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interview

Janis Ian, 1993

**At 42: Lesbian Legend Janis Ian Comes Out**

By Owen Keehnen

Janis Ian burst onto the music scene in 1965 when, at the age of fourteen, she wrote and recorded "Society's Child," a controversial song about an interracial teen couple and the social pressure to end their relationship. After a couple of years she dropped out of the limelight and focused on writing poetry and more songs. In 1971 her career resumed when her gorgeous song "Jesse" became a hit for Roberta Flack. The following year she began recording again and in 1975 she hit gold with the fragile anthem "At 17." The album *Between the Lines* went to Number 1 and she received two Grammy Awards, including Best Pop Female Vocalist. Ms. Ian recorded five more albums and then in 1982 abandoned her lucrative Columbia Records contract.

For the next couple of years she unwound from eleven solid years of touring and recording with dance lessons and theater lessons from Stella Adler. Then in the mid-1980s everything fell apart. She ended an abusive six-year marriage, endured emergency intestinal surgery, suffered a family loss, and lost everything in an IRS nightmare of gross financial business mismanagement. In 1988 she moved to Nashville. There she worked to establish herself as a premiere songwriter. Since then such diverse artists as Kathy Mattea, Bette Midler, Nanci Griffith, and Amy Grant have recorded her works.

Janis Ian has been out of the closet to her family and within the industry for years. But this year [1993] she has chosen to come out publicly as a lesbian amidst the publicity of *Breaking Silence*, her first album in twelve years. Much of the reason for the album's delay was that the music industry considered Janis Ian "unbankable." Finally in frustration, she was forced to mortgage her house to record *Breaking Silence*. The album is receiving wonderful reviews nationwide. Her lyrics pull no punches. The issues covered in this collection include incest, abuse, and the Holocaust. It is an exceptional work by an artist at the top of her game, perhaps because for the very first time Janis Ian doesn't have to compromise the content of her work to please and placate record executives.

Today Janis Ian still lives in Nashville with her partner of four years and two dogs. I recently talked with her about coming out, coming back, and a lifetime love affair with the poetry of her music.

**Keehnen:** First off, I'd like to extend multi-leveled congratulations

on your fantastic new album and also on your coming out. I've read you were out with your family and within the industry. What made now the right time to come out publicly?

**Ian:** Oh, thanks. It's kind of weird to be congratulated about coming out. Actually we were going to try and do this five years ago when we started to try to get funding for the record, but we couldn't find any. I talked to the people from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and they felt pretty strongly that I should wait until I could do a decent amount of publicity around it, otherwise it would be wasted. That was a lot of it.

**Keehnen:** I've read that one of the decisive reasons for you was the alarming rate of suicide among lesbian and gay teens.

**Ian:** The statistics are just awful! There are an awful lot of people coming out and that's really great, but there aren't a lot who had a song like "At 17." I know by the letters we're getting from gay kids that the fact that I wrote "At 17" and I'm gay now puts a whole different slant on it, like now they have their own anthem too.

**Keehnen:** Lately you've been very open about your lesbianism but on your recent *Tonight Show* appearance with Jay Leno the topic never came up. Did you sense he was uncomfortable, was it by agreement, or did it just not happen in the time available?

**Ian:** That was a decision we all made. I had literally two minutes. We talked about it with them. They were quite open to whatever I wanted to do, but given that I'd just been on CNN and *Entertainment News* and about 500 other things talking about being gay, I just decided that in two minutes I didn't want to go into it. I felt like that was slighting the issue. It was a tough call, but in the end I decided I would rather perform "Tattoo."

**Keehnen:** That's such a potent song. *Breaking Silence* has been getting great reviews all over the place--in *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, etc. Did you know it was that good when you finished it?

**Ian:** We've been getting great reviews, but I still don't believe it. I only hear what's wrong with it. I knew the songs were really good, and I knew the players were really good, and I knew we worked really hard. Good is such a relative thing these days, good and a nickel will get you a ride on the Staten Island Ferry. But I am delighted by the response.

**Keehnen:** You cover so many issues on this album. "His Hands" is about abuse; "Guess You Had To Be There" is about failed idealism; "Tattoo" is about the feelings of a Holocaust survivor; the title song--"Breaking Silence"--is about incest. Has there ever been an issue that you've consciously shied away from for one reason or another?

