

The Advocate

MUSIC

Out on Their Own

After decades of rocking out together, Indigo Girls shirk the big labels for a DIY venture.

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By Karen Iris Tucker

When Amy Ray and Emily Saliers first offered up their guileless lyrics, braided harmonies, and fevered acoustic strums in Atlanta's Little Five Points pub in the mid '80s, the ladies in the audience appreciatively tossed bras and underwear at their feet. Pop culture has since had its fickle way with their careers, but Indigo Girls are nevertheless icons to a core of lesbian fans who through the years have commingled with frat boys and neo-hippies as they all pumped fists in the air at shows to the duo's signature song "Closer to Fine."

Much has happened since that single from their self-titled album launched Indigo Girls to mainstream notoriety in 1989. Nine major-label studio releases later, the pair is at a crossroads, independently issuing their most recent imprint, *Poseidon and the Bitter Bug*, after having been dropped from Hollywood Records in 2007, ostensibly due to poor sales.

Of going indie, Ray, 44, says simply, "It felt liberating." The gravelly voiced guitarist has always paved her way in DIY subterranean scenes, both in music and social activism.

Ray is seated in an empty barroom of West Hollywood's still-shuttered Troubadour club, dark eyes staring intently. Ahead of the current Indigo Girls tour, she paused for an interview during sound check for a solo show -- part of her eight-year-strong side project on her own Daemon Records label.

As her drummer Melissa York of the Butchies pounds away in the other room, Ray explains that on hearing that she and Saliers had been dropped from their label, famed producer and keyboardist Mitchell Froom "was like, 'I'm still in. Pay me whatever you can.'"

Ray says that generous spirit reigned when, to save money, the act began a breakneck three-week recording stretch for *Poseidon*, with bassist Clare Kenny, drummer Matt Chamberlain, and engineer David Boucher on board. The resulting 10-track set (paired with a second CD of stripped-down acoustic versions of the same songs, plus one bonus cut) has an unencumbered breeziness to it -- this despite its decidedly contemplative subject matter. The opening track, Saliers's "Digging for Your Dream," is a portrait of domestic abuse featuring the trenchant line "And you bloody your hands digging for your dreams."



Longtime listeners will note that Ray continues to build on her discussion of gender in the tender ballad "True Romantic," asking, "Would I still be the girl that suits your fancy? / Would I still be the boy that rocks your world?"

Of that duality, Ray explains, "I've struggled to really honor the girl [in me]. The boy is easy to honor -- that's mostly what I am."

Later that night, she takes the stage for a well-attended show, in a men's button-down shirt and tie. Coursing through Clash-inspired guitar lines, sweat darkens a long strip of shirt fabric down her back. Ray and Saliers have always been impervious to the trappings of image -- to the pressure to conform to the music industry's take on how to sell female artists. Their fans have adored them for this realness, periodically complaining on the fan site IndigoVortex about them wearing too much makeup in their glossy press photos.

"I think they kind of struggled with what to do with us," says Ray of longtime label Epic, which released most of the duo's CDs. "They knew that we weren't going to be any different than we were. They kinda didn't know what to do with what we were."

By way of explanation, Ray cites fellow musician Pink, who collaborated on the Indigo Girls cut "Rock and Roll Heaven's Gate," from the 2007 Hollywood release *Despite Our Differences*. Saliers and Ray also lent backing vocals to Pink's song "Dear Mr. President," from her album *I'm Not Dead*. "When she sort of refers to bisexuality -- her own penchant for knowing that part of her sexuality -- she's tough, but she's femme. She's got an image and it's a little more acceptable. If a woman is really hot and gay, it's better than the butch lesbian Indigo Girls."

There was a time, however, when Indigo Girls were not synonymous with the negative connotation of "butch" or "lesbian," when they enjoyed mainstream popularity and even won a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk Recording in 1990. This is simply because their music had the potential for universal appeal. That largely changed when the pair -- true to their socially conscious bent -- officially came out in the media. The tenets of the music stayed the same, but the press relentlessly branded them anew the "Lesbian Folk Duo."

"We were naive," says Ray. "We thought we could hang on to the universal thing we had going. You get tired of every critic and every review and every show where you are kind of made a parody of." Still, she is ultimately happy for what she has. "Now, I'm just proud, you know? I'm proud of our community and I'm proud of our audience. And I'm proud of me and Emily, like, being gay and not shrinking from it all the time. That would be easy," she says, followed by a deep, satisfied laugh.

