

MUSIC

A girl needs her role models

The Gossip's Beth Ditto is more than just a pretty body

BY CORI TARATOOT

When Beth Ditto and her band The Gossip play Nocturnal on Aug. 8, the show can be considered a sort of homecoming. Olympia is yesterday's news: The band is shacking up in Portland permanently.

But make no mistake: While the sounds of Olympia's riot grrl scene linger in Ditto's musical vocabulary, she is, first and foremost, a Southern girl to the bone. Ask about her favorite musician or movie, and the lexicon—and pop culture leanings—of the singer's Arkansas upbringing cannot be muffled.

"In high school, I really loved Reba McEntire," says Ditto. "I still love Reba McEntire. I really love the Dixie Chicks. I think they're fucking awesome. Oh, Loretta Lynn. She's really cool."

Given that The Gossip often finds itself lumped in with those other minimalist blues duo-trio acts (White Stripes, Black Keys, The Kills), I wonder aloud if Ditto's been tracking the latest Jack White-Loretta Lynn adventures. (Lynn told MTV's Kurt Loder that hearing the White Stripes for the first time "sounded like someone was breaking into a bank." The Stripes' Jack White promptly requested Lynn's onstage presence at some Stripes shows. And now Renée Zellweger's broken-fingered boyfriend is slated to produce a few tracks on the country legend's next record.)

"That's so cute!" shrieks Ditto. "Loretta Lynn is amazing. She comes off simple, in this total backwoods hillbilly way. But then she has a head on her shoulders. I think that's really important. She's so damn smart. Here's someone who didn't have an amazing education, who married at 13, had a bunch of kids, and now she has this successful career. Especially in music. Especially in country music! Her message is important, and it was really controversial in the 1970s. *Coal Miner's Daughter* is my favorite movie. *Sister Act 2* and *Coal Miner's Daughter*."

Sister Act 2? Yup, Whoopi Goldberg's 1993 homage to singing R & B nuns ranks right up there for Ditto. "Lauryn Hill's in that movie. Whoopi Goldberg? C'mon. It's so good."

A girl needs her role models, after all. Especially a proud fat girl who identifies loudly as queer. For Ditto, 22, role models are everything.

"In high school, I listened to a lot of Mama Cass," she laughs. "I was always on the lookout for people that were big. Or queer people. I was really into Janeane Garofalo and Rosie O'Donnell and Ellen DeGeneres. Even before Ellen and Rosie came out. I was looking for something so bad. And I really loved Annie Lennox and Tori Amos, Bikini Kill and Cat Power."

Ditto is a trailblazer, even if self-professed Dean of American Rock Critics Robert Christgau may not think so. ("A fat, sexy, lesbian teen-ager whose entire trio escaped Arkansas for Olympia? And face it, folks—



From left: The Gossip's Beth Ditto, Kathy Mendonca and Nathan Howdeshell play Nocturnal on Aug. 8

when it comes to putting good old rock 'n' roll on record, a bass player really helps.") But Christgau is a grumpy old man.

To fully appreciate Ditto's radical mission, you've gotta leave the house, you've gotta smash yourself into a crowd, you've gotta be willing to get off your ass and dance. This is a participatory thing—drop your self-consciousness. Ditto's dropping hers. And her bra and panties, too.

"Sometimes taking my clothes off on stage feels liberating. Sometimes it feels empowering. Sometimes it feels really silly. Now sometimes girls in the audience do it, and that's cool. If they feel good enough about themselves to do that, that's really rad. It's cool that there's a space where they can do that.

Because it's just a shirt. It's just a body. But yeah, sometimes I do feel silly—I mean, I'm up there in my underwear, y'know? But for the most part it feels good."

And as members of The Gossip expose themselves to a bigger and broader audience, Ditto is coming to terms with their power and responsibility. "It's important to spread this message. People are really scared and repressed. We live in a country where no one wants you to be out of the closet. They don't want you to talk about it."

Not only that, they don't want to pay you for it. "Look at the bands that have success," Ditto continues. "They fit the beauty standard. They're white, they're straight. You can see the system working. You can see how fucked up the industry is. You can tell by who gets famous. It's important for someone who looks like me, for someone's who's queer, to actually be successful, to let people know exactly who you are and what you're about, that you have an agenda or an issue that you want to address."

There's a soft underbelly sweetly hiding underneath Ditto's brazen stage persona. You can hear it when she talks about her "sweetheart" (a brave drag-king lover who recently posed with Ditto for the cover spread of *On Our Backs*). And you can hear it when she fantasizes about the musical possibilities in her near future.

"I want to do a solo project and make music with people that are queer and tour with queer people. I love The Gossip, and I love Kathy and Nathan. But there's something special about making music around queer people, with queer people. We understand each other."

And Ditto understands the lure of change. "I don't think The Gossip will ever be any-

thing but one guitar and drums and one singer. For me, later, I think that I will definitely want something crazy, something produced with all kinds of instruments and all kinds of sounds and all different genres of music."

How would Ditto describe the sound she hears in her head when she imagines a sound separate and independent from The Gossip? Her voice quiets. "The sound would be really full and moving and melodic. And pretty to watch. And pretty to hear. I want to perform in really long dresses and keep the makeup on my face on. A lot of piano. A lot of nice melodies that get stuck in your head for days." ■

Sleatmute Nightmute and Paradise Island open for THE GOSSIP 8 p.m. Aug. 8 at Nocturnal, 1800 E. Burnside St. Tickets are \$8 from TicketsWest or at the door.

Free-lance music writer CORI TARATOOT is working on a biography of the Polyphonic Spree. In her free time, she drafts speeches for Lisa Bradshaw's 2004 mayoral campaign.

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