

On the long, long road to Portland

Amy Ray of the Indigo Girls talks with Street Roots about her views on music and politics

BY SUE ZALOKAR
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

When the Indigo Girls hit the music scene, a queer folk duo from Atlanta was quite the departure from the kinds of role models, female musicians had. Now known for their heart-wrenching, gritty lyrics, warm vocal harmonies and social commentary, Amy Ray and Emily Saliers complement one another like no other duo and they have made their mark on the world of social activism just as intensely as they have on the world of music.

The duo was coming of age, so to speak, in the '80s when other female-based bands and performers such as 10,000 Maniacs, Suzanne Vega and Tracy Chapman were finding success in the mainstream media. It left an opening for the duo to shine into the lives of a flurry of listeners who would soon become loyal fans and admirers of their music.

While they continue to produce albums and tour together, they each have created individual careers for themselves as well. Saliers is a restaurateur and author and Ray has a solo musical career that rounds out her musical experience.

Recently, Ray sat down with Street Roots to talk about road maps that have led her to where she is now, the music industry,

activism, gay marriage and much more.

Sue Zalokar: *You and Emily have been forging the way for not only yourselves, but also the legions of female musicians who have and will come behind you. In your experience, has the music industry evolved at all for women?*

Amy Ray: Definitely. It's not perfect, by any stretch. There are steps forward and sometimes you step back. Sometimes it feels like it's not getting anywhere. It has evolved though, and there are more opportunities for female artists — more exposure. Part of that is the Internet. There are so many avenues that are free and are open from the normal gatekeepers.

There is some representation in the world of country music, but women have to be a different thing in that world. In Top 40, there is a lot of women, but it's in a really specific way too.

In the world that I'm in — rock and folk and alt Rock — women are just not given the same representation. We aren't archived as well, we're not represented in the Top 100 guitar players (with the exception of Joni Mitchell and Bonnie Raitt). We're not mentioned as much in a historical context either.

Female musicians are often treated as anomalies with the "wow" factor. "Wow! Can

you believe a woman can be this good?" That kind of thing is still happening. It's a mixed bag.

S.Z.: *You and Emily have always had a reverence for your audience. As you have grown up, so has your audience to some degree. From your perspective, has the audience changed at all over the years?*

A.R.: Our core audience that have been with us since the beginning, they're older like we are (laughs). But people always brought along their younger sibling and kids, so their audience has stayed more diverse in some ways than we had expected. We go through times when our audience is really small and it's just a core group of people. When our audience gets bigger, it definitely brings in more people that might be different from us.

There are certain cities where our audience is mostly women. And then other places where it is completely mixed, men women, straight and gay. Our audience is not as mixed racially though. You've just got to do what you do. You can do things to make sure people are not alienated. But you don't want to fetishize a person's race.

S.Z.: *The Indigo Girls have no policies against audio recording live shows for personal use and enjoyment — a treat for your fans, to*

say the least. What led the Indigo Girls to the decision to allow taping?

A.R.: When we started — in the '80s — people taped shows and passed them around and that's kind of how you got the word out about who you are. It just seemed silly to not let people do that. The whole point of music is creating this community around it. You can't really do it any other way or you won't really evolve and you won't have any continuity or longevity.

When I was kid, I took a cassette player to all of the shows I went to and taped them. I taped everything — I have this five-hour radio special on cassette that was a tribute to John Lennon the day he died. I still have that. I treasure those tapes and I treasure all my bootleg records too.

S.Z.: *Your fourth solo album, "Lung of Love" came out this spring on your label, Daemon Records. I read that you collaborated on the songwriting with producer Greg Griffith — a first for you as you and Emily write separately and then come together to arrange. Can you talk about the experience of co-writing?*

A.R.: Yeah. I never do it. I've tried it with a couple of other people, but it never

See **AMY RAY**, page 9



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