

## **Excerpts from *Society's Child - My Autobiography* by Janis Ian**

*Nigger lover! Nigger lover! Nigger lover!*

I was standing alone on a stage in Encino, California, halfway through the first verse of my song "Society's Child."

*Come to my door, baby  
Face is clean and shining black as night  
My mama went to answer  
You know that you looked so fine  
Now, I could understand the tears and the shame  
She called you "Boy" instead of your name*

The problem had begun with a lone woman screaming out the words *Nigger lover!* Then the people sitting around her had joined in, chanting as though they were at a religious service. They were even chanting in time to the song. "*Nigger lover! Nigger lover! beat beat beat beat Nigger lover! Nigger lover! beat beat beat beat.*" It was difficult to concentrate on keeping my own time.

The chant degenerated into yelling, twenty or thirty people in the sold-out concert hall. I peered to the left, where the sound came from, and saw some of them beginning to rise. They were shaking their fists in the air as the rest of the audience looked on in stunned silence.

I was having a hit record.

I was singing for people who wanted me dead.

I was fifteen years old.

I felt like crying, but you can't sing and cry at the same time, so I tried to keep going. My fingers were getting clumsy; it felt like I was trying to play the guitar with gloves on. My voice was starting to tremble, and I was losing control of my pitch. More of the crowd began yelling, whether for me or against me, I didn't know. It was hard to hear myself over the noise.

I looked into the house again, walking out of the spotlight to avoid its glare. There, in the center left, dozens of audience members were shaking their fists and screaming at me. One woman was bouncing up and down in a frenzy, shrieking the epithet so loudly that she was bright red in the face. A man, dressed nicely in a suit and tie, was making obscene gestures and shouting something about monkeys. I was trying to block out the crowd's chant and get through the song, but all I could hear was the yelling.

I had no idea what to do. I'd been on a concert stage perhaps a dozen times in my life to date. If this were a club, the bouncer would make short work of the troublemakers, but no one seemed to be doing anything. I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. What was wrong with these people? It was just a song, not a combat invitation!

I finally stopped playing and started crying. Not wanting the audience to see me break down, I set my prized guitar on the floor and tried to calmly walk off stage. As soon as I hit the wings, I went running for the ladies' room. I could hear booing and hissing as I left, along with a few cheers. I wondered which group was doing the booing, and which was applauding. The walls blurred as I bent my head over the sink and began to cry in earnest.

I'd written the song a year before, when we were still living in East Orange, New Jersey. It was a very mixed neighborhood - well, actually, it wasn't that mixed. It was almost all Negro; I was one of seven white girls in my whole school. So I'd seen the problem from both sides. My black friends' parents didn't want them dating whites. My white friends' parents didn't want them dating blacks.

The whole thing seemed pretty stupid to me, so I wrote about it to clear out my system. I never thought of it as a song about an interracial love affair gone bad. I just thought of it as a good song. Now here I was, a year later, with a single that was banned from virtually every radio station in the country, and a career that was turning into a war zone.

People got crazy. A radio station in Atlanta dared to put "Society's Child" in rotation, and someone burned the station down. Strangers walked up to me in restaurants and spit in my food. Sometimes, when

I tried to walk onstage from the audience, a person would deliberately put their foot out to trip me. The mail I got spanned the gap between heaven and hell; one letter would thank me for bravely speaking out, the next would have razor blades taped to the envelope so I'd shred my fingers opening it.

The irony of it all was, I wasn't especially brave. At least, I didn't think so. The song was just in keeping with the times, and the times were volatile indeed.

A few minutes after I'd begun to weep, the concert promoter came rushing in. "Why did you leave?!" he cried. "What on earth is wrong? You've got to go back out there!" Now, in retrospect, I can see that he was scared, too. The thought of a thousand people demanding their money back must have been horrifying to him.

I splashed water on my reddened nose, dried my face, then turned to look at him. The tears welled up again when I saw pity in his eyes.

"They were chanting '*Nigger lover!*' at me. I couldn't hear myself. I didn't know what else to do. They were starting to move toward the stage. So I left." It all sounded pretty logical when I said it, now that the threat was in the past.

The promoter wrung his hands. "Well, you've got to go back, Janis. You've *got* to. We have a thousand people who paid good money to attend this show, and you're talking about a few troublemakers bothering you enough to stop a performance? You can't do that. You've got to go back and finish the show!"

I was appalled, and it showed in my face. Just the thought of going back on stage with those people still in the audience was enough to put me in a state of panic.

"I can't go back there. I *can't*. What if they start throwing things? What if somebody takes a shot at me?"

There. I'd finally said it, the secret dread I hadn't admitted to anyone. *What if someone takes a shot at me? What if someone really does try to kill me?* I would never have believed a simple song could provoke

such violence, but I believed it now. Oh, yeah, you bet I believed it. And I truly did not want to die. Onstage or off.