**Ian:** I've never shied away from an issue. There are still issues I really want to write about--like being gay. I'd love to write the quintessential song about that, but it hasn't happened. "Breaking Silence" is a good example. I've wanted to write about incest for a long time and I finally got it right. "Tattoo" is something I've wanted to write about since I was a girl.

**Keehnen:** What's your favorite song on the album?

**Ian:** "Ride Me Like a Wave."

**Keehnen:** That's a wonderfully sensual song without being gender specific. Do you perceive your music becoming more lesbian-themed in the future, or do you intend to keep it more universal?

**Ian:** I'd rather stay universal. I've been gay. It's not a sudden discovery for me that's suddenly going to be all over my work. For the kind of writer I am, unless it's a special song like "Tattoo," where I have a specific point to make, I'd rather stay universal. The great love songs--I'm talking Johnny Mercer, "Moon River," stuff like that--could be sung to anyone. That's important to me. I don't want to close any doors.

**Keehnen:** As your first album in twelve years, how do you think this work differs from the Janis Ian of the Columbia Records years?

**Ian:** There're no boring songs on it. I had a long time to figure out these songs. The Columbia stuff, particularly after *Between the Lines*, was an album a year for a long time. That's a lot of records and a lot of songs.

**Keehnen:** It seems like it would be a phenomenal amount of artistic pressure.

**Ian:** Yeah. No matter how hard you try, because you're not home you can't help but be insulated. At that point it becomes real hard to write from any kind of experience because you have no contact. It's sort of like being a gay person and not knowing anyone else who's gay. How do you go about being a gay person without anyone to have a dialogue with, without anyone to bounce things off of, without any examples other than yourself? It's so insular and limiting that it becomes real unhealthy after a while.

**Keehnen:** Then, artistically it would be nothing but a rehashing of old material.

**Ian:** Exactly. Cannibalizing.

**Keehnen:** You mortgaged your home to finance the recording of *Breaking Silence*. Weren't you terrified?

**Ian:** I'm still terrified. I haven't paid the mortgage back. I'll remain terrified till that damn note gets paid.

**Keehnen:** You've had some extremely rough times in the past few years. What kept you going through it all?

**Ian:** Blind faith and stupid optimism. If I look right now at where I am and where I was, it seems like it gets to the point where you say either I keep going or I go under. At that point, life becomes very simple. Again, to draw a bad analogy, it's like when a lot of people come out, it's because they are in a relationship that becomes more important to them than their own safety. At that point you're dealing with something much bigger than yourself. At that point day-to-day is very simple. I'm in love with somebody and I can't take him or her home for Christmas--what am I going to do? That's simple. If you reduce life to that, to "I have no money, I have no prospects, I have two guitars," life becomes very simple. In a way, it was good.

**Keehnen:** Almost like a rebirth.

**Ian:** It feels a lot like that. I never thought I'd get the chance to record again, so all of that is an extra.

**Keehnen:** Something about your career that amazes me is that you've never recorded a song that you didn't either write or co-write. Do the lyrics have to be your own in order for you to feel them?

**Ian:** I don't know if it's that. It started out that way, and it just happened. You've got to remember, of the songs on any album there's probably another 50 or 60 that didn't go on the album. If someone came to me tomorrow with a song that had the power and commercial appeal of "At 17," I would do it. But those songs rarely come along.

**Keehnen:** Do you have a personal heroine?

**Ian:** Stella Adler.

**Keehnen:** What message would you hope that the body of your work conveys?

**Ian:** Take no bullshit! An audience can smell that. I think a lot of my work says, "Accept nothing less than what you're worth." People deserve the truth and integrity, and they shouldn't forget that.

**Keehnen:** Thanks, Janis, and all the best with *Breaking Silence*.

**Ian:** Thanks to you, Owen.

### **About Owen Keehnen**

**Owen Keehnen** has worked as a journalist, book reviewer, and interviewer for a number of years. Currently, the Chicago based author is completing a trilogy of interview books on gay XXX stars, finishing a horror novel, and supporting himself as a massage therapist. He is also launching a website which celebrates independent horror films, [www.racksandrazors.com](http://www.racksandrazors.com).

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