

At a time when hope and forgiveness seem in short supply, roots singer-songwriter Amy Ray gives us all a shot in the arm with her ninth solo album, *Holler*, due this fall from Daemon Records.

Still thriving as one half of GRAMMY-winning folk duo Indigo Girls, Ray has also produced a vital body of solo work over five studio albums and three live records (beginning with 2001's *Stag*) that explores more deeply her roots in punk and classic country music.

Last time, on 2014's *Goodnight Tender*, she gathered a band of mostly Southern players and immersed into the rich sonic tradition of old-style country music-making that had long-captured her imagination, but never fully made it into work. The result was equal-parts Appalachian gospel and late-night honky tonk.

That song cycle navigated themes of darkness and heartbreak, calling to mind the words of Southern greats like Hank Williams and Eudora Welty. From songs like "Let the Spirit" and "More Pills" emerged Ray's own bucolic vision of mortality, true love, and the afterlife. *American Songwriter* called it "beautifully well-done" and PopMatters called it "wise" and "vulnerable."

But, while many of those reviews rightly focused on Ray's ability to embody her songwriting, few focused on the impressive work of her backing musicians. Finding their spark on *Goodnight Tender*, Ray's firecracker band has evolved into a tight unit over four years of on and off touring.

Critics are unlikely to miss them on *Holler*.

Led by shape-shifting multi-instrumentalist Jeff Fielder on guitars, dobro, bass, and mandolin; Ray's band—Matt Smith on pedal steel, dobro, and guitar; Adrian Carter on fiddle and guitar; Kerry Brooks on upright bass and mandolin; Jim Brock on drums and percussion; Alison Brown on banjo, and Kofi Burbridge of Tedeschi Trucks Band on keys—has long since fused into a level of cohesion more typical of a family band. As a result, *Holler* bristles with a certain tight-knit, friendly energy. Sonically, it's reminiscent of the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main St.* or Kitty Wells' Decca singles recorded in the early 1950s. It's an increasingly elusive sound in the modern era; it's the sound of a damn good band, playing together in a room, recording it all live to analog tape.

With the group's intuitive chops serving as a foundation, Ray, together with producer Brian Speiser, takes things further with *Holler*.

She was inspired by Jim Ford's 1969 album *Harlan County*, which a friend gave her after she released *Goodnight Tender*. When the time came to start recording, she says, "I had that in my mind, musically. I knew I wanted horns and strings to bump it up to that level, to get that swagger into it."

To boot, she's called upon the masterful slide guitar of Derek Trucks (Tedeschi Trucks Band, the Allman Brothers), and vocal harmonies from Vince Gill, Brandi Carlile, the Wood Brothers, Lucy Wainwright-Roche, Phil Cook, and Justin Vernon (Bon Iver).

Though many of the album's guests are old friends, Gill was someone Ray had been hoping to work with for a while. She expressed to Alison Brown that she would love to have him sing on "Last Taxi Fare"—an emotional epiphany about a quiet moment with a man down on his luck—and it turned out Brown knew him. She was happy to make the introduction.

"I had seen him on the CMA Awards doing this thing with Taylor Swift, Alison Krauss, Sam Bush, and Edgar Meyer," Ray recalls. "When I saw him in that moment I thought, 'God that guy can be in any situation and take it up to an even higher level.' He's one of those generous singers that gives everybody space, but at the same time he raises the bar."

Though Gill and the other guest vocalists recorded their harmonies elsewhere, the bulk of *Holler* was tracked live over an intensive nine-day stint at Asheville, North Carolina's Echo Mountain Recording studio. To produce, Ray turned once again to *Goodnight Tender* producer Brian Speiser, who has also worked with Indigo Girls and Tedeschi Trucks Band. Alongside Speiser behind the board was engineer, Bobby Tis (Tedeschi Trucks Band). Working mostly fourteen and eighteen-hour days with the band, a full string and horn section, and reels upon reels of analog tape, the team steadily captured what is indisputably Ray's most sonically ambitious solo record to date.

"I knew I wanted to try to have more of a ... Southern rock feel." She explains, adding that she was hoping to make the record "a little freer in some ways, with a little of the old punk sensibility from my earlier years. I was writing with that in mind." Amy goes on to explain, "So, I would write songs like "Tonight I'm Paying the Rent" or "Last Taxi Fare" in what I think of as a trad country sort of George Jones style, but also venture into my love of punkabilly with a song like "Sparrow's Boogie".

