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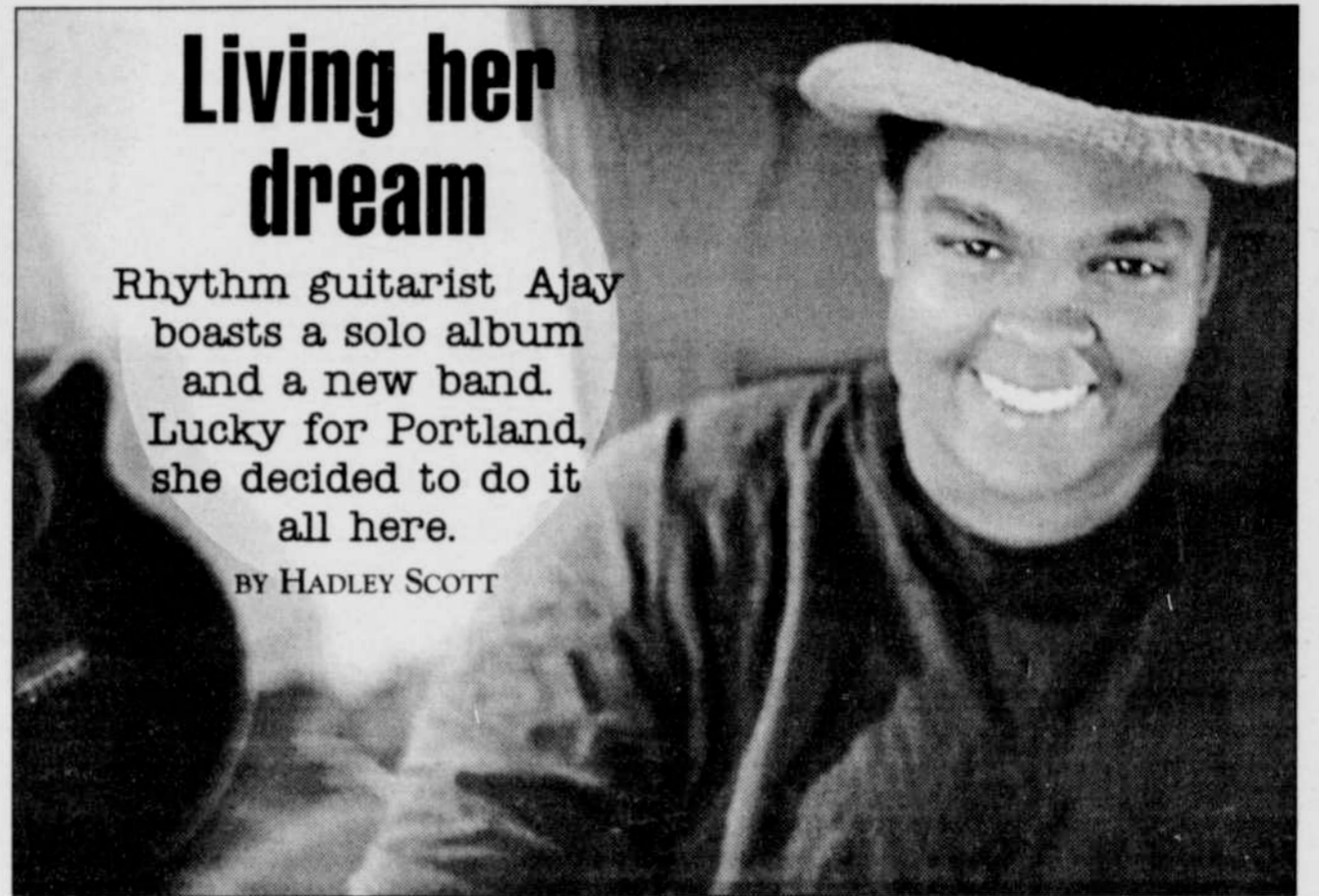
More Wonderful
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Await You on the Next Page

MUSIC

Living her dream

Rhythm guitarist Ajay boasts a solo album and a new band. Lucky for Portland, she decided to do it all here.

BY HADLEY SCOTT



"I have always loved music," exclaims singer, songwriter and guitarist Ajay. "I was always lip-syncing to my favorite songs and pretending I was a rock star. Those were the days!"

Those are still the days for Ajay, who fronts the acoustic folk-pop group Embra. Originally from Arizona—where she played clubs, Pride festivals and, she smiles, "a lot at lesbian bars"—she relocated to Portland in early 2000.

Driving through town on her way to Seattle a year earlier, the musician fell in love with the Rose City's beauty and accepting atmosphere. "Here I am happier than I have ever been, personally and musically," she remarks. "I honestly don't see myself living anywhere else."

Clearly, the artist was musically inspired. She quickly released her solo album, *Arrival*, which certainly did announce her arrival on the music scene: *GirlMedia.com* named it the Best Folk Album of 2000.

Arrival is a splendid mix of Ajay's soulful voice and rhythm guitar. Her sound and style have been compared to Tracy Chapman and Joan Armatrading.

But rockin' with a band was a lure she couldn't resist. Embra slowly grew out of her jam sessions with a few other musicians.

It all started when a friend introduced her to drummer Rob Schnell. "We just connected instantly," she exclaims. "We have the same thoughts and feelings about music."

Soon after, Schnell suggested a friend, Franklin Gallwas, help them out with percussion. He was hired after just one session. Gallwas begat bassist Sean Foxley, who "only got a few rehearsals in before we threw him out for his first gig," Ajay laughs.

Joe Scroggins, who also sings with the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, lends backup vocals. Ajay met him on the Starbucks float in Portland's Pride Parade. (Both of them sling coffee in the 'burbs when they're not entertaining the masses.) "We went out to karaoke, and by the end of the night he was in the band," Ajay says.

Most recently, they managed to steal lead guitarist Mike Schadt from another Portland band and—voilà!—Embra is complete. The band often plays around the metro area, and Ajay continues to appear solo.

Because Embra is newly formed, the sound is a little gritty, a little rough. But it has a cohesive mix of soulful style, catchy rhythms and edgy lyrics. The group never fails to get you

on your feet shaking what your mama gave you. Ajay compares her band's style to Lyle Lovett and Tasmin Archer, noting Embra uses life experiences to connect with its audience. From *Arrival's* "The River":

*Why cross the river as it flows
Into a destination nobody knows
It's a long way back to childhood
It's a road nobody knows.
I've seen the pictures in my mind
Tasted love one too many times
Dabbled in the art of playing games
And mastered the art of causing pain.*

"Being alive inspires me," Ajay exclaims. "There are so many things that happen... that we take for granted. Yet when someone sings about those things, people seem to get it a little more. 'The River' is about that."

Embra is playing almost all of Ajay's own music, but she says they are beginning to write together. The longer they play, the more comfortable they get with each other, she notes.

"My vision for myself is to be successful with music," Ajay maintains. "I don't have to be a star. I just want to sing and play guitar and make music that people relate to."

This is a dream motivated by her own experience as a music fan. "I can't count the number of CDs that in some way or another have affected my life or have helped me get through a rough spot or two. I want people who hear my music to feel that way.... If a song makes them cry or laugh, I want to know that. Then I know I can say that I am successful." □

You can catch AJAY fulfilling her dream with Embra from 9 p.m. to midnight Jan. 12 at the Mad Hatter Lounge, 203 S.E. Grand Ave. *Arrival* is available from Music Millennium or www.cdbaby.com/ajay. Find Embra at www.embramusic.com.

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Embra woos with edgy, soulful rhythms