



The song is "Society's Child." One year ago, it would have been a folk-rock bonanza.

It has Janis Ian singing like every girl in Brighton Beach who has made it at the Dom and dared to bring the schwartz home.

And it has the good sense to admit its own defeat. Our heroine is tormented not by love, but by her own failure to defy The Way. She is society's child all right and the hint of rebellion in the distant future is more a self-justification than a threat.

But nothing is more old fashioned than a fad one year after its time. And folk-rock has entered the great Diaspora.

Hang onto those yellowed photos of Barry McGuire. Treasure those nasty editorials on John Lennon's latest heresy. Frame that Bob Dylan shopping bag. Because folk-rock is already something to tell your grandchildren about.

And nobody knows that better than Janis Ian. At 15, she is already old enough to be passé. And the ones young enough to be "in" this year are gray at the temples. "Society's Child" has scratched the toes of the Hot 100, but radio program officials are keeping it well out of earshot for the multitudes. So, despite critical dotage (notably by Robert Shelton in the New York Times), and promotional mother's milk from Verve-Folkways records, "Society's Child" would have expired quietly in the mass grave being dug for folk-rock by the little men who program what you hear.

But Janis Ian's testimony was snatched from the jaws of anonymous death by an errant knight who, true to his feudal

code, took the disc home to his castle and made it work for him. The knight is WOR-FM, the city's newest rock outlet and without even trying its boldest and best.

WOR-FM makes the rest of the pop radio scene look like a teabag on its third cup of water. Its staff of disc jockeys, veterans of the AM frenzy are quieter and oddly, less formal than the good-guys, who pour a puddle of forced cheer into their microphones.

The new station programs for an audience which doesn't regard the big beat as an impediment to pleasure or to sanity. WOR is rock without the AM shlock.

Says program director Tommy Reynolds: "We're selling quality music. We don't shout, we don't ring bells, we don't intrude over our vocals or talk down to our listeners."

WOR's charts are based solely on record sales from outlets all over the city. And the backbone of its air policy—a chart which lists the top 130 and includes "extra" discs which have not broken anywhere—makes it the first station in New York to cover the pop scene before it fossilizes. And it makes WOR this radio market's first authentic breakout station. So, WOR is the only place in New York where you can hear "I Can't Control Myself" by the Troggs. It's the only station playing "Bend It," (a smash hit in England, but overlooked in this country because of alleged sexual directness). It played "Eight Miles High" long after WMCA phased it out. It stuck with "Mind Excursion" after disc jockeys labeled it "a commercial for LSD."

And it plays "Society's Child" as though interracial love were busting out all over. The station's patronage is understandable. If the Janis Ian ballad takes off after exclusive exposure, it will be conclusive proof of the station's power. And it will make a good case to insiders for the new freer music.

FM Rock may prove to be more than a bothersome splinter in the paw for the AM giants. FM produces tonally clearer music, due to its wider band. The new sounds, which demand careful listening and high fidelity, make WOR the only place to hear vital new music and hear it well.

By broadcasting excerpts from important new albums, the station reaps the tonal benefits of songs too experimental to be released as singles. WOR breaks the most impregnable rule in the AM game when it plays the complete "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" (the song takes a whole side of the Dylan album) without a break. The big boys on the AM dial blanch at the thought of a 30-minute song, because a station like WMCA, actively competes with its music, while WOR flows with the sound. The difference in style is more than mere nuance; it is a vital difference in function.

The AM format serves as background noise for an urbanized existence. This means you don't listen to WMCA; you absorb it. External sound—constant and monotonic—has become the beat by which city people measure their existence. When the metronome stops, the melody goes awry.

The housewife's obsession with noise in an empty apartment (all those unwatched TVs, turned on anyway), the omnipresent success of car radio, the student's habit of studying oblivious to ear-shattering background noise—all reflect a vital need to live within sound. The city makes silence an admission of loneliness and defeat.

AM pop radio fills this need with screeching sound and disc jockey patter which sounds like an amphetamine psychosis. WMCA plays much more than the hits; it programs life noise.

