

'Tis of Ani

a review by Cathy Resmer

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Ani DiFranco, April 14, 1999, Memorial Auditorium, Burlington

photo: Cathy Resmer

Let me start out by saying that I love Ani DiFranco's music. Love it, live it, cherish and respect it. Her insightful and biting lyrics inspire, delight, and challenge me in ways I constantly struggle to articulate.

That out of the way, let me get to what I really want to say: If you love what Ani says she's all about – folk music, gender revolution, radical reform of the “oxymoronic” criminal justice system – do not, I repeat, *do not*, pay \$26.50 to see one of the shows on her latest tour.

And if you really need that live fix, be warned – this is not your first girlfriend's Ani.

It's not so much that *she's* changed. Yes, she got married; yes, she's grown her hair; yes, in one song on her new album, she happily proclaims “I'm not angry anymore.” Still, her passion for activism and do-it-herself work ethic are both alive and kicking ass. She just received a Gay and Lesbian American Music Award for her work as an out bi performer; she headlined a recent benefit for a criminal justice system reform project; she's playing new songs about the cultural and environmental ills of the US of A.

So it's not really *her*, it's...her audience. At the last two Ani shows I've seen – this one being the second – I've been embarrassed to be in the increasingly impolite and clueless crowd.

There was a time when the audience was as queer-friendly and progressive-minded as The Folksinger herself. Now I'm not so sure.

It used to be that fans would scream and roar at appropriate moments, but settle into a sudden, respectful hush during quieter and more intimate interludes. Not so at Memorial. During “'Tis of Thee,” a political ballad/lament that's arguably the best song on her new album (“my country 'tis of thee/to take swings at each other on the talk-show TV”), the persistent hum of conversation practically drowned out the lyrics – and I was directly in front of the eight-foot-high speakers. I looked around to see who was talking and saw the lobby doors swinging open for an exiting flock of folks who needed a break.

It was also jarring to see the tank-top, tattooed-shoulder, tight black Gap pants crowd wriggling and squealing with glee – presumably because they knew the words – during songs like “Two Little Girls.” This is a song about a woman in an abusive relationship. It's not pretty – it's sad and angry. The way these girls were holding hands and bouncing around, one might infer they were playing a hyperactive “ring around the rose-y.”

And Ani played a few clunkers. I nearly ducked out early on when she played bland versions of “Not a Pretty Girl!” and “32 Flavors.” Her new bass and keyboard-heavy style, combined with often annoying voice sampling and trick mics, ruins the gnash-

ing simplicity of older songs. Bassist Jason Mercer and scene-stealing super-keyboardist Julie Wolf seemed unnecessarily occupied during much of the show. Although I think Ani's lyrics are still right on, I'm resigned to the fact that I don't like the new musical territory she's exploring. It seems mediocre compared to the innovative songwriting and collaborations on her earlier recordings.

But perhaps I'm being harsh. It *was* still an Ani show. She did her trademark slash-and-burn guitar-ing. She threw her head back and let loose remarkably full and poignant wails. She forgot some words and took cues from the front row. She improvised and threw in things only Ani could do, like a seamless version of “Shy” that jumped to “Hat Shaped Hat” to “Take Me Home” to “I love my band” introductions to the final chorus of “Shy.”

With all her witty commentary and explosive energy, she's one of the most talented and engaging

acts on the Billboard charts. It just seems like she used to be so much more.

So if you're really into the new music – and the new fans – and you like the experimental ensemble and you've got loads of spare \$26.50s, it might be worth it to check out the “Up Up Up Up Up Up” tour roaring across the states this spring and summer.

But if you're really into the politics and righteous ways of this righteous babe, buy the CDs – or T-shirts, caps, and bumper stickers – from RBR or your local music store, and save a few bucks on tickets. Then support your local up-and-coming folksingers instead. The Burlington Coffeehouse hosts folk performers every Saturday night for a fraction of the cost of an Ani show, and I hear Katherine Quinn is back from her West Coast tour and ready to tune up for the summer with a gig at Higher Ground...▼