

A lot of artists defy categorization. Some do so because they are tirelessly searching for the place they fit, while others are constantly chasing trends. Some, though, are genuinely exploring and expressing their myriad influences. Amy Ray belongs in the latter group. Pulling from every direction — Patty Griffin to Patti Smith, Big Star to Bon Iver — Ray's music might best be described as folk-rock, though even that would be a tough sell, depending on the song.

Ray's musical beginnings trace back to her high school days in Atlanta, Georgia, when she and Emily Saliers formed the duo that would become the Indigo Girls. Their story started in 1981 with a basement tape called "Tuesday's Children" and went on to include a deal with Epic Records in 1988, a Grammy in 1990, and nearly 20 albums over more than 35 years.

Rooted in shared passions for harmony and justice, the Indigo Girls have forged a career that combines artistry and activism to push against every boundary and box anyone tries to put them in. As activists, they have supported as many great causes as they can, from LGBTQ+ rights to voter registration, going so far as to co-found a Native environmental justice organization, Honor the Earth, with Winona LaDuke in 1993. As artists, they have dipped their toes into a similar multitude of waters — folk, rock, country, pop, and more — but the resulting releases are always pure Indigo.

Ray's seven studio records — and three live albums — have charted even wider seas, from the political punk of 2001's *Stag* to the feminist Americana of 2018's *Holler*. Each effort seems to lean into her influences in different ways, whether it's the Allman Brothers or the Carter Family. One album finds the Butchies on full blast, another features Alison Brown on bluegrass banjo.

Both *Stag* and its follow-up, *Prom* (2005), found Ray addressing societal woes, ranging from the dangers of homophobia to the machismo of rock & roll, all while channeling her inner Replacements into a Southern punk sound that she has called "subversiveness with a smile." Ray softened her sonic stance a bit for her next two efforts, 2008's *Didn't It Feel Kinder* and 2012's *Lung of Love*, both of which felt closer in tone to her work with Indigo Girls, confronting cultural issues alongside personal ones.

In retrospect, it's easy to see how songs like *Lung of Love*'s "Bird in the Hand" and "The Rock Is My Foundation" served as signposts of what was to come next for Ray. With *Goodnight Tender* in 2014, she recorded in Asheville, North Carolina, and stepped squarely into the country music that has been a part of everything she's done. But it's not the kind of country heard on the radio; it's the country music culled from folk, bluegrass, gospel, and Southern rock, going so far as to title a tune after Duane Allman.

For 2018's *Holler*, Ray recorded, once again, with her Carolina country kin, adding horns and strings to all but split the musical distance between *Kinder* and *Tender* to create a soulful, country-tinged, gospel-infused Americana sound. More cohesively than her prior releases, *Holler* encompasses and imparts all the disparate aspects of Ray's influences in a singular offering.

Ray's vast artistic inspirations are matched only by the deep peer admiration that is reflected in her albums' guest appearances, which have included Vince Gill, Brandi Carlile, Justin Vernon, Jim James, Derek Trucks, Susan Tedeschi, Phil Cook, and others. That kind of good will is something only built from a lifetime of good deeds and great music.

When 2020 found the world immersed in a pandemic, Amy and her band turned to the digital world, and started producing and recording singles from their own makeshift studios. "Tear it Down" released along with a video in November, 2020 wrestled with Amy's upbringing in the cradle of the confederacy and pays tribute to activists working to dismantle racism. In February, 2021, Amy Ray Band released another video and song, "Muscadine", to sing of dogs and what they teach us of unconditional love. Another song, "Chuck Will's Widow" about the incessant call of the night jar came out in 2021.

These singles laid the groundwork to go into the studio in the winter of 2021 in Nashville and record a full-length record to analog tape. The upcoming release, *If It All Goes South* is due out in September 2022. IIAGS digs deeper into Amy Ray and her band's musical roots and showcases their bond and agility of 9 years and running. She is revisited by old friends Alison Brown (banjo), Phil Cook (keys and vocals), and Brandi Carlile (vocals). The addition of guest vocals by Allison Russell and Natalie Hemby along with mandolin and vocals from Sarah Jarosz bring fresh influences to the mix. The record also brings us a collaboration with Bluegrass / Americana greats I'm With Her, where they reimagine the song "Chuck Will's Widow".

Ray will be tour with Indigo Girls and her solo band through 2022 and 2023.