Good guy plugs appear on waxed milk containers, on shirt wrappings from the cleaners and in most subway stations. They greet us wherever we are and however we try to avoid them.

And what they emphasize is not youth but community: bar-mitzvah announcements, lost-dog calls, sweatshirts. Two years ago, ad copy featuring a proto-Italian mother listening to rock 'n' roll on her transistor would have inspired laughter. Today it makes for reader identification.

WMCA's restricted airplay list would put WOR out of business in a month. The FM audience wants to be stimulated, not lulled. The lyric style of folk-rock (narrative rather than chant-like) and the technique in the best rhythm-and-blues creates music that sounds better on FM, where more of the structure is audible.

The more involved the melody, the more suggestive the lyric, the more the listener has to listen. Says afternoon DJ Scott Muni: "WOR is the only station in New York that has any freedom of expression. And it's the only station where disc jockeys aren't part of a juke box."

What Muni means is that FM radio encourages the kind of critical rapport likely when a commentator speaks to an adult audience in a normal tone of voice. Disc jockey freedom on AM radio is impossible, not because of autocratic censorship but because the high-pitch nature of the medium makes it difficult for personality, not to mention opinion, to evolve. The AM jockey is a conglomeration of grunts, horns and football cheers. AM makes abstractions of air personnel. Some use rapid-fire rhyme, some hold dialogues with howling beasts and some even invent a new phraseology and a new identity—like Murray the K.

In the two years since Murray Kaufman (last name changed legally to "K") watched submarines race and let loose blasts from the past, [indecipherable] has come and gone. But [indecipherable] on WOR, Murray [indecipherable] over the coals of what he calls "attitude music." His [indecipherable] His cautious analysis of music

(including some of the most circumlocutious references to draft-dodging, politics, and LSD) represents at least a first stab at serious consideration of meaning in rock 'n' roll. The new Swinging Soiree is nothing to do your homework by.

The new Murray has got kulchuh ("Rock 'n' roll no longer exists; it's an archaic term. To call this music is rock is to say it hasn't matriculated"). Murray has got the non-partisan enthusiasm of a politician ("I have no attitude other than the fact there are many attitudes"). And Murray has got Dylanesque suave ("Words are crystals. Hold them up to the light and you can see whatever you want.")

At first, Murray's voice was all valley. Maybe once a night, it rose suddenly to the old WINS whine and Murray's teeth would clench in a vicarious "mee-a-sow" for old times sake. But then, a repentant descent, and back to the sober-tongue master of FM mob appeal.

You get the feeling that Murray was happier in the old days when there was falsetto and bass harmony in his voices, when his patter was a rock 'n' roll song in itself. Now, to thousands of fans who grew up stomping in the aisles twice a year at his rock shows (Murray in a golden blazer and tight silver-threaded pants moves across the stage like a marlin, hands against his thighs, hat flipped over one arching eyebrow, Murray reaches the mike and picks it up and—oh god the rumbling in the balcony because you know what's coming—Murray swings his head back and everyone shouts ahead of him until the old rococo chandelier groans—Aaaaa-vay . . .), to this audience, he is an after-dinner disc jockey with an after-dinner voice: Murray the Ex-K.

The Swinging Soiree is not quite Pacifica Radio and WOR-FM is no radio underground. Scott Muni admits that if "Society's Child" had ended another way—if the heroine had

defied her parents and stayed with her schwartz—the station might have refused to play the single.

What is ultimately important about WOR is not its metaphysica, but its sound. Murray the K calls AM "sharecropper" radio; FM is for the aristocrats. WOR sells sound. Though it hasn't quite stolen the audience from the AM dial, 98.7 has discovered a tidy niche. It's looking to turn that toe-hold into a vantage point.

Seasons change with the scenery. The search for success is leading WOR into a program policy independent from the Hot 100 miasma. The freedom from imitation shows. It makes sense. It makes sound.

And if it makes money, those sacred scarlet bullets may be relegated to their proper place — indicators, not dictators.

Note: Because of the poor quality of the original, this article has been retyped.