

Nashville's a funny town. If you're not mindful, you can take greatness for granted here. Recently I was in Wild Oats, the health food supermarket, and I ran into Janis Ian in the produce department, Kim Richey at the meat counter, and Titans coach Jeff Fisher in the checkout line. And since it's Nashville, everybody's real nice to you, as long as you don't gherm them too bad. So you can take greatness for granted sometimes, because it's right there and it's pretty accessible.

Janis Ian was already a pop star at 15. Okay, once in great while, such a thing happens. But I can't think of another single case where it involved not only an original song, but a truly great song, one that caught the attention of a nation in transition. "Society's Child" is still a great song today, and it's only one of many outstanding and successful songs that Janis has written and recorded. She's had several international number ones, and her songs have been covered by a slew of great artists. All of those landmark achievements are covered very eloquently at the artist's website, which is a visit we highly encourage (www.janisian.com).

She's very brainy and a fast, extemporaneous conversationalist. She's busy, and comes right to the point. We had talked about doing an interview on and off for a couple of months, after running into each other around town a few times in a row. Things kept getting in the way—vacations, snowstorms, her relentless touring. When finally our opportunity came around and I did a little preliminary research into her career, I was really amazed by all she's done, and all she continues to do.

If you get a chance to see Janis in concert, be sure not to miss it. She's an excellent musician as well as a crack songwriter, and puts on a hell of a good show. She and her soundman, Phillip Clark, get into some very cool stuff with the vocals and digital delays and harmonizers, with repeats and singing along with herself, very creative and fun, jamming with your soundman on the fly kind of thing. And she's a wicked guitar player, and will whip out the wah wah pedal and rain down Hendrix's "Standing Next to a Mountain" or something on your head. She makes "good for a girl" sound as stupid as it is. Investigate some clips from her CD *God and the FBI* on our Listen page.

Greatness is a precious and admirable quality, in any town. Janis Ian fits the bill, and in many ways. Be sure to check out some of her articles or columns on her site, for instance. I was floored by what she wrote in "The Internet Debacle" and its sequel "Fallout," on the subject of free downloading of music from the internet. All musicians need to check that out, big time. It might open your eyes to some new ideas.

With great pleasure, we bring you our conversation with the multi-talented and much lauded Janis Ian.

Puremusic: This morning when I started writing questions, I was thinking that there should be a Trivial Pursuit question for which you are the answer.

Janis Ian: There is. There are a couple.

PM: Really?

Ji: Yeah.

PM: Mine goes: "Which 60s music icon was a pop star at fifteen and is still touring successfully today in her fifties?"

JJ: Ah.

PM: You are at the beginning of your fifties, aren't you?

JJ: I am. I'm fifty-one.

PM: Yeah. I'm your vintage. Is there anybody else that comes to mind who meets that criteria?

JJ: Well, yeah. Maybe not exactly. There are people like Baez, Richie Havens. Most of them are eight to ten years older than me just because I started so young. There's a bunch of people. Most of them aren't involved in as many different projects as I am, although Richie certainly is.

PM: Is he?

JJ: Uh-huh. He does a ton of stuff, everything from addressing the U.N. and working with oceanographic institutes to having hit records with samples in England.

PM: Amazing!

JJ: He's a pretty busy guy.

PM: Yeah. I'm in the midst of tracking him down for an interview, too, because he must be a fascinating character.

JJ: Yeah, Richie is great.

PM: Touring pretty nonstop the way you do, what are your favorite cities to play in the States?

JJ: Ooh, that's a tough one.

PM: Are there favorite places?

JJ: Well, New York. New York is kind of hometown—New York, New Jersey, anywhere in there.

PM: Where in Jersey is home to you?

JJ: All over. All up and down. You name it, I've lived at that exit.

PM: That's what they say, isn't it, "What exit?"

JJ: Yeah, "What exit are you from?" Also the Carolinas—I've been having a really good time in the Carolinas the last few years. Virginia is great. But, you know, I'd be hard pressed to pick a favorite city. Favorite countries, that's a different thing.

