



## Janis Ian “**Billie’s Bones**” Oh Boy Records

Ian’s last studio album, “**God & The FBI**” [2000], the second of a pair of releases on the Windham Hill imprint, was co-produced by Janis, Marc Moreau and Jim Cregan. Three years earlier, Ian had co-produced “**Hunger**” with Jeff Balding. By way of retaining a thread that links the past to the present, production wise, this collection of thirteen songs is a Ian/Moreau [vocals, overdubs, editing]/Balding [tracking, mixing] collaboration. Merged with previously unheard songs, there’s a handful that have appeared on Ian’s quartet of self-issued albums [1999-2002], and one cut that appeared on her Oh Boy label debut, last year’s *live* double disc “**Working Without A Net.**”

The album opens with the album title song [#], and amounts to Janis’ tribute to her musical heroine Billie Holiday [1915-1959]. In the second verse, relative to the fame that Holiday still enjoys almost half a century after her passing, Ian surveys her own career in music and concludes “*All these years and all I’ve learned, Is just how brilliantly I fail.*” While I feel Ian’s personal conclusion is harsh in the extreme, in truth her, almost forty-year long, career has been something of a roller coaster ride. Popularity came, visited for a time and departed on a couple of occasions, and was punctuated with spells of *retirement*, and now it’s hard to decipher whether this is still the third, or now the fourth phase of her remarkable career. In terms of the *bones* mentioned in the song title, relatively to one of life’s great mysteries – songwriting, the lyric presents the proposition that while the flesh disappears and leaves only bones once we pass, the spirits of musicians, remain floating around in the ether emitting energy – “*You can hear them through your skin and the singing of the bones.*” It’s worth noting, at this juncture, that, currently, Ian’s web site [ <http://www.janisian.com/> ], is nothing short of a *tour de force* treasure trove of information related to the processes involved in making this recording. In one, short, audio segment Ian comments that the final verse lines, “*When the wind blows from the east, I can taste her on my tongue,*” while retaining the thematic thrust of the “Billie’s Bones” lyric, resulted from a post 9/11 conversation with a New York based acquaintance.

Ian has been a Nashville resident since the late eighties, and her deep love affair with the state is apparent in the songs “My Tennessee Hills,” “Forever Young” and “Mockingbird,” the latter being a composition Janis began writing a decade ago. Dolly Parton has penned a number of songs in adoration of the state of her birth – “My Blue Ridge Mountain Boy” and “My Tennessee Mountain Home” being two of them – and on “**Billie’s Bones**,” the girl from Locust Ridge provides the second vocal on Ian’s “My Tennessee Hills.” In truth, the song is a *shoe in* for being a Parton creation, and is melodically reminiscent, particularly on the chorus, of “Home On The Range.” The self-release “**Unreleased 1: Mary’s Eyes**” [1999], featured “Forever Young,” and this new version sees drummer Harry Stinson provide the second vocal, while “Mockingbird” is a song that focuses on winter weather in Tennessee. For those ornithologists among the Folkwax readership, the mockingbird is the state bird of Tennessee.

During her career, in terms of presentation and style, Ian has had one foot in the folk camp and another, at times, in the jazz camp. While much of “Billie’s Bones” leans to the former style, Stinson’s use of brushes on “Paris In Your Eyes” gives the song a smoky Paris nightclub feel - just the place where you’d expect to hear jazz. The song previously appeared on “**Working Without A Net.**” Having commented in the previous sentence about style, “Marching On Glasgow,” is something of a departure for Ian, since it’s an instrumental. It possesses something of a Celtic feel, aided principally by Stinson’s almost militaristic

drumming. According to Janis the melody came to her during a pre-concert sound check in Glasgow during her Y2K UK tour.

Having been given some of Woody's unpublished music by Nora Guthrie, Janis joins a list of co-writers that includes Billy Bragg, Jeff Tweedy, Eliza Gilkyson, Slaid Cleaves, Ellis Paul and more. The song in the question, "I Hear You Sing Again," is based on a March 1949 Guthrie lyric. Much in the vein of the album title song, on this collection, "Matthew" a song that she began writing in 1994 includes the word "*bone*" in the lyric, while "Dead Men Walking," far from being inspired by the singular and *almost similar* film title, poses numerous questions about life and death, and in closing asks for answers to the greatest mysteries in "*Will I be remembered, Will I rise again.*" "Save Somebody" appeared on the five song self-release "**New Cuts**" [2002] and was co-written with Jimmy Collins, while her third collaboration is the closing track, "When I Lay Down" co-written with Skip Ewing.

In terms of European destinations we've already mentioned Paris and Glasgow. But there's more....much, much more. The jazz flavoured waltz "Amsterdam" previously featured on "**Unreleased 3: Society's Child**" [2001], while the song's co-writer, the estimable Buddy Mondlock, included it on his self-titled album first released by Son Records, a Dublin based offshoot of the U2 music empire. In the late nineties Janis toured Europe as the opening act for Dublin based, Irish songbird, Mary Black. Although Southern Ireland has a predominantly Catholic populace, and in spite of lines such as "*We are saints and we are sinners,*" "Mary's Eyes" is a tribute to the vocalist. The *sly* third line of the second verse runs to "*It's a woman's heart that beats beneath,*" and when Janis sings it you can almost hear her *vocally smile*. The reason? – why, it's an allusion to the Eleanor McEvoy song "Only A Woman's Heart," which the writer sang as a duet with Black, and also inspired the title of the 1992 *Irish songbird* compilation album "**A Woman's Heart.**" That disc became the biggest selling Irish album of the decade. "Mary's Eyes" previously appeared on Janis' self-release, "**Unreleased 1: Mary's Eyes**" [1999].

The "**Billie's Bones**" recipe of *something old, something new* makes for a darned fine addition to Ian's already extensive catalogue.

#### **Note.**

[#] – In 1969 and concurrent with the appearance of the Capitol album of the same name, a book of Janis' poems was published titled "**Who Really Cares.**" Reprinted in 2002, the tome contains the poem "Billie's Bones." While the song on this album is founded upon the same premise, adoration of Billie Holiday, the words are different.

Folkwax Rating 8 out of 10

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