

“Society’s Child”

Janis Ian

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1967

Janis Ian’s “Society’s Child” was banned in Detroit last year by all the major radio stations. WKNR’s Paul Kannon refused to air it because he felt it was too sensational for a radio audience. “Society’s Child” is currently the number one song in Detroit. Below Janis talks candidly about Janis Ian and her life as a 16 year old sensationalist.

ON JANIS IAN: My name is Mary Ann Schwartz. My parents are very unprejudiced. They will let me marry anyone I want as long as he is Jewish.

ON “SOCIETY’S CHILD” and INTERRACIAL DATING IN THE YOUNGER GENERATION: I think it’s disgraceful. I think it’s absolutely shocking. As I answered one dear kind mother who wrote to me and said she wasn’t allowing her daughter to buy that horrible “Society’s Child” record ... I hadn’t intended that children should hear the record. I think it should be locked up and played in nightclubs where only adults are allowed. I don’t mean that really. This is not a song about me and my experience with a Negro. Most of my songs are drawn from the experiences of my close friends.

ON “SOCIETY’S CHILD” AS A COP OUT: It’s the heroine in my song who’s copping out, not me! That’s why I wrote it. There are many young people copping out today. If the girl in the song was 13, it’s understandable why she’s copping out. A lot of young kids today go with Negroes just to prove that they’re not prejudiced. But if “Society’s Child” was really in love with the guy -there’d be no excuse for her ditching him. Like she says, “When we’re old these things may change.” Well, you know it’s not even going to happen when she’s older and time passes. It’ll be too late then because the time to stand up for her beliefs is now when she’s young.

ON LOVE: Personally, ahem, I don’t believe in sex at all, among other things. I believe in free love to a certain extent, but after awhile it becomes an accepted thing. It’s immediately expected that you’ll sleep with a guy after you see him for two weeks. Like, say you and a guy have 10 minutes to kill. So do you have to go to bed with him for that 10 minutes to prove something? You should talk, run around the block for those 10 minutes. Sexual acts should be something that are very important. If a girl gets in with a guy who doesn’t know what he’s doing, he could mess her up. Discounting the pregnancy thing, this guy could do her an actual physical or emotional hurt.

ON GETTING HURT: If you have never slept with your first guy who doesn’t regard your feelings at all. That’s a hurt. It’s like some guy saying, “I’m sorry I’ve been going with you for two weeks and you won’t sleep with me.” I don’t think this is prevalent among the 13s and 14s, but it happens all the time with 15s, 16s and 17s.

ON MARIJUANA AND LSD: I’m not going to tell anyone not to smoke grass or take acid. I don’t really need it though. Music is my high. I’m so high when I come off the stage that I need a downer.

You know I drink a lot too...tomato juice.

ON VIETNAM: If the Vietnamese want communism let them have it. I don’t know what the U.S. is doing in there. As a matter of fact, I don’t know what they’re doing anywhere. But peace is a good thing. I love it.

ON LOVE-INS: The purpose of a Love-In should be more babies.

ON DYING: I'm going to be dead by 23. I just know it. Poor Janis Ian, dead at 23. I have this feeling about it, seriously. So I guess I'd better get busy and make some money. I've only got a few good years left.

ON HER FIRST ALBUM: Hmmm. Janis Ian's first 15 years and her first album. I talked to this lady one time who said, "Gawd, I just hope she goes on and on like Shirley Temple." God, Shirley Temple was finished at 9 years of age. The 16 year old Janis Ian has had a year to grow, man, since her first album on Verve. I've two more white hairs now. I used to have seven, but people pulled them out. The songs I've written for my next album are much different. Between the ages of 15 and 16 there's a tremendous change that takes place. All of a sudden you start realizing what's going on. The change in Janis Ian is outside of me acting on inside me. I'm not growing fast because I'm in show business. I would have grown this fast in spite of that. My generation is just growing fast.

ON BEING A PROFESSIONAL: I don't think that you have to be hard to be a professional and I'm not hard at all.

ON HER SONGS: I write everything at once. I'm not really an unconscious creator. Sort of spontaneous, I know what I'm doing when I'm writing. When I write the lyrics I do them to fit the melody and when I do the melody it's to fit the lyric. Sometimes I'll go through a lyric and maybe scan it for rhyme and meter—it depends on the songs. Like "Yesterday's preacher, today's bikini beacher." I really don't know how it works...it just does.

SPONTANEITY: I'm against it. No one should ever be spontaneous. Everything should be planned. Planned parenthood, planned babyhood, planned mortuaryhood. I told you I was going to be tragic, dead Janis Ian at 23. I'm picking out my plot at Forest Lawn. Dave Van Ronk told me that I should see that place. I've got to please David.

HER AUDIENCE: The age I'm reaching is about 13 to 25. I'll probably hit higher than that with the new album. I'm doing more on it in terms of arranging, instrumentation, the whole bit.

CLOTHES: I hate shopping for clothes. I've got a problem with my size—clothes don't fit. It's very embarrassing. I get my friends to make me clothes. I've got two pairs of pants now. I get lots of shirts from my friends. As a matter of fact, I've got 22 shirts from my friend Janie. It's embarrassing.

SPARE TIME: When I'm not writing or creating, I get Chinese spare rib bones stuck in my teeth.

fifth Estate

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