PM: My next question.

JJ: Ireland, great to play.

PM: Is it about Dublin or Galway, or are they both good?

JJ: It's just the Irish. You know, you can go anywhere there, you don't need any harmony singers, they take care of it themselves. It's just a fabulous place.

PM: How about the food?

JJ: The food's fine.

PM: Really? It's been twenty years since I was there, and I remember that as the one thing I didn't like.

JJ: It changed a lot in the last twenty years. Oh, it's a great place.

PM: How many dates are you doing these days?

JJ: I was doing between 100 and 120 a year, but this year we're just touring in March and a couple of festivals. It's a good year to stay home and work on an album.

PM: I want to talk about that, we'll come back to that in a minute. Only those of us who've seen you play live know what a great guitar player you are.

JJ: Yeah, well kept secrets.

PM: Too well kept. Do you still play at home for fun?

JJ: Here and there. Not as much as I used to. Mostly I sit around and diddle on the piano for fun.

PM: On guitar, do you practice, as such?

JJ: If I'm working on a new lick, yeah. Otherwise, nah.

PM: So you're still getting better, huh?

JJ: Well, I don't know if I'm getting better. [laughs] I'm certainly getting more nerve wracked. You know, I worry about it more. It's harder to play loose when almost everything you do turns into something professional.

PM: Got it. That was an excellent link on your site—which is a great site all the way around—an excellent link concerning your equipment. I know you're really into your gear.

JJ: Oh, well, yeah. And I'm big believers in free sharing of equipment tips.

PM: There's a lot of good stuff there. Last time I saw you play, you and your soundman Philip really did some cool vocal effects with loopers and harmonizers.

JJ: Yeah, we have a good time. We've been carrying around an Eventide this last year, and that's been great just for live vocal sampling and my guitar sampling.

PM: He does it on the fly.

JJ: Yes, he does. And then there are certain things where I know if I go *here* then he'll probably go *there*. But particularly with having the in-ears, where I can keep one in and still hear in real time, and I can have one ear cocked towards the speakers, that gives me the ability to hear what he's doing and then build on it. And vice versa. So it becomes almost like a jazz band, except that it's a self-contained unit of two.

PM: I've never heard of people using in-ear monitors like that before. Or is that the common way?

JJ: I have no idea how most other people use them. I just know the only time I use two in is if I'm at a huge, really noisy festival where I can't hear properly over the system. But otherwise I just always work with one.

PM: That makes perfect sense.

JJ: The other reason why we've been so free with the equipment stuff is that I really feel that these vendors, you know, people like Shure and Mackie and the others, they're making it possible for me to do this on the road, and the studio would be unaffordable otherwise. When Shure gave me a couple of pairs of in-ears to beta-test, and then give me the upgrades to test, I feel that the least I can do is put them on my website.

PM: Right. Absolutely. Do you ever use the Lexicon Jammans for looping with your guitar?

JJ: Yeah. We used to do that all the time, we had three of them out with us. But they're not making them anymore. As with all smart things, it was taken off the market. So we bought up all the ones we could find here in Nashville, and used them until it got to the point where reconditioning them and worrying about what would happen when one failed was really too nerve wracking. I think now we've got one or two of them in the rack. But the Eventide and the SPX have really picked up a lot of the stuff that they did.

PM: The Jammans has gotten hard to find anymore even on Ebay. I'm thinking I'll buy one of those Boomerangs, but they're really big.

JJ: Yeah, they're huge, and they're kind of a pain in the ass to carry around, that's what I've heard.

PM: But then so are racks. But you've got a rack already, so then it's easy to stick one or another thing in it.

JJ: Yeah.

PM: When you tour these days, do you tour solo, or do you bring any accompanists on the road?

JJ: No, it's just me and Phillip. I don't know if, technically, you would call that solo, just because—

PM: Not the way you guys do it.

