

MUSIC

Knuckle Down

Ani DiFranco • *Righteous Babe*

The crazy-prolific Ani DiFranco appears to be finished trying to convince the world she's an invincible one-woman island. Instead, she's re-embracing collaboration and hunkering down to the task of making mesmerizing music out of her ever-present misery.

"I am a powerful Amazon warrior, not some sniveling girl," Ani proclaimed on last year's *Educated Guess*, of which she wrote, sang, played and produced every note. The recently released *Knuckle Down* finds her surrounded by a stellar supporting cast of musicians and aided for the first time in her career by a producer, fellow musician and Madonna brother-in-law Joe Henry.

Though she'd never admit it, maybe Ani just needed a little help from her friends. Her past couple of years included a divorce and the death of her father, events she alludes to on *Knuckle Down* with characteristically clever wordplay. "Course neither of us were wearing helmets, and our blood was just everywhere" is her clear-eyed postmortem of a ruined relationship on the spare funk of "Modulation," despite later conceding that her ex was "better than any drug." The gently percolating "Sunday Morning" details domestic bliss, only to unceremoniously pull the rug out from under us in the last verse. "Manhole," an open-wound raw meditation on infidelity, has Ani playing emotional MacGyver: "After my dreaded beheading, I tied that sucker back on with a string."

Musically, *Knuckle Down* runs the gamut, from the familiar staccato folk of the title track to the clattering, Tom Waits-y blues of the sex-

ually playful, metaphor-heavy "Seeing Eye Dog" to the sprawling, spooky, intruder-in-the-home spoken word epic "Parameters."

Not everything works perfectly; in fact, the final third of the record drags like a paralyzed limb until the stunning, strangely hopeful closer, "Recoil," in which Ani juxtaposes the final days of her father's life with her own self-imposed exile in a "sty strewn with half-written songs."

Like a bio-diesel engine converts vegetable oil into fuel, Ani DiFranco continually trans-



forms everyday heartaches into compelling music. You never want to wish bad things for your friends, but let's cross our fingers that her life doesn't get too insanely happy anytime in the near future.

Mood swings

Their loss is our gain

BY JIM THOMPSON

The Beekeeper

Tori Amos • *Epic*

"I hate elevator music," Tori Amos declared in 1991. Fourteen years later and she's just released a record that wouldn't sound out of place on the way up to the top floor. The \$18 question: Is it a trip worth taking?

I should admit that I hesitate to give *The Beekeeper* a lukewarm review for fear of being whisked off in the night by avenging faeries and emasculated in some fire-lit forest ritual. Or at least chastised for not being better versed in all things esoteric to more fully appreciate Tori's body of work.

The woman who once graphically described her rape—a cappella, no less—in the back seat of a Cadillac (1991's "Me and a Gun") and later

spat, "You think I'm a queer/I think you're a queer" (1996's "Blood Roses") takes few chances with her new work, unless you count adding an organ to the mix and filling all but 30 seconds of an 80-minute CD. Now a 41-

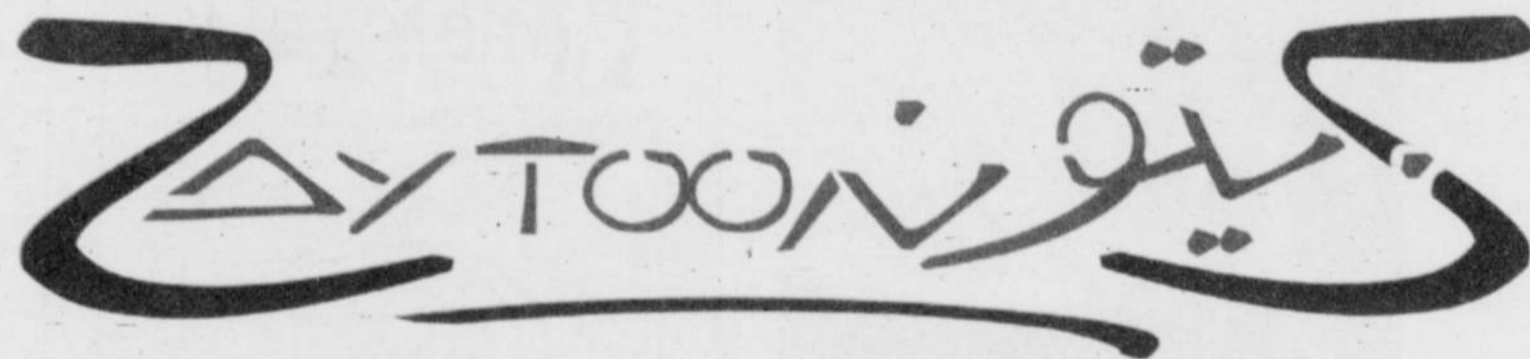
year-old married mother, maybe Tori's just not that pissed off or messed up anymore.

The Beekeeper continues in the easier-listening vein of 2002's gorgeous travelogue *Scarlet's Walk*. "Parasol" is a stunning opener on par with 1991's "Crucify," and the sultry "Sweet the Sting" could heat up the iciest of bedrooms. "The Power of Orange Knickers" is bewitching but underutilizes guest vocalist Damien Rice almost as blatantly as she did Nine Inch Nails' Trent Reznor on 1993's "Past the Mission." "Goodbye Pisces," the most eloquent breakup song of the year, is guaranteed to send you scuttling for Kleenex.

"Cars and Guitars" describes love in automotive and fast food drive-thru terminology and provides further proof of Tori being The Weirdest Lyricist Alive Besides Frank Black. The playful "Ireland" is the album's most fun song by a long shot, lauding the simple pleasures of driving a Saab-ful of friends to the land of leprechauns. The only track where Tori sounds remotely pissed off is "Hoochie Woman," but it's only halfhearted, and her philandering lover gets off the hook too easily with a verbal bitch slap: "You can keep the house and the bank accounts 'cause boy I bring home the bacon."

Tori Amos caused *Little Earthquakes* with her debut but would be lucky to make your dishes rattle with *The Beekeeper*. However, when you're Queen Bee of the Piano, you don't need seismic activity occurring with every new release. **JT**

JIM THOMPSON wants to write full time, when and if he ever grows up. Meanwhile, he doesn't cry for yesterday because nobody knows what's gonna happen tomorrow.



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