

DiFranco excels as DIY folk poet

DiFranco's 21st release, 'Educated Guess,' is her first solo album since 1991's 'Not So Soft'

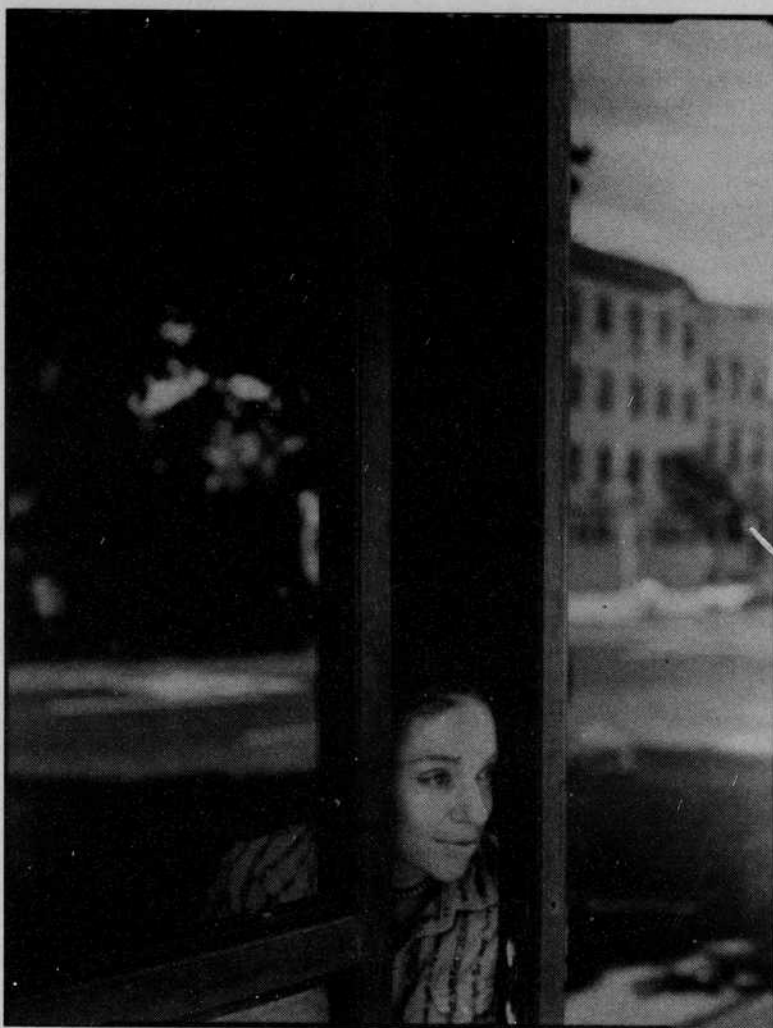
By Aaron Shakra
Pulse Editor

Humbleness exudes from Ani DiFranco's music. With 20 albums, her own record label and a performance career that has transcended both borders and decades, it's amazing this facet still comes through. DiFranco returned to

solo touring nearly two years ago, but her latest record, "Educated Guess," marks her first studio effort reflecting this change. This album, her 21st, is all DiFranco for the first time since 1991's "Not So Soft," her second release.

In some ways, "Educated Guess" reflects much of the same format — introspective, political songs, mixed in with the occasional poem — as "Not So Soft." But this is no throwback to the past. She is obviously not the same person she was when she released that album 13 years ago. After all, this is the singer who once said: "We got egos like hairdos / they're different every day / depending on how we slept the night before / depending on the demons that are at our door." Both literally and figuratively, DiFranco has worn many hairstyles. And because she has always been so incredibly honest from the beginning of her career, she has become wise in her recording years. These albums are starting to resemble lifetimes.

Within the 14 tracks of "Educated Guess" are songs and poems fascinated with listening meditation and reflection. This continues along the theme that her previous release, "Evolve," set into motion. On "Swim," the album's first song, she sings the haunting opening lines "You keep telling me I'm beautiful / but I feel a little less so each time" to a clicking, percussive guitar progression. Later, the singer searches for solitude, as she bemoans: "I'm so far away



Courtesy

Ani DiFranco will support her new album, "Educated Guess," with an April show in Eugene.

from my shore / so far from what I came here for."

