shook his head. "Why did you make me do that, my love? I don't like to hurt you. Why?" It was heard to answer. My ears were ringing. My jaw hurt. There was broken glass scattered all around me. After knocking me across the room, he'd flung a bottle of beer at my head. It missed me by centimeters, and shattered on the tile floor...Blood dripped from my head to the floor, staining the white grout. I tried not to look at it. I looked up at Tino instead.

He just stood there, shaking his head. Sorrow lined his eyes. Part of me detached itself from my own pain and watched the interplay of emotions across his face. Through the puffiness brought on by drink, I could see that he pitied me for the stupidity and willfulness that had led me to challenge him.

I moved warily, like an animal backed up against a wall, picking up small pieces of glass and collecting them in my open shirt. He'd torn the buttons off when he grabbed me, pulling me closer to backhand me across the face. I'd flown clear across the kitchen and into the pantry beyond, landing in a heap.

Are you trying to kill me? I whispered, half afraid it was true... At some point, I became serene, passing from a state of complete terror into a sea of calm. I was going to die, and that was the end of that. There was nothing I could do about it now.

Being Gay

I'd known I was attracted to women since fourth grade. I'd been reading something by Freud that my parents had on their bookshelves, and it set me to thinking about my homeroom teacher. Sitting on a knoll watching her at recess, I thought *What I'm feeling*

isn't some little girl thing. It's real. My next thought was *Better not tell Mom. She'll think it's just a phase...* My classmates were dating, making out, talking about boyfriends and dreaming of marriage. I was dreaming of saving Joan Baez from drowning, of her eternal gratitude as she kissed me chastely on the lips and adopted me into her life. I was a late starter; my sexual fantasies ended at the neck. But they were always about women.

The Dentist at Age 11

So when I met the dentist, there was already a fair amount of female visible on me.

One morning, after he put me under, he told me we were going to play a game, something he called 'the tickle game.' He'd tickle me somewhere, and if it felt good, I should smile. The part of me in the chair thought that sounded okay, kind of like something I'd do with Eric. So he tickled my arm, and I giggled. Then he tickled my neck, and I giggled again. Then he tickled my thigh, and I stopped giggling.

From then on, every time I went, he'd play the tickle game. And as his hands moved higher, and my body began to respond, he became more excited. Finally, after the third or fourth time, he touched me and then went to the little bathroom connected to the treatment room...There was silence, then the toilet flushed, the sink turned on, and eventually he came out, wiping his hands. It took me months to figure out what he was doing in there. Yuck. But I couldn't tell anyone. I really couldn't. First, because every time he put me under, he'd remind me that if I told, my parents would be ashamed of me. I'd be sent away because I'd been bad. I wouldn't be allowed to see my brother again.

Second, because *I* was ashamed. I couldn't imagine anything more humiliating than my parents finding out.

Society's Child

Sitting on a bus one day, I saw a couple holding hands. They were just a little older than me; he was black, she was white. The occupants of the bus moved away from them, but they seemed oblivious as they smiled and whispered to each other. I started wondering what the outcome of their relationship would be, and began writing 'Society's

Child.' It took a while to complete, because I wasn't sure how I wanted it to end. I was excited when I came up with the refrain:

I can't see you any more, baby/Can't see you any more

And when I finally resolved it to my satisfaction at the end:

No, I don't want to see you any more, baby

That solved the hardest part, because I didn't want the breakup of their relationship to be just society's fault. I wanted the girl to take some responsibility for it, too. I saw that last 'baby' as an ironic comment on her cowardice. Frances Stern, my school guidance counselor, helped me enormously. She told the administration I needed heavy counseling, then let me sit outside her office and write instead of attending classes. I wrote most of 'Society's Child' like that, holed up in an uncomfortable chair trying to ignore the bell that signaled the start of the next period.

David Geffen and "The Graduate"

I signed with William Morris, a huge booking agency, and started getting offers to write film scores. My agents, David Geffen and Hal Ray, were busy going through them. We had a meeting one day where they presented me with a script for something called "The Graduate," and advised me to pass. One of them said, *"It's going to be directed by Mike Nichols, who is good, but as a director of a major motion picture he's pretty much untried. It stars some short, big-nosed unknown kid with a funny name and bad hair. The story line is silly – Up With People type graduates from college, has an affair with his mother's close friend and neighbor, falls in love with the neighbor's daughter, then runs away with her after breaking into the church where her wedding's being held. Oh, and he locks everyone else inside the church with a big cross, while he and the chick make their escape by bus. Ridiculous."*

Janis Joplin

My album got nominated for a Grammy, and *Life* magazine decided to profile me...We went to California, where The Byrds opened for me and I played to sold out houses. I did the Berkeley Folk Festival with Big Brother and the Holding Company and Janis Joplin became a

good friend. She was seven or eight years older than me, but it didn't matter. We both had bad skin. We both felt overweight. We were both outsiders. The only difference is that she'd slept with more people than I had. We went to a party at Peter Tork's house one night, where everyone was wearing bright silk Indian clothing and crashing on a floor filled with pillows and hashish pipes. There were dozens of naked people lolling around; I shrugged it off, trying to look cool. Joplin took me to another party and introduced me to Olive Watson, granddaughter of IBM's founder. Olive in turn made us matching suede pants, and at the next party, I watched as a heroin dealer went around the room, giving free shots to all and sundry. When Janis' turn came, she looked up at me and rasped, 'Kid, time for you to go home.' As I turned at the door to tell her goodbye, the shot was sliding through her brown suede pants and into her thigh.

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