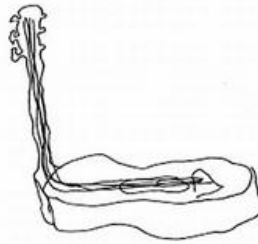


Janis Ian

Folk is the New Black



Janis Ian **"Black Is The New Folk"** Cooking Vinyl Records

In terms of sound and production, less is more on **"Black Is The New Folk"** with Ian's vocal and guitar[s] being supported, only, by Alison's brother Viktor Krauss [upright bass, National Steel, guitar], Jim Brock [drums, percussion] and, occasionally, Carson Whitsett [organ]. Janis penned all fifteen songs the first occasion that has occurred on one of her albums since the pop sounding **"Restless Eyes"** back in 1981.

Countless American roots music songwriters have delivered "state of our homeland" assessments in their songs in recent years, so from that standpoint, the opening pair of "Danger Danger" and "The Great Divide" don't reinvent the wheel. However, coolly and calmly the former, blues tinged number, amounts to a subtle commentary on sexual preference and the nation's immigrant population, by way of a focus on censorship and personal freedom of choice, although I'd speculate that some people will mistake Ian's lyric as an "open" expression of prejudice. In recent decades we have become emotionless voyeurs, blinded by the light, exemplified by Janis' bloody *"I watched the news last night at nine, Saw a head blown of somebody's spine."* As for "The Great Divide" the opening line *"Come good people and gather 'round"* evokes memories of those great campaigning folk anthems of the nineteen-sixties, and Janis goes on to deliver the stinging assessment *"While politicians lie and cheat to get to higher ground, We follow them like sheep, and salute them as we drown."* Corporate crime, the *"No, God is on our side"* approach adopted by countless of the world's religions, and finding your voice and having the courage to use it, all come in for scrutiny in this powerful lyric.

The funky sounding "Life Is Never Wrong" advocates the "no nonsense" approach of picking yourself up, dusting yourself down and getting on with your life. The ensuing, mellow paced, "Jackie Skates" recalls the highway death of a female *"L.A. drifter"* and its aftermath, and is followed by "All Those Promises" an unrequited love and heartbreak song that already smacks of becoming a Janis Ian concert classic. Featuring Carson Whitsett's organ, "Standing In The Shadows Of Love" isn't the Holland, Dozier, Holland penned 1969 hit for the Jackson 5, rather it's another Janis Ian composition that takes inspiration from love, complete with a melody reminiscent of that era topped off by a "shoop, shoop" style sixties girly chorus. A barroom conversation ensues in the delightfully poetic "The Drowning Man," and "Crocodile Song," which follows, is a nursery rhyme for adults – sic. *"There was a lady name of Annie May, She fell in love at the zoo one day, That crocodile with the big white smile, Stole her very heart away."*

"The Last Train" merges reality with fantasy and in the process evokes memories of the Viet Nam conflict and those young American boys who never returned home. "My Autobiography" presages, in word and melody, the fact that Ian will take the whole of 2007 off to pen the tome. Early on this crystal ball gazing number she intones the tongue in cheek *"My life doesn't have a very good plot, Guess I'll have to lie a lot."* Poking even more fun at herself, Janis proceeds to "dream" that Sigourney Weaver will play her in the inevitable movie of the book. At 5' 11½" [1.82 m] [+] tall Sigourney would more than fill the role, since our Janis measures 4' 10" [1.47 m]. The focus of the melodically gentle "Home Is The Heart" is the choice to seek or not to seek a relationship, and the degree of commitment that relationships require in order to grow, nay survive the passage of time. "Shadows On The Wind" also reflects upon the passage of time and how children fail sometimes to fulfil their parents dreams – an outcome that compounds itself

once those parents pass on, “Haven’t I Got Eyes” poses questions regarding weaknesses of the human condition, while “Joy” amounts to a light and airy expression of love and goodwill.

Four decades on from the last major folk music scare [a period during which the genre, and Janis first, enjoyed a modicum of commercial success], Ian closes **“Folk Is The New Black”** with the title cut, a sing-a-long anthem and commentary on changing fashions and passing fads, that references some of the classic songs of that “bygone era.” Of course nowadays, musically, we can attain instant aural gratification through electronic downloading – *“The first time is free, then you’ll be hooked.”* Acknowledging that it’s *“Cheaper than crack, and you don’t have to cook, Download it and see,”* Janis proceeds to attest that, for mankind, addiction comes in many forms, then, with a sly wink, imagines a Pete Seeger led promotional campaign – *“even though he’s just a fad”* - whose rallying call is *“folk is for fun.”* Is it too much to hope that following decades of dormancy people will “wake up” and make the dream come true.....

**Note.**

[+] – Information sourced from IMDb

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10

**Arthur Wood.**

Kerrville Kronikles 02/06.