

arts

By Susan McMillan

It was 1999 when I first met Janis Ian. The Alaskan nights were getting long and cold. It was an intimate concert in a rustic bar with a disruptive sound system. I went to the show because, honestly, there's not much to do in Fairbanks as winter approaches.

I remembered the singer from her teen-angst hit, "At Seventeen." I expected a folk singer strumming old tunes. Instead, I met an artist who is bold, outspoken, talented, and has been that way for 50 years. Long before Melissa, long before the Indigo Girls, long before k.d. lang, this gifted kid taught herself to play piano and guitar and stormed the music industry at the age of fifteen. She was featured in *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* and appeared on the *Tonight Show*. She received death threats for her controversial hit song, "Society's Child," and by seventeen, she'd had a breakdown, and she was called a "washed-up-has-been."

Janis Ian has lived her life with an intensity to be admired, with several significant firsts. She was one of the first to be involuntarily 'outed,' back in 1976 with Elton John and David Bowie. She headlined the first NGLTF AIDS benefit in New York. She was the first woman to receive five Grammy nominations in one year. She was the first musical guest on *Saturday Night Live*. She is the first to document the making of a CD on her website.

Ian has been called too old, too young, and too gay. Labels notwithstanding, she has nine Grammy nominations, two Grammys, and is in the Grammy Hall of Fame. She has awards in pop, folk, jazz, and children's music and has recorded duets with country greats Willy Nelson and Dolly Parton. No wonder it's a hunt to find her CDs in the racks. Her music is easy to listen to but hard to label.

Last month, Ms. Ian released her eighteenth studio album, *Billie's Bones*, six months on the tail of a live double CD, *Janis Ian Live: Working Without A Net*. Here are two more collections, both diverse and intriguing, to add to her astonishing legacy.

On *Working Without A Net*, you hear the breadth and depth of Janis Ian's musical catalog. She is an accomplished guitarist, not afraid to wander the stage to perform a big solo. She jokingly admits she has spent years building a reputation on depression, but her work is clever, funny, and moving. In "Boots Like Emmy Lou's" she humorously looks at life as a country singer. The terrifically inspiring "Days Like These" reveals the hope Janis mustered on the day the IRS took her last dollars. "Ride Me Like A Wave" is as sensual as a song can legally be.

Ian candidly admits these recordings are not always "the best singing I've ever done but are wonderful performances." At times, you can hear the strain of the road, but she weaves heart and perfection into each performance.

More Magic from Janis Ian and *Billie's Bones*

A Woman of Many Firsts

This is a 'best of' CD worth owning.

Billie's Bones is a return to Janis Ian's roots. It is a folk album, with moments of blues, country, and jazz. "My Tennessee Hills," a duet with Dolly Parton, exposes a mutual love of their home state. "Matthew" is a sultry contradiction touching on the fear provoked by Mathew Shepard's murder. You can hear Janis smiling on "Mary's Eyes," a tribute to Mary Black, although many swear it reflects Ian's love for Ireland. The title song evolved from a poem written in the 1960s reveals the yearning to live up to her idol, Billie Holiday. This album once again proves that she is a masterful singer and songwriter.

Janis Ian considers her sexual orientation of little importance but absolutely identifies as gay. In 1989, she was approached by the head of what is now HRC. When she heard the statistics on gay teen suicide, Ian agreed to publicly come out. She did not want anyone, any

child, for a moment, to think she was ashamed of being a lesbian. It is of no concern to Ian that k.d. lang beat her as the first mainstream female artist to come out. Ian bluntly takes pride in her accomplishments. She was born a lesbian but has made herself a consummate singer/songwriter.

Is this woman of so many firsts a feminist? Ian says she has "lived my life as a feminist," but does not identify that way. Labels are too restricting. True to her nature, she declared "but if you tell me I can't do something because I'm a girl, I'll be in your face!"

She is a devoted spouse. Janis married her partner, Patricia, this summer in Toronto. Together fifteen years, they are opting not to renew their vows in Massachusetts. Describing it as almost aiding and abetting the opposition, Janis replied, "who else has to get married in every state" to have a valid mar-

riage? And when asked if she will publicly fight the Federal Marriage Amendment, she decided it will surely make its way into her show.

Janis and Pat do not seek publicity. "We're just as happy to not be the latest and greatest and coolest. It's a lot of pressure on a relationship." All the fanfare heaped on Ellen DeGeneris's and Melissa Etheridge's romances is not unnoticed. After exchanging vows in Canada, Ian wrote "I do note that of all those couples who were media darlings for a heartbeat, we are the only ones left standing together." Their success comes from being "old enough to compromise," Ian reflects, "you realize how fragile life is."

Ian frequently ventures out of the music industry. Her accomplishments are wide-ranging. Her non-profit Pearl Foundation has raised \$114,000 to provide scholarships to returning students. Always insightful and humorous, she was a columnist for *The Advocate* in the mid-90s and still writes a monthly column in *Performing Songwriter Stars*, published in 2003, assembled an impressive group of sci-fi authors, including Ian herself, offering short stories inspired by her lyrics. She has openly battled the Recording Industry Association of America's stand on free music downloads.

At the cellular level, first and foremost, Ian is a performer. Her songwriting allows her to be a magician, she says, "turning lead into gold." It is an "immense privilege," she acknowledges, "to have the talent and luck" to do what she loves, a hundred nights each year.

It was my privilege to see Janis Ian perform "What About the Love," a harsh examination of the real value of our lives. On that cold night in Fairbanks, something magical happened to me. I realized my life had to be about more. I signed on as a Big Sister, and met Alaska's greatest seven-year old, Vallyn, who, by the way, is also a Janis Ian fan. ▼

Janis Ian will be performing in Albany, NY at *The Egg* on May 8 and in Northampton, Mass at *The Iron Horse* on May 12. More info and free downloads at janisian.com.

Susan McMillan has been referred to as a friend by Janis Ian, a term Janis generously bestows on fans, especially ardent ones like Susan. McMillan is still in touch with her Little Sister, Vallyn, who lives in Fairbanks.