JJ: Yeah, not the way we do it. But it is just the two of us.

PM: I've read both installments of your article "The Internet Debacle" twice now. That's amazing, all the thought, the research that you put into that.

JJ: Well, that's why I'm not writing for the magazine anymore. It just takes up too much time.

PM: Yeah. And how long have you not been writing for the mag [*Performing Songwriter*], because my subscription ran out, I'm embarrassed to say.

JJ: Oh, it must've been right after that follow-up article. I've done a couple of one-offs for them, but that was it.

PM: Does that fascinating two-part article continue to generate correspondence and controversy?

JJ: Yes, kind of an absurd amount of it. It's terrible to say, but I'm totally over it. [laughs] I mean, nobody in my camp expected anything to come of it. It's just another article. So when our website hits suddenly shot up—we had 60,000 hits one day—I went, “Oh!” [sighs]

PM: 60,000 hits in one day?

JJ: Yeah, yeah. We were slashed on it. But that was the worst of it. The main hassle for me was just that I really have always answered all my e-mail. So to answer 300, 400 e-mails a day, sitting in the car—I had to switch from AOL to Earthlink because AOL kept insisting I was spamming.

PM: I've been there.

JJ: But it has led to some cool things. I got to go to the CES Convention, and got to meet Congressman Boucher and Congressman Doolittle, and do a press conference with them, so there's some cool stuff. It's an ongoing problem, as we all know.

PM: Yeah. And we don't even know what corners it's about to turn. I mean, certainly if you talk to the fifteen to twenty-five set, it's one thing, and if you talk to the under sixteen set, it's quite another.

JJ: Absolutely, absolutely. And I think for the over forty, over fifty set, it is entirely another.

PM: Yes. It seemed to me when I was talking to kids who were sixteen to twenty-five that they're just sick of paying 19 bucks for CDs, and that's why they're downloading by and large.

JJ: Yeah. That's not a real good argument to me. You know, it's really mysterious that it has nothing to do with what things cost, ultimately—except of course from a consumer point of view. “If you're going to give me crap, then I'm not going to buy it.” The only power the consumer really has is in their pockets. But I think it goes beyond that. I mean, when somebody says to me, “Well, I ripped that CD, because why should I give the record company money,” I say, “Well, what about the songwriters? You just ripped them off also.” There are a lot of questions to this. I just think a problem arises from an industry that has never been a big fan of new technology unless it's cheap and easy to manufacture *and* easy to overcharge for, you know?

PM: Right.

JJ: And there's not much to be done about that except for consumers to show how they feel by not spending. And they're doing a pretty good job of that.

PM: Without belaboring the topic here, isn't it only a matter of time before music is almost exclusively purchased by downloading it from some source?

JJ: I don't know. I keep thinking somebody is going to come up with another technology that will give you a great huge album cover, you know? Or printable album cover that will easily fit into a great biodegradable CD holder. And then some kind of format that's like the CD, but even better, scratch proof, and hassle proof. I'm sure they're working on it. Somebody has got to come up with something.

PM: Reading this interview will probably move a lot of people to buy a Janis Ian CD. Would you point them, first, to the latest one, *God and the FBI*?

JJ: Yes, I'd point them towards *God and the FBI*, absolutely.

PM: That's a really good record.

JJ: I think it's a good one, yeah. I was pretty happy with it.

PM: Let's talk about a new record that must be at least incubating, if not in the works.

JJ: Well, there's no title and only about four songs. [laughs] I'm going to use most of the same team. I'm going to use Philip Clark and Marc Moreau, and I'm going to bring in Jeff Balding. He's a local who worked with me on *Hunger* and on *Breaking Silence*. And we're cutting it in Nashville in our little studio here, and it's conveniently a couple of doors down from my house, so that makes me very happy.

PM: That's nice.

JJ: It really is.

PM: What did Balding do?