Indeed, all of her musical interests blend beautifully on *Holler*, from the emotionally gripping title track, which she finished writing during the week of recording in Asheville, to the punk frenzy and brass-section blast of "Sparrow's Boogie."

A standout on a record full of them, "Sparrow's Boogie" is an ode to rural Georgia poet Byron Herbert Reece whose career quietly flourished in the 1940s and ended abruptly with his suicide at the age of 40 in 1958. In the song, Ray inhabits Reece's salt-of-the-earth mentality and finds spiritual renewal, as she often does, in the natural world. "Look away to the mountain blue / I could tell you a thing or two / Every seed that you sowed / Every word that you wrote / Brought another sparrow home."

Variety is one of Holler's strongest attributes. Fans of *Goodnight Tender* will fall for Alison Brown's spiderweb-like banjo on "Dadgum Down," the pep-talk to indie artists on "Tonight I'm Paying the Rent," and the intimate, Elizabeth Cotten-influenced "Fine with the Dark."

But Ray's greatest skill has always been her knack for straddling the line between the personal and the political. Ray tackles Southern identity and racism in "Sure Feels Good Anyway," and "Didn't Know a Damn Thing," while in "Bondsman (Evening in Missouri)" she paints a scene of poverty and hardship in the Ozark mountain region.

In "Oh City Man," Ray meditates on the physical spaces we inhabit, the living history that hides all around us, and the notion that we are all merely temporary visitors. "I'm chipping wood, pulling a plow / Digging up the ground where the Indian bowed."

The history of the American South is often discussed in terms of right and wrong and Ray does not hesitate in owning the moments when she was part of the problem and not the solution. "Didn't Know a Damn Thing" presents the listener with a powerful image of a teenage Amy Ray, "*buzzed and kissing*" under the glow of a laser-lights show that is being projected onto a Confederate monument. The line is a reference to Stone Mountain Park, a Mount Rushmore-like monument to the Confederacy just outside Atlanta, once the de facto meeting place for the Ku Klux Klan, it later became known for its laser displays and reputation as a teen hangout spot. What might have been pure nostalgia in a typical country song is instead a stark admission of teenage ignorance and white-privilege. "I didn't know nothin,'" she sings, "about the black kids that were missing."

Equally powerful, "Sure Feels Good Anyway," grapples with a more recent experience in her hometown of Dahlonega, Georgia. Ray wrote it following the tension that arose when someone posted a banner on an old building, identifying it as an "Historic Ku Klux Klan Meeting Hall."

"Three hundred people in my tiny town turned out to protest," she says. "That's when the flag issue was heating up."

"I have a certain sympathy with the people who are good people, but they still have a Confederate flag on their house. ...My neighbors may have been racist and homophobic at one time, but I believe that people can change. I also appreciate the fact that when I'm stuck in my driveway and don't have enough horsepower to clear all the trees that have come down in an ice storm, those people come and help me."

So, as she sings, "*I know that you don't like me / but it sure feels good anyway,*" she's referring to her attempt to reckon with the people and the place she so loves—"to balance all of that together, as a Southerner."

"I love where I come from y'all," she told a live audience earlier this year before kicking into "Sure Feels Good." "But when I walk into my polling station, they *know* who I am."

Another standout track is “Jesus Was a Walking Man.” Though she wrote it well before the crisis of family separations at the Southern U.S. border, the song bears a timely message for the listener: “Jesus would’ve let ‘em in.” To cap off the track, she called on the oratory prowess of former SNCC Freedom Singer Rutha Mae Harris, driving several hours to Albany, Georgia, just to capture Harris’s voice, field recording-style.

“I kind of cold-called. I had an introduction from my friend, and I just called her and said, ‘Would you do this?’ She had such a great attitude. She just said, ‘I’ve never done it, but I’ll try it. Sounds good to me.’

“I wanted someone who could infuse the feeling that I had into the song, that was not me. I didn’t want to have some white guy pretending to be the Louvin Brothers. I wanted someone who was really *in it*.”

Indeed, it’s that kind of artistic commitment that has made Ray’s career so full of unforgettable songs, and *Holler* feels like a culmination.

We can only hope for more.