

Janis Ian
Breaking Silence
Originally released: 1992
Morgan Creek Music Goup

Seeing Janis Ian on The Tonight Show recently, sitting next to a blond hunk who was forcibly titillating the audience and an African-American hunk who was simultaneously degrading and promoting his new game show, I thought: How rare is a truly bare heart. Singing first her 1976 hit "At Seventeen" – one of the most brutal songs ever written – and then a lyrical cut from her new album about a woman survivor of a concentration camp, Ian looked, as she always did, at once paralyzingly shy and like a gun about to go off.

Which is what I always loved about her. Ian gave me the same frisson at 17 that Polly Harvey gives me now; bursting through all of Ian's technical accomplishments was a great love of extremes: thunderous highs, devastating lows, a continual state of ravishing or being ravished. On Breaking Silence, her first album in 11 years, Ian is as accomplished a singer/songwriter as she ever was, but she handles the highs and lows with the tremendous care of a survivor. Breaking Silence is actually a somewhat quiet, haunted work in which the displays of raw musical power are far fewer than the slow, sure, frequently lovely glides of melody and memory in which a happy ending can often be discerned. Love holds. Damaged lives are repaired.

But the most powerful work on this album moves past recovery to more ambivalent zones of heat, light and fury. Ian may have vanquished her demons, but she has fortunately retained her witchiness. In the strong, eerie "All Roads to the River," she sings, "I am master and slave... I am every mother's nightmare"; in both "This House" and "Breaking Silence," dream houses burn to the ground; in "His Hands," a battering relationship is presented with all its disturbing seductiveness. Lullabies like "Through the Years" and exuberant anthems like "This Train Still Runs" are set off by the barbed wire of "This House" and "Tattoo." Safety and horror coexist as they do, of course, in life.

Still, I can't quite reconcile the speaker who angrily challenges you to "come into this wonderland of wounds that will not heal" with the one who sweetly wonders about the lonely, "Didn't anybody love them like you love me?" The Janis Ian I remember didn't have to ask. Breaking Silence could as easily have been titled Burning Down the House; it is stronger the closer it gets to the flames. (RS 665)

STACEY D'ERASMO

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