

Society's child – my autobiography



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the excerpt from *Society's Child – My Autobiography* (2009), Janis Ian, an American folksinger and writer, outlines a particular incident that occurred on a night in 1966 in Encino, California two years after the release of her very first hit single, "Society's Child". She was 15 at the time. As a matter of fact the very first line of the excerpt sets the stage for her account, so to speak. It starts in medias res with the quite aggressive chanting being shouted at Ian, who is standing alone on stage: "Nigger lover! Nigger lover! Nigger lover!" (l. 1).

She is halfway through the first verse of "Society's Child", a song about an interracial relationship between a young white girl and her black boyfriend. Its controversial theme (at the time) has made a lot of people, especially from the Southern states; rise up in anger against young Ian – their racist propensities very much a reflection of the mother's ideas described in the song: "She called you "Boy" instead of your name" (ll. 11-12). The situation starts to get out of hand as more and more people join in on the chanting.

Eventually the yelling becomes too much for Ian to ignore, as the troublemakers begin to rise – shaking their fists in the air. "I was singing for people who wanted me dead." (ll. 31-32). It is clear that they do not mean her well, yet nobody seems to make any motion to intervene. She describes how confused and uncomprehending she felt, when she attempts to make any reason for their obvious hate towards her. "What was wrong with these people? It was just a song, not a combat invitation!" (ll. 63-65).

It is not hard to imagine how difficult it would be for a 15-year-old girl, who had grown up in a mostly black neighbourhood, to understand how some

people could become so offended by a single song about a black boy dating a white girl. Ian also mentions just how much of an impact the seemingly innocent song had had. “ Now here I was, a year later, with a single that was banned from virtually every radio station in the country, and a career that was turning into a war zone. ” (ll. 92-96).

After Ian runs off stage crying, the promoter comes rushing in and tries to convince her to get back out there – most likely for his own sake, as a 1000 people demanding their money back is not exactly what you would call good business. He does have some valid points though. However, Ian is unyielding – there is no way she is going back on stage to perform before a crowd, who would rather see her dead than alive. “ I would never have believed a simple song could provoke such violence, but I believed it now. Oh yeah, you bet I believed it. And I truly did not want to die.

Onstage or off. ” (ll. 152-156). What changes Ian’s mind is the promoter’s appeal to her sense of heroism. “ Oh, no. He’d hit on the one thing that would sway me. Hadn’t my parents raised me as a hero? ” Back on stage she starts singing “ Society’s Child” from the top, and thinking of her real fans, her idols, and the popular saying of showbiz – the show must go on, she gets through the song and thereby beats the troublemakers. In order to make sure that Ian gets her message across, she writes her autobiography in a certain style to create the desired expression and effect.

It is obvious that the text, being an account directed to her fans and whoever else might read it, is primarily an expressive account. It’s a way for her to reflect upon various events that have occurred in her life and perhaps to

help her understand what they have meant for her. Our sympathy is placed with the 15-year-old Janis Ian, which is really no surprise, as her older self is telling the story. To put us in her situation she utilises the very emotionally characterised mode of persuasion, pathos.

For instance, the reckless shouting of “ nigger lover” at the young girl is indeed a very emotionally loaded language, which then results in her breakdown on stage as she starts crying. That particular image, with a crowd heckling at a defenceless young girl, undoubtedly appeals to our feelings. In general it could be said that the whole excerpt very much has an emotional tone, which of course comes as a result of it being an account of a very emotional night. Had we not been told of Ian’s origins from a lower class black neighbourhood, we might still have been able to deduce this fact from the style of her language.

It is not that she uses a particularly low style of language, perhaps due to the fact that this is a published book, but the slang and informal language is definitely observable: “ What if someone takes a shot at me? ” (ll. 159-150), “ Oh, yeah, you bet I believed it. ” (ll. 154-155). Ian also uses contractions whenever possible, making the excerpt appear very much like spoken language, which makes sense since an autobiography should aim to reflect oneself. Throughout the text, the tone used is very aggressive. “ Now he was getting postcards with his photo in the center of a bull’s-eye.” (ll. 170-172).

This is chosen to depict how the mind of a 15-year-old girl would respond to the aggression and violence of such narrow-minded people who are mentioned in the excerpt, thus making it easier for the reader to put him or

herself in the shoes of young Janis Ian. The part where Ian describes the promoter's attempt to get her back on stage and her reasoning for eventually doing so is essentially the message she wants to get across. It's what she learned that day in Encino, California – that you do not let a gang of ignorant troublemakers bring you down.

“ And I know that you know they'll win, if you don't go back out there. ” (ll. 260-262). She mentions a lot of civil rights activists, who has both fought and died for their cause, which at first scares her, but eventually comes to act as a motivator. The message is not about racism. Racism is only used to exemplify how one should never back down for sole reason that 30 out of 1000 people start shouting abuse at you. “ I don't want to disappoint the real fans of there. And there must be real fans out there, somewhere! ” (ll. 280-282).