JJ: He produced and mixed and engineered *Breaking Silence*, and then he mixed *Hunger*. So we're bringing him in as kind of a consultant and the mixer.

PM: Will you use other players?

JJ: I don't know. I imagine so. There are so many great players in this town, people I've never gotten the chance to work with. And then the temptation is to take a group that already exists, like the Del Beatles, and then just work with them on a project.

PM: Oh, wow, what a cool idea.

JJ: I think that would be big fun.

PM: Yeah. We've even interviewed them. [now called the Vinyl Kings, see the archives]

JJ: They're good guys.

PM: You've been in Nashville a long time now. What do you like about living here?

JJ: Oh, gosh, the community. First and foremost, the community. It's so much more musical than L.A. or New York. It's so much simpler to deal with. There's not the backbiting that you find in those areas, so I prefer it. I couldn't live in the north now, I wouldn't be interested.

PM: Yeah, it's rough.

JJ: It's just a whole other thing.

PM: Aside from being a great, great songwriter, you're rather a fantastic prose writer. Is there an autobiography planned?

JJ: God, Frank, all these compliments.

PM: Well, I feel positively about you. [laughs]

JJ: Yes, an autobiography at some point. I mean, the plan right now is to tour 2004 into 2005, and then start working on an autobiography and put that together with a best-of CD, because I've never had a best-of in this country.

PM: Really? That ain't right.

JJ: Oh, well, I control it, so it's mostly my fault. But it would be a good thing, I think.

PM: Yeah, and it would be nice to have the autobiography and the best-of in the same year.

JJ: That's the plan. Who knows if it'll happen. One never knows with that sort of thing.

PM: Right. The Pearl Foundation is a wonderful initiative on your part. For the readers who may not get to your site—although they all should—would you say a few words about that?

JJ: The Pearl Foundation was started in honor of my mom, who died of multiple sclerosis a few years ago. And what we do is, we take people who've been out of school more than five years and we send them back. That's adults. We pay for anything from just child-care on up to full tuition. We had our first six graduates this year from Goddard College. So we fund all kinds of universities. Right now I think we're sitting at about \$70,000. We're trying to get up to \$150,000 because then we can do a scholarship per year.

PM: That's amazing. You've accomplished a great deal in your life already. Are there things that you'd like to do that you've not even yet begun?

JJ: [laughs] Tons! I'd like to write a Broadway musical. I'd like to write a couple of books. I'd like to write a lot of short stories.

PM: Have you done anything of that yet?

JJ: I've been writing science fiction for about a year now, and I've had a couple of those published, so that's been fun. They'll be coming out in 2003 in various anthologies. And then there's a big anthology of 24 original stories, based on my lyrics, by science fiction writers. And I've got a story in that.

PM: Who is the publisher of that one?

JJ: DAW Books. It'll be called *Stars*—I think it's *Stars: Original Stories Based on the Lyrics of Janis Ian*, or something like that. But the lead title is *Stars*. Big giant book, 185,000 words.

PM: Now, how did it come to be that science fiction writers would write stories based on your lyrics?

JJ: Oh, I've just always loved science fiction. To me, science fiction is the jazz of prose. And I went to a convention, their major convention, two years ago with a writer named Mike Resnick, and just started meeting writers I admired. Really, Mike had the idea. And I told him that it was stupid, because nobody would be interested. And he came back and said, "Well, I've got seven so far, and they're all your favorites. Why don't you contact the rest?" So it's pretty cool.

PM: [laughs] It's incredible!

JJ: Yeah. We're editing it now and it'll be out in August or September of 2003.

PM: Okay. We'll be on the lookout for that. Other things you'd like to do?

JJ: I'd like to sing with Eric Clapton. I'd like to sing with B.B. King. I'd like to write with Willie.

PM: [laughs]

JJ: There's way too much stuff.

PM: Before we part company, is there any question that you'd like to be asked and answer that people never ask you?

JJ: Oh, no! [laughs] No, no. I've been asked enough questions already for a lifetime.

