

Censors and the 'New Reality'

By ROBERT SHELTON

AFOLK-ROCK disk issued earlier this month which spotlights a shining new singing and song-writing talent, also throws some rays of light into the shadowy corners of censorship in the pop-music field which has been causing some controversy.

The newcomer is Janis Ian, a 15-year-old, precocious singer-composer who has written several beautiful, bold songs. But none of her works so far seems more destined to create controversy than her first single, *Society's Child* (Verve-Folkways). In her song, Miss Ian faces head on the touchy question of interracial dating. The white girl in the song tells her Negro boyfriend that the disapproval of her parents and society of their relationship is too great to bear. The haunting mournful final line keens: "I can't see you anymore."

Musical Conscience

The past year has seen many folk musicians such as Miss Ian attempting to upgrade pop-folk music with meaningful lyric-content. This fusion — often called folk-rock—has been enthusiastically received by the nation's disk-jockey's. But many radio stations have been playing censor by not playing controversial records.

Bob Dylan's song of 1962 which was critical of the John Birch Society caused some of the first censorship problems.

Nearly a year ago there was the P. F. Sloan song, "Eve of Destruction," a "message" song which reportedly was kept off many juke-boxes and radio stations for its implicit stand against America's role in the Vietnamese war.

There have been further suspected examples of censorship of songs with bold, frank sexual allusions which can be found in popular music as old as the form itself. But these are part of the "new reality" of pop music which also includes criticism of religion, political apostasy, and references to the use of drugs.

Miss Ian's disk is meeting the usual series of hurdles. Larry Martire, an associate of the record's producer George (Shadow) Morton, said, "I've never had so much trouble promoting a record in my career." The fate of "Society's Child" was hinted at in a cynical capsule review of the disk in the Sept. 6 issue of the *Tip Sheet* for disk jockeys which is released by Ted Randal Enterprises of Hollywood. It said: "Magnificently done, but will probably never see the light of day. Too bad."

The battle for the "new reality" and its free expression has been joined, at least in print. Richard Goldstein, writing in *The Village Voice* last month, proposed that: "Rock 'n' roll is the medium in which some of our best young poets have chosen to express themselves. They are victimized today by as vicious

and encompassing a system of censorship as ever hindered the publication of a novel or the screening of a film. It is fashionable enough to protest censorship in printed literature, theater, or even film. It is becoming increasingly difficult for television sponsors to censor material. But radio disk-jockey's often act as a legion of decency, and they do so without any objection from their audience."

Hypocrisy

Even if "Society's Child" should become a national hit it will have encountered as much resistance as any recording of recent years. After Mr. Morton cut the disk last June, he made the rounds of record-makers, only to run into doubt and open hostility to the song. Of the four major record companies that initially turned it down two deal largely with Negro disk-jockeys and record-buyers.

"The biggest insult was that I had to try to convince people who are fighting for equal rights to release this recording," said Mr. Morton.

There have been outright refusals to play "Society's Child" by radio men in Chicago, Nashville, Cleveland and other localities. The record was played here early in its first two weeks on WBAI-FM and WOR-FM, but the major pop stations in New York were taking a "wait and see attitude."

Spokesmen for WMCA and WABC, two of the most powerful taste-making stations

locally and in the nation, were waiting to confirm popularity of the recording. Which comes first, air-play or popularity?

Both Peter Strauss of WMCA and Rick Sklar of WABC confirmed that, in the past, "offensiveness to some listeners" had led to censorship of some objectionable recordings, such as "They're Coming to Take Me Away," a record that lampooned mental illness.

But both denied that social criticism would constitute a basis for censorship. "Controversy has never bothered us. We thrive on it," said Mr. Strauss. "We won't keep something off the air because it's controversial," echoed Mr. Sklar.

Whether "Society's Child" has been suppressed (nationally or regionally) because of its controversial message must be evaluated later. If the song becomes a hit because it is controversial, this will provide another interesting aspect of the sociology of our new pop music.

In any case, the disk has cast down a challenge to the recording, broadcasting and juke-box industries. "Society's Child" marks a new boldness in popular music while also proclaiming the radiant new talent, Janis Ian. Those who care about the upgrading of popular music and its freedom of expression will watch closely both Miss Ian's song and the issue of censorship it has so forthrightly raised.

Janis Ian's first single, "Society's Child," has challenged more than the recording industry's censorship.

A white girl pressured to terminate a friendship with a Negro boy sings: "I can't see you anymore."

Bob Greene

