

# Spitfire

## WHY THERE IS HOPE FOR THE AMERICAN LEFT



*Ani DiFranco's commitment to being a free agent is inspiring. While the indie musician is definitely concerned about the state of her country, she's not particularly worried about the impact George W. Bush's administration has had on civil liberties—not on hers, anyway.*

BY CINDY FILIPENKO | PHOTOS BY DANNY CLINCH

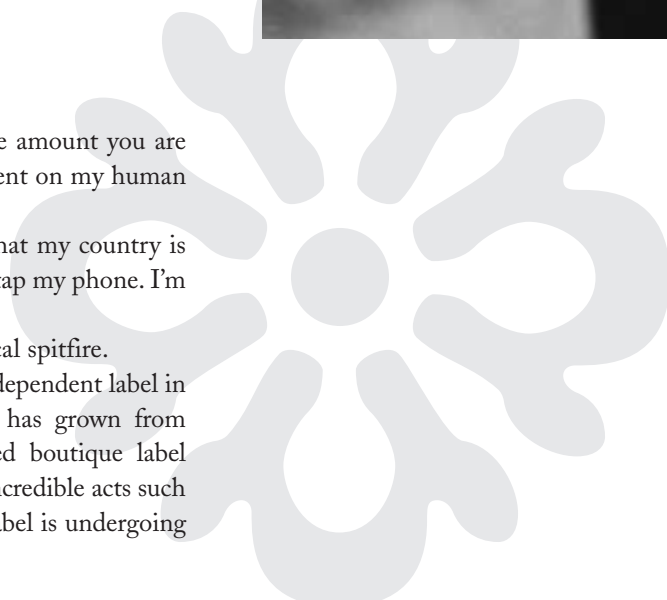
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As Utah Phillips would say, ‘The amount you resist is the amount you are free. And I think I will always resist this basic encroachment on my human rights, so I will always feel free.

‘It’s much more compelling for me to be concerned about what my country is doing in other places, or to other people. I’m fine. Go ahead and tap my phone. I’m sure my file is nice and fat—whatever.’

At 36, the small-framed DiFranco is still a political and musical spitfire.

For nearly half her life, she has operated the most successful independent label in the U.S. Started with \$50 in 1989, Righteous Babe Records has grown from DiFranco’s production and distribution vehicle to an esteemed boutique label credited with revitalizing Utah Phillips’ career and introducing incredible acts such as Toshi Reagon to a larger audience. The Buffalo, N.Y.-based label is undergoing some changes these days, but DiFranco remains optimistic.





Ani DiFranco's latest album, *Relieve*, charted in *Billboard's* Top 50 for 2006. (Photo by Danny Clinch)

"There's a little problem: People don't buy records anymore. It's all iPods and downloads—it's a new world and we're still standing in the old world going 'wait, what just happened?'"

"It's hard. It's been a big shift," DiFranco says. "We're a little company that made little indie records. All the indie record stores are gone. It's all major labels. The basic scenario at Righteous Babe was that my records paid the bills, everything else lost money, but great artists made the records. We've been seat-of-our-pants. My record sales are way down. Do the downloads compensate? I don't know yet."

"Today it's all about music placement, and advertisement, and online marketing. We don't do that. We're definitely downscaling."

And while sales may be down, DiFranco's career remains intact. Her latest album, *Relieve*, charted in *Billboard's* Top 50 for 2006. In fact, every studio album she has produced since 1996's *Dilate* has charted on the venerable music industry chart. The fact that an independent artist can have this level of success is impressive. Another equally impressive aspect of DiFranco's career is her prodigious output. Since 1990, she has released 16 full-length studio albums, 12 live albums and a handful of EPs. Additionally, she has continuously added new artists to Righteous Babe, produced a documentary concert road film, married and divorced one producer and conceived a child with another.

Many fans were shocked when the openly bisexual singer

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wed long-time musical associate Andrew “Goatboy” Gilchrist in 1998 (they divorced in 2003) on the heels of *Little Plastic Castle*. Around that time, DiFranco made a conscious decision to quit reading anything written about her or her music.

“It was such a weight of opinion, definition and stereotyping, and this claustrophobic feeling you get when you become so self-conscious,” she explains. Along the way, there’s been things like, “‘Oooh, you got married and alienated all your dyke fans.’ And it’s like, ‘Well, I could focus on people I don’t know who want me to be something for them, or I could focus on becoming myself and not worry about that.”

“I think it would be a whole lot safer to read about myself now than it was 10 years ago, when people had no idea what they were talking about. I would read anything about me and go, ‘what!?’ It would compel me to respond, saying, ‘no, I’m not that, I’m this.’ It was an inward spiral that was going nowhere,” she says.

*“We have much more meaningful conversations than back when it was, ‘so what’s with the hair?’”*

“I’m divorced from all that media feedback, but I do feel, when I talk to people to do interviews, that we have much more meaningful conversations than back when it was, ‘hey, so what’s with the hair?’”

DiFranco has definitely come a long way from the indie-alterna girl with dreads who once blasted *Ms.* magazine for including her in its 25th anniversary issue based on her business venture. The feisty DiFranco signed off her missive with: “Thanks for including me, *Ms.*, really. But just promise me one thing: If I drop dead tomorrow, tell me my gravestone won’t read: ‘Ani D. CEO.’ Please let it read: ‘songwriter, music maker, storyteller, freak.’”

Today, the music-making, storytelling, songwriting freak is living in The Big Easy and exhibiting the rarest of commodities on the American left these days: hope. After four years of spending progressively more time in New Orleans, DiFranco decided to put down some roots in one of American music’s most fertile



(Photo courtesy Righteous Babe Records)

cities. While the city continues to be rebuilt at a snail's pace, the post-flood population half of what it was, DiFranco is optimistic about the its future.