In "Origami," she likens men to "delicate origami creatures / who need women to unfold them / hold them when they cry," then succinctly says: "But I am tired of being your savior / and I'm tired of telling you why." One wonders which experience in life led DiFranco — in this song, the self-proclaimed all-powerful amazon warrior — to write such lyrics.

The album's title track is an embrace and acceptance of the human family, with DiFranco delivering the lyrics: "And I'm learning how to say / that I'd be happy either way / with

your love" in a smoky voice. The lightest song of the bunch is easily the poppy "Bliss Like This." With her happily singing, "I said Venice / you heard Vegas / now I say either way / baby let's go," this tune could easily find a home on most radio stations.

One musical highlight is "Company," a track that pointedly croons over the tensions between intimacy and alienation in a relationship. A rambling, banjo-like guitar line and DiFranco's tumbling bass punctuates the space between verses, such as: "What's the point / of all this pointless proximity / if you won't talk / take me for a walk / through a little story."

Later, she asks, "Why should I keep you / if you won't keep me?"

In her tradition of previous music-poems "Self Evident" and "Serpentine," this time around listeners get "Grand Canyon," a requiem for the feminist revolution. In the opening lines, she says: "I love my country / by which I mean / I am indebted joyfully / to all the people throughout history / who have fought the government to make right." Later, she proclaims the feminist revolution is underplayed in the present day and asks, "Why can't all decent men and women proclaim themselves feminists / out of respect / for those who fought for this?"

DiFranco has always been a poet, and her return to straight-up spoken word gives the songs on "Educated Guess" much needed breathing room. The album opens with a short piece called "Platforms" and there are two additional poems — "Clip clop clack" and "Literal" — included in the liner notes that aren't on the album. On another album, DiFranco said "half of learning how to play is learning what not to play"; this idea seems to apply to her words as well. Her poems are short, succinct and pointed, and her lyrics have such a keen awareness of line breaks that they read beautifully even without music.

This album's production is all DiFranco, save for the final mastering. She recorded it in two different studios and used vintage, eight-track reel-to-reel recording equipment. All instruments, background vocals and mixing were done by the folk singer. The result is a sound endearing in its homemade quality, complimenting the songs rather nicely. DiFranco even found a way to incorporate happy accidents into this recording—the rain can be heard in the background of "Grand Canyon," for instance.

"Educated Guess" was released Tuesday and by now has probably completely permeated the record stores of Eugene. DiFranco returns to the McDonald Theatre on April 6; the show is already being heavily advertised, so buying tickets now is advisable if you want to be there.

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Plath's talent overshadowed by death

Sylvia Plath used a thesaurus. I say this not only because it's blatantly obvious the word "ablution" doesn't come off the top of your head when writing a poem, but also because it has been written about by others, in-



Aaron Shakra
The poet's tree

cluding Plath herself.

In regards to the former article I wrote discussing Basho — a wandering poet, traveling the land in order to cast away his earthly attachments,

paying reverence and respect to all beings in his path — Plath comes across as an opposite kind of creature. She's a modern writer (born 1932, died 1963), grounded in notions of self and fascinated with her relationships with men, and often, society's norms.

Yet, this almost sounds like an insult. So what is the appeal here? A common response I hear to this question is that it's her ability to be bitter, relentless and absolutely unforgiving in her poetry. And in this confrontation with subject, the reader doesn't want to turn away. At the heart of all of this is a search for self-definition. It's like everything put on the page is wavering between being defined and undefined. Consider the opening lines of her poem "Mirror" in which Plath proclaims: "I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions / Whatever I see I swallow immediately / Just

as it is, unmisted by love or dislike. I am not cruel, only truthful —"

But of course, the mistake might lie in trying to say Plath is any one thing. Suicide is clearly an idea that Plath gained a mastery over; with words she painted poems such as "Lady Lazarus" and her novel, "The Bell Jar." Yet, describing Plath by her suicide often overshadows what else she wrote about. Which was a heck of a lot. But because suicide was her ultimate end

and is such a sensational subject, it unduly receives more than its fair share of attention.

"Sylvia," the Plath biopic that ran briefly in December, made the same mistake, only in a different way. The filmmakers oddly chose to begin with and then focus the entirety of the film on her relationship and marriage to the late Ted Hughes, England's Poet Laureate. The film tried to sell this

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