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SOMETIME LATER THIS year, Janis Ian will exit the stage at a gig yet to be announced and leave behind more than 50 years of touring the United States with her music. The singer-songwriter is winding things down—she may still book some dates abroad and take on special projects but, for the most part, she's heading toward retirement.

Ian had just turned 16 when her first hit, “Society’s Child”—which she had written a couple of years earlier—just missed the Top 10. A tale of interracial romance, released at a time when such songs simply did not get played on the radio, it beat the odds and launched her career, which is still going strong as she heads for birthday No. 71.

Fortunately, Ian has a slate of extraordinary new songs to sprinkle among her older ones as she says goodbye to her loyal fans. *The Light at the End of the Line*, released on her own Rude Girl Records in January, contains some of Ian’s most poignant compositions to date. A song like “Resist” serves as something of a bookend to “At Seventeen,” her signature tune, which vaulted into the Top 5 in 1975 and took her then-current album, *Between the Lines*, all the way up the charts. The new album—some songs performed with full accompaniment, others featuring just Ian’s voice along with her guitar or piano—is filled with powerful anthems, like “Stranger,” the title track and the autobiographical “I’m Still Standing.” Another is “Nina,” Ian’s tribute to the late singer Nina Simone, whom she considers one of her major influences. Ian says that she witnessed the troubled performer at her best and worst, memories that she tried to portray in the composition. “It’s very hard to capture her strength without also showing her troubles, her anger and her nastiness,” Ian says. “She was



Janis Ian

The veteran singer-songwriter prepares for her final tour, over 50 years after she released her groundbreaking tale of interracial romance.

By
JEFF TAMARKIN

so hard to love, and yet she was a miracle.”

Then, there’s the album-closing “Better Times Will Come,” which features a lineup of A-list guests, among them Sam Bush, Vince Gill, Jeff Coffin, Diane Schuur and John Cowan, who provides a lead vocal. “Though we live each day as our last/ We know someday soon it will pass,” begins one verse. “We will dance, we will sing/ In that never-ending spring/ Oh, better times will come.” If the song turns out to be the finale of Ian’s last album—which it may very well become—then it sure is a hopeful send-off.

Ian admits she is feeling “bittersweet” about her impending retirement. “I don’t know. I really don’t know,” she says wistfully, when asked how she thinks she will feel when she wraps up the 2022 tour, much of which was planned before COVID hit, then delayed until now. But, she says, “I would love to have a life for a while where I don’t need to be on email eight hours a day and I don’t need to pick up a phone and I could actually take a vacation for two weeks and not think about business. I want to be with my family. I want

to walk on the beach. I want to play with my dog. I want to have a good time.”

She’s earned the rest. When she originally released “Society’s Child” in 1966, she was, as a teenager, ill-prepared for the harsh realities the music business would lob her way. “I was completely clueless,” she says about the initial prospects of a song calling out racist attitudes during the peak of the Civil Rights movement. “My dad said to me, ‘You’re going to have a lot of problems with this.’ And I said, ‘Why? What are you talking about?’ And he said, ‘Take it from me. You’re going to have a lot of problems with this song.’ I sort of sloughed it off and Shadow [producer Shadow Morton] sloughed it off too.” Sure enough, not only did many radio stations ban it, but Ian even received some death threats.

Although the corresponding, self-titled album fared well, Ian’s record company at the time, Verve Forecast, couldn’t land any follow-up releases even close to the upper echelons of the chart. She was dropped by the label and a lone album for Capitol, 1971’s *Present Company*, bombed. It

wasn’t until she signed with Columbia Records that her prospects began to pick up again. Her 1974 debut for the label, *Stars*, and its title track, received positive reviews and a song buried on side two, “Jesse,” was picked up by Roberta Flack, whose cover made it to No. 30 on the Billboard charts. When Ian released the Brooks Arthur-produced *Between the Lines*, and especially “At Seventeen,” her time had finally arrived. She performed the song—which told of an “ugly duckling” high-school girl who is treated as an outcast—on the very first episode of *Saturday Night Live* and took home the Grammy for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance for her work. (It was also nominated for Song of the Year and Record of the Year.)

Ian still loves her best-known composition. “I think that if you can tell something that’s true and, at the same time, it’s accessible, then it resonates in a way that other things don’t,” she says. “If you look at something like Kurt Cobain’s songs, there’s truth and there’s accessibility. This song’s got a tremendous amount of heart. And to watch the good that it still does for people—to hear from some 15-year-old kid who says, ‘I’m miserable and I hate my life and I’m so glad that somebody else gets it’—that’s powerful. To know that you’ve been a part of that, that’s amazing.”

Now, as she looks back over her career—she went on to release more than 20 albums after *Between the Lines*—Ian can finally say that she has attained much of what she set out to do. “I wanted to be a great songwriter, not just a good songwriter,” she says. “I would either be a great songwriter or go be a vet like I originally intended. In all humility, I really feel like with this new album, I did that. I actually lived up to my potential.”