"It's starting to feel really hopeful. It feels weird to say that, because of course a lot of people are still out on their ass. New Orleans has such a spirit, a will to fucking persevere, transcend and party, despite the worst. The year anniversary [of hurricane Katrina] felt like New Year's around here. It was like we're starting over."

In her new home, iconic restaurants and bars are continuing to tear down the boards from their windows and get back in the game.

"Driving around, it's like, hey—King Rogers Seafood is back open! Look! They have coon meat again! People are slowing coming back and putting the pieces back to together, with no help from above."

Asked whether a rebuilt New Orleans will be the equivalent of a Disneyfied Bayou jazz experience, she pauses to consider why she believes it won't.

"There's too much spirit for it to be squelched by money, speculators and developers. This town is so deep, spiritually, that it can't even be described."

*"Hey, King Rogers Seafood is back open! Look! They have coon meat again! People are slowly coming back and putting the pieces back to together, with no help from above."*

Yes, a lot of people have been displaced. The communities where the brass bands spring from took really hard hits. "There's a shift, for sure, but New Orleans has come back from all kinds of horrible, awful things. If you live here, you see there's still tons happening, musically and culturally."

The strength of the city's culture is what initially drew DiFranco from her home in Upper New York state.

"You come to visit and you fall in love. New Orleans is its own culture; it's unique, powerful and really beautiful. There's something about a place where history is still alive and active.

"I grew up in a town with lots of old buildings, but they are all being torn down. Buffalo was a beautiful city—it still is—but it's been devastated by the march of development. Here it's like nothing happened. The freight trains still hoot by the shotgun houses, the ships are booming up the river, horse-drawn carriages are clapping by your window and there are kids with trombones running around the streets continuing the musical traditions. There's such a feeling of connection here, I can't leave."

While New Orleans may be her new home, she's given a gift that celebrates cultural heritage to her old stomping grounds. Righteous Babe has almost completed the renovation of a 19th-century church into a multi-use arts

complex featuring a 1,200-seat theatre.

"We're just about ready to move the Righteous Babe offices into the office space in the church. There's a gallery, a black box theatre and Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center is open in the building. The venue is pretty much done, but we're tricking it out acoustically now—right now it still sounds like a church, which isn't so good for most music."

Performing since the age of nine, DiFranco clearly knows what makes good music, and the critics agree. The august quarterly music journal *Paste* had this to say about her in reference to a glowing review of *Reprieve*:

"DiFranco's ability to at once be both righteous and self-skewering is so weirdly empowering, so honest and human and flawed, it's almost impossible not to be compelled to action by her wit."

She laughs when the quote is read to her.

"I love that—honest, human and flawed—that's the world I love, and I guess that's the one I live in and write about. My quest in music is to be as present and open and loving as I can, with myself and the world around me. People have commented a lot about the fervent passion my audience brings to my music, and I think that makes sense, because I

bring that fervent passion to it. If you throw all that love out, it all comes back; and when you feel inspired, other people feel inspired. It's the kind of energy I revel in."

By deciding to remain on the outside, DiFranco has developed a perspective that is rare in an industry rife with insecurity born of competition.

"The state of music is pretty much like the state of everything else, which is to say: massive corporate control. It's incessant marketing and inescapable commercialism standing in for much more meaningful paths to connection, community, enlightenment and art. It's not getting any easier for young people to find connection, find alternative culture, affirmation and experimentation."

Asked about the impact the great American marketing machine has had on the selling of the Iraq War, she says its power is subsiding.

"They have honed the craft of propaganda so acutely that to disseminate truth or organize around an alternative is a daunting task. For people who were not as politicized, I think there is a slow awakening. Thank God. It's long overdue, excruciatingly overdue. You're just beginning to see, in the mainstream media, people beginning to stand up and talk."

What DiFranco doesn't understand is how George W.

Bush can be president.

“The election was stolen—S-T-O-L-E-N. I was stunned that the American people allowed that to happen twice—after the first one and the namby-pamby voting machine and ballots, the fact that we allowed all of these electronic voting machines to be installed in these crucial states.

“You saw coverage from the exit polls, it was Kerry, Kerry, Kerry—he’s a shoo-in. And then, huh, at the last hour, Bush? It’s amazing the abuses of what’s known, not to mention the unknown like the jerry-rigged machines that aren’t exactly traceable. The fact that we are living with that and not in an uproar is shocking.”

DiFranco recalls being depressed when Bush moving in to the White House was only an idea.

“Before 2000, I remember standing on the stage in Rome and saying: ‘If Bush gets in, I’m moving here.’ I was there a year or two later and people where like: ‘Well, did you move?’”

DiFranco reflects. “It’s tempting to jump ship; it’s a sinking monolith that’s bringing a whole

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S-T-O-L-E-N.”*

lot of the world down with it. How can you leave when there’s so much work to be done? It’s one part love for my home and one part the need to address what’s wrong.”

The need to help fix what’s wrong may come in part from the fact that DiFranco is expecting a baby any day, along with *Relieve* producer Mike Napolitano.

“I was talking to an activist friend of mine who is really tireless and brilliant, and she was talking about feeling really weighted down. It was the fifth anniversary of 9/11. She lives in New York and she was down at Ground Zero witnessing the circus. The anniversary of Katrina was right in there, and she was watching it on the news and she was feeling just debilitated by the state of the country.

“Then she went out and hung out with a couple of friends who just had a baby. Playing with the baby, she found herself laughing. It proved to her that there is more to life than this bullshit.” ❀



(Photo courtesy Righteous Babe Records)