I wasn't exaggerating my fear. Based on the hate mail I was getting from the Southern states, my manager and agents had decided not to book me within fifty miles of the Mason-Dixon line. It wasn't just me, either. No one was exempt; the record company and everyone else who worked with me was in trouble over this record. Even Shadow Morton, my producer, was taken aback by the virulence. He'd been producing the Shangri-Las, and the only mail they got was requests for autographed photos and marriage proposals. Now he was getting postcards with his photo in the center of a bull's-eye. Everyone, from the record company secretaries to my manager, was being attacked.

Yet stubbornly, Verve Forecast president Jerry Schoenbaum kept re-releasing it, kept publicizing it, kept demanding that radio play the song. It helped that the reviews were astounding. It helped that the most respected radio tip sheet of the day said, *Magnificently done, but will probably never see the light of day. Too bad.* It helped that *The New York Times* gave me rave reviews. But nothing anyone wrote changed the death threats that came regularly, with my name on the envelope. And no one had any idea of what to do about it; this was all new to my team.

When we cut the single, I didn't have anything resembling a "team." I had myself, Shadow, and the attorney who'd introduced us. Shadow had listened to the dozen or so songs I'd finished, picked one, and a few weeks later I was in the studio for my first recording session. I remember Shadow, myself, and a friend talking on a busy side street during a break. Shadow turned to me and said very seriously, "Janis, if you'll change just one word in the song - just one word - I can guarantee you a number one record. Just change 'black' to anything else. It's your decision."

I thought about it for around two seconds, then our friend looked at me and said, "You whore now, you'll whore forever." Strong words for a fifteen-year-old to hear, but they made sense. To my way of thinking, I had nothing to lose. I was getting to make a record! How cool was that?

And coming from the folk tradition, I couldn't see telling new friends like Dave Van Ronk or Odetta that I'd weaseled out, just to get a hit. After all, in my world a hit record was kind of embarrassing. It meant you'd sold out. Joan Baez didn't have hit records. Peter LaFarge didn't have hit records.

But Bob Dylan did, and he was my hero. Still, he had them on his own terms, and that was what I intended to do as well. The word stayed.

And now, look where it had gotten me. Here I was, standing in a bathroom, blowing my reddened nose and arguing with a promoter over whether my show should be canceled. So much for sticking to your principles.

My hands were still shaking, though the adrenaline rush was dying down. I tried to read his mind. *He probably thinks I'm behaving like a kid, a spoiled kid. Like an amateur. I don't care! Right now, I am an amateur.*

The promoter sat on the edge of a sink, paused, then said, "It would be terrible if a small segment of the audience ruined it for everyone else.... You know, those people who were yelling paid perfectly good money for their tickets, just so they could come here and try to scare you off the stage. Are you going to stand for that?"

I nodded miserably. Yes, I was going to stand for that. Of course I was going to stand for it. Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney had been found dead in Mississippi, killed just for helping people register to vote. All I'd done was write a song, make a three-minute record, and those same people wanted me dead. The stakes were pretty high.

He sighed. "You've got to go back, Janis. You've got to, because if you don't, they win. And you can't let them win. What about the next person they take on like this? You're no coward. I know you're not a coward. And I know that you know they'll win, if you don't go back out there."

Oh, no. He'd hit on the one thing that would sway me. Hadn't my parents raised me to be a hero? Hadn't I grown up on stories of Judah Maccabee, how he and his brothers and a small band of Jews had

fought off mighty Rome for four full years? Hadn't my brother and I played Superman until I half believed I could fly? In my family, in my culture, heroism was expected. Those people who named names before the House Committee on Un-American Activities were traitors, cowards. My grandparents spit after saying their names. I couldn't stand the thought that I might be a coward - I just couldn't stand it.

Then a completely different idea struck. *I don't want to disappoint the real fans out there. And there must be real fans out there, somewhere!*

I thought about all the times I'd heard other performers say, "The show must go on." If there was one cardinal rule in show business, that was it. The only valid excuses were hospitalization or your own death; otherwise, the show went on. That was tradition. That was the lineage I'd adopted.

Shortly before cutting "Society's Child," when I was still fourteen, I'd run into Ellie Greenwich up at Shadow's office. I was tongue-tied; I loved her songwriting, thought "Da Doo Ron Ron" was brilliant, and couldn't think of a thing to say. Shadow rescued me, telling her I was also a songwriter and performer. With a stern look, she'd turned to me and said, "Kid, this business is about hard work, and don't you ever forget it. It's about getting your period, having cramps that are killing you, then walking onstage to do the show anyhow - and never letting the crowd know it. If you don't have the guts for that, don't even start."

Yep, that was my lineage now, like it or not. I wiped my eyes with a paper towel, then looked down at the floor, hoping I wouldn't start crying again. The promoter awkwardly patted my shoulder and said, "Well?"

