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Janis Ian

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Album Reviews



Janis Ian

Between The Lines

RS: **NOT RATED**

AVERAGE USER RATING: ★★☆☆☆

1986

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Janis Ian's second Columbia album is elegiac in mood, its 11 tunes composing a romantically introspective self-portrait. Ian has forged an appealing melodic style based on the folk simplicity of Don McLean and early Bob Dylan and added to it some of the sweetness of MOR pop. Some of her tunes could be covered by Roberta Flack or even Frank Sinatra. Vocally, Ian sounds more confident and relaxed than on her Columbia debut, *Stars*. Her singing is consistently strong and plaintive, reminiscent in timbre of Melanie's, though surer in pitch and more emotively reticent.

The finest songs on *Between the Lines* are painfully autobiographical confessions of loneliness, insecurity and the perils of dependent relationships. Ian asserts feminine vulnerability so nakedly that the album should appeal especially to white, middle-class high-school girls and college-age women who maintain a mid-Sixties idealism about sex. Sexual and romantic frustration provides the subject for the album's two finest songs, "At Seventeen" and "Water Colors." The first, a delicate samba, confronts adolescent misery:

I learned the truth at 17

That love was meant for beauty queens....

And those of us with ravaged faces

Lacking in the social graces

Desperately remained at home

Inventing lovers on the 'phone*

"Water Colors" recalls a lover's quarrel in language that suggests a conflict between trust and independence:

I said 'Do you wish me dead?'

Lip service to books you've read

Articles on how to bed a bird in flight

You called it love

I called it greed

You say 'You take what you want'

I said 'You get what you need'*

These songs of experience are far more credible than those that strut a more general cynicism—"When the Party's Over" and "Between the Lines"—or those that

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formalize longing as soap-opera pageantry—"In the Winter," "Tea & Sympathy." Yet these too have the virtues of careful craft, melodic strength and earnestness of interpretation. On the album's two most commercial (though not the best) songs, Ian effectively achieves a middle ground. "From Me to You" works as a terse update of Dylan's "It's Alright Ma," and "Light a Light," a melodious love song, has one flaw, the use of syntactical inversion for rhetorical effect ("Now am I humble, who once was proud/Now am I silent, who once was loud" ... etc.). Ian is too prone to leaning on such devices, which though they have genuine roots in folk, pop and concert literature, seem affected in comparison to her skillful use of naturalistic diction.

Brooks Arthur's understated production complements the tunes and singing immeasurably. Ian's soft, acoustically based songs are buoyed but not inflated by atmospheric instrumentation (some of which she has arranged herself), so that her emotional intensity communicates from the most positive stance possible — one of restraint. Particularly in "Water Colors," her most poignant creation to date, Janis Ian shows a potential for excellence.

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STEPHEN HOLDEN

(Posted: May 22, 1975)



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- ▶ When The Party's Over
- ▶ At Seventeen
- ▶ From Me To You
- ▶ Bright Lights And Promises
- ▶ In The Winter
- ▶ Water Colors
- ▶ Between The Lines
- ▶ The Come On
- ▶ Light A Light
- ▶ Tea & Sympathy
- ▶ Lover's Lullaby

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