Saliers, in a Skype Internet interview from Vietnam, where she was traveling, says, "I have no regrets about the way things have gone down. If, by being out, we're helping in the evolution of civil rights, I'm all for it."

Saliers, 45, wrote the CD's ebullient single "What Are You Like," radio-ready pop that sounds like a blissed-out love song. She says the cut is actually a tribute to two friends "who really saved me when I was having a rough time." By that she means, "A relationship breakup and midlife crisis. That, and the war in Iraq and the Bush administration. That's about it," she jokes.

"What Are You Like" has the potential lyrically and stylistically to endear itself to mainstream listeners. Over the years, Saliers says, "I do think that we have been boxed in by labels and that we might be more easily dismissed because of that. I have always felt that our music had a broader scope than what we were given credit for."

The latter point stands up, particularly considering the mid-career success Saliers and Ray experienced with the female-centered Lilith Fair concert tour, an ideal forum to showcase their music. *Shaming of the Sun*, released around the time of the tour in 1997, debuted at number 7 on the Billboard album chart, buoyed by the Lilith appearances.

"Lilith Fair was remarkable; I consider that tour a highlight of our entire career," says Saliers, who recalled reveling in the camaraderie of all the artists, from headliner and founder Sarah McLachlan to Sheryl Crow to Angelique Kidjo.

Since that success, Indigo Girls' mainstream popularity has ebbed considerably, while their lesbian fan base has remained true blue. This is not to say that their shows -- typically held in theaters such as Radio City Music Hall, in New York, and at summer folk festivals -- are entirely homogenous. The duo has witnessed a new generation of both gay and straight fans -- the children of die-hard enthusiasts -- attending their concerts. The difference now is that fans snap cell phone photos rather than tossing lingerie.

"They don't do that anymore," says Ray, laughing.

Is she saddened that her audiences are now largely made up of gay women, with mainstream fandom perhaps a thing of the past?

"When I listen to Joe Strummer, I'm not thinking, *That's heterosexual white boy music*. I'm thinking, *Wow, I can really relate to that song*. I want some white guy to hear what I am doing and relate to it," Ray explains. "And I want some black guy to relate to it. Songwriters want people to relate. You can't pick that -- you can't choose that. You can't force it. You just have to be happy for who does relate."

In the context of the unusual Lilith Fair experience, where female singer-songwriters rode the airwaves in impressive numbers, Saliers recognizes where her music is today. "Singer-songwriters will probably mostly remain on the fringe of popular music," she says, "but their fans are loyal. They buy records -- not just singles -- and they come to shows. Serious women writers and artists are able to maintain long, successful, and meaningful careers. I am thinking of amazing women like Lucinda Williams or Patty Griffin."

Songwriter Joan Osborne met Indigo Girls on the road and in recent years lent backing vocals to two of their CDs. She draws parallels between the evolution of their careers and her own.

"We have followings not just from people who have heard the recording but from people who have come to see live concerts year after year," says Osborne, who mentions, incidentally, that rumor has it another Lilith Fair tour is on its way.

"When I have been around Amy and Emily, I see women who are certainly not selling millions of records like their first big hit, but who have found a way to make music they are interested in and proud of. They have also found a way to work on political causes they are very much involved in -- sometimes more than their music," Osborne says.

Ray, who lives in rural Georgia with her partner, filmmaker Carrie Schrader, and Saliers, who lives in Decatur, each lead busy lives outside their songwriting. Together they founded the organization Honor the Earth in 1992, dedicated to Native environmental issues. Saliers is an avid wine collector who co-owns the Decatur-based restaurant Watershed. She has also written a book about music and spirituality with her theologian father, and the two give talks around the country on the topic.

As for their future as a musical duo, Anthony Columbo, *Billboard* charts manager, sees Indigo Girls as part of those forging forward within a new paradigm of independent artists.

"It's increasingly more common for artists to strike out on their own," Columbo says. "It's more financially feasible: You can make a cheaper record with fewer marketing costs and less overhead."

He points out that while their last CD, *Despite Our Differences*, sold only 100,000 copies, "It may not have been what Hollywood signed on to, but it's not a bad number." He adds, "You don't see a lot of female artists with careers as lengthy, from a radio and sales standpoint. This is a group that has been around over 20 years."

So what's the key to the perennial staying power of Emily Saliers and Amy Ray? Osborne says it's the least complicated thing you can imagine. "What you see is what you get with them, in a pretty deep way. They're wearing their hearts on their sleeves, as far as their politics go, as far as their music goes."