"Well..." I lifted my head to meet his eyes, then took a deep breath.

"Well, if I die tonight, you know, if something goes wrong, just tell my folks and my brother I love them." It seemed like the brave thing to say, even though what I really wanted to tell him was, *I'm not a coward, I'm just scared, and I want to go home right now and hide under the bed.*

He walked me to the wings. The houselights had been turned up to half while the crew waited to find out what came next. The lights went out, and a spotlight drifted toward the side of the stage where I stood, taking deep breaths and blanking my mind to everything but the show. I squared my shoulders and walked back to center stage, picked up my guitar, adjusted the microphone, and began singing "Society's Child" again from the top.

At first, there were a few more shouts, but I ignored them and kept going. I closed my eyes to help myself concentrate, tuning out the noise, tuning in to the words and the music. And oddly enough, as I continued to ignore the shouting, the audience members took matters into their own hands. A few rose and walked over to the troublemakers, telling them to shut up. An usher came down the aisle and shone his flashlight in their faces, threatening to eject them bodily if they continued.

Slowly, the clique of people who'd been disrupting things began leaving the theater. As they rose and filed into the aisles, I stopped singing, but I kept playing the guitar chords, tapping my foot to the beat. My eyes were wide open and my head was high as I watched them go. I wanted to let them know I was no longer afraid. When the theater doors closed behind the last of them, I began the final verse.

*One of these days I'm gonna stop my listening  
Gonna raise my head up high  
One of these days I'm gonna  
raise up my glistening wings and fly*

As I got to the words "I'm gonna raise up my glistening wings and fly," there was a roar from the crowd, and the entire room stood up. Someone began clapping; the rest of the room joined in, and I grinned like a fool as I strummed the final chords. I had a standing ovation, even before I'd finished the song.

My chaperone and I left the theater quietly, me hiding on the floor of the backseat to avoid the picket line and any further disruptions. It had been funny earlier in the day, rolling up to the theater and seeing signs with *Nigger lover go home!* and *No race mixing allowed here!*, but it wasn't so funny now.

I never ate before a show, and I'd spent a lot more energy than usual, so we stopped at a roadside coffee shop about half an hour out of town for a quick bite. This was farm country, and the counter was full of seated men wearing hard-worn jeans and neatly buttoned shirts, the dust of the fields still on their soles. In my bright hippie clothing, dangling earrings, and beads, I attracted a fair amount of attention any time I left a major city. Usually there wasn't big trouble, just a few snide remarks like *Is that a girl or a boy?* or *Who let the animals out of the zoo?* But I'd just been through an awful experience, and I tensed as they turned to look at me.

The waitress grinned as we ordered, trying not to laugh. I must have looked like something she'd seen on television, or in magazines with articles on the "new generation." After she took our orders, the place settled down, but I noticed one older man staring at me out of the corner of his eye. Now, in my fifties, I realize he wasn't so very old at all, but back then he seemed ancient.

*Maybe he saw me on TV, and he's just staring because he's never seen a famous person this close before.* I tried to tell myself that, but alarm bells were going off in my head.

He kept gawking, and it became irritating. It's hard to relax when someone actually turns around on their counter stool and stares at you without pretense, occasionally whispering something to the person next to them and laughing. I felt like a zoo animal.

By now our food had arrived, but mine tasted like sawdust. It seemed like the entire diner was lining up against me, and I braced myself for the worst. I wondered if he'd come over and spit in my plate, or just take me out back and lynch me, then bury me in a cornfield somewhere.

*I just bet he was one of that clique calling me a nigger lover. Bastard.* I clenched my jaw. Dinner was ruined. The entire day was ruined. The more I thought about it, picking at my food, the madder I got. Scared as I was, I was also getting really angry.



As I pushed the plate away, he rose and started to walk toward us. Uh-oh, here it comes. I could feel my muscles tightening. My chaperone, blissfully unaware, kept her eyes on her cheeseburger and her mouth wrapped around the fries. I felt totally alone.

He came to our table, paused, stuck his hands in his pockets, and said, "Hey."

I looked up with no smile and said, "Hey back at you." He smiled broadly, and suddenly he didn't look so old. Or so mean.

"Just wanted to say, I was at your show tonight. Good job. Thanks."

My confusion must have shown on my face. It took a minute for me to register that he was actually complimenting me, not hawking a gob of saliva onto my food. I could feel myself flushing with embarrassment.

"Uh, thanks for the compliment.... It was a rough show." I tried a tentative smile, but my face wasn't working right yet.

"Yeah, it was rough, but you handled it. You showed 'em but good. Nice job, kid." And with that, he turned and walked away.

As we left the diner, my chaperone looked at me curiously and said, "What on earth was that about?" She had no idea; while I was dealing with the crowd, she'd been up in the office, dealing with the money.

I shrugged, then said, "It's nothing. Just that sometimes, you can't judge on first impressions."

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