

Amy Ray Goes Stag

REVIEWED BY DAVID HINZ



AMY RAY
STAG

The photograph of Amy Ray featured on the cover of her recently-released album *Stag* is credited to the performer herself. This photographic self-portrait is a fitting metaphor for the first solo recording by the rougher, tougher half of the well-seasoned duo Indigo Girls.

Not only does *Stag* feature Ray's own gutsy lyrics and guitar: it was produced by Ray herself and released on her own independent label, Daemon Records. After assuming myriad voices with remarkable success on the latest Indigo Girls album *Come On Now Social*, Ray demonstrates a profound eagerness to speak for herself again—a task she takes up with confidence and an honesty that is sometimes painful.

Rather than transcend the well-known Indigo Girls aesthetic, Ray's musical style unleashes an edgy intensity that has become increasingly apparent on the duo's more recent albums.

Although her opening track "Johnny Rottentail" could pass

for an Appalachian folk anthem, Ray quickly settles into a beat that is propelled by percussion, bass, and a heavy dose of electric guitar. This instrumentation, coupled with Ray's decision to adopt the more primitive studio technology of the Indigo Girls' early recordings, helps her to achieve a raw, slightly unpolished sound that is characteristic of many independent-label releases. This effect is emphasized by her collaboration with The Butchies and The Rock*A*Teens, independent-label bands who, along with Joan Jett, back her up on a number of tracks.

The gutsy, hard-driving style of up-tempo cuts like "Lucystoners" and "Mtns of Glory" demonstrates clearly that Ray has not been oblivious to recent trends on the alternative rock and punk music scene. Nonetheless, it is her down-tempo tracks like "Laramie" and "Lazyboy" that give the album its tour de force. Rather than settle into the acoustic singer-songwriter style of earlier Indigo Girls' ballads, Ray's down-tempo style highlights her mature lyricism and low, raspy voice without sacrificing the album's edgy, percussive momentum.

As such, Ray's ballads assume their place alongside her more up-tempo tracks to produce a stylistic integration that has sometimes been lacking on Indigo Girls albums.

Ray's lyrics are often enigmatic and always challenging. When, on the album's most straight-forward cut "Black Heart Today," Ray offers up the bitter supplication "take this meanness out of me," she carries forward the time-honored Indigo Girls' tradition of bare-your-soul honesty that has made the duo's lyrics so compelling.

And Indigo Girls fans who are expecting a dose of biting social commentary will not come away disappointed.

Ray is at her best, in fact, when searching out an explanation for our myriad social ills—be they violence, sexism, or homophobia.

On a track called "Laramie," Ray recalls the brutal murder

of gay student Matthew Shepherd with the following lines: "Poor man do the biddin' for the rich man. Those red necks just doin' what the class of other's thinkin'. And tolerance, it ain't acceptance. I know you wanted it to be."

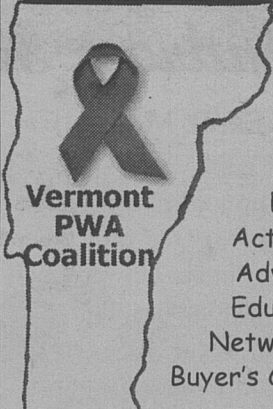
This is not to imply, however, that Ray's lyrics do not break new ground. In fact, a majority of the tracks on her album explore the related themes of gender and sexuality—issues that, for whatever reason, have never featured prominently on Indigo Girls' albums. On Ray's hardest-driving cut "Hey Castrator," for example, she explores the difficulties of coming to terms with her own sexuality as an adolescent. And on the track "Measure of Me," Ray hints at the self-loathing from which many gay and lesbian youth still suffer: "The boy, he thinks I'm damaged goods. I know he does and I guess he should ... The lion lays down with the lamb. But I can't do it, so I ain't worth a damn."

Clearly, Ray's collection of tracks offers up its share of torment. Taken as a whole, however, Ray's album is neither sullen nor defeatist. A confident track like "Lucystoners," for example, provides a healthy counterpoint to "Measure of Me." The cut's oft-repeated line "Lucystoners don't need boners" pretty much speaks for itself. And the track "Late Bloom" sounds a decidedly optimistic note. To the adversity of the past and of the moment, she responds with confidence: "I know we grow when it's over."

Fans of the Indigo Girls need not worry about the duo's

impending demise, as I did when learning of Ray's first solo release: although *Stag* unleashes an intensity that might initially catch listeners off guard, the album will fit nicely into any Indigo Girls collection. Admittedly, Ray pushes the Indigo Girls' aesthetic to the breaking point; but she does so with one eye on—and one arm around—Emily Saliers, the duo's kinder, gentler half. After all, it is only when listening to *Stag* that fans can finally discover where that enigmatic Indigo Girls title *Come On Now Social* originated.

And who is that woman with Ray on the album's cover photo, anyway?



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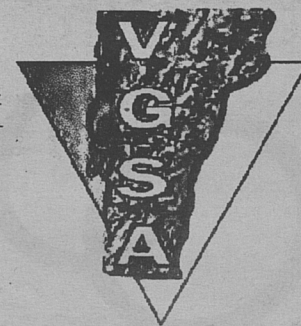
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