



FOLLOW YOUR BLISS

BY
CINDY
FILIPENKO

Po' Girl founder Allison Russell says that charging her abuser helped her move forward. (Photo: Kevin Nortz)

It's rare for women who have been sexually abused as children to put their assailants behind bars, particularly when the abuser is a parent. It's almost unheard-of to put that wrenching experience to music and sing about it. But that's exactly what Po' Girl founder Allison Russell did with "No Shame."

The nightmare of being sexually abused by someone who was supposed to protect her began when Russell was four years old and it finally stopped when she left home at age 15 to "live in a punk rock house"—another experience she committed to song with "Poor Girl," featured on Po' Girl's second album, *Vagabond Lullabies*. The realization that she had the power,

and felt a moral obligation, to stop her adoptive father from abusing another child came five years later.

"My abuser had two grown children from a previous marriage. I found out from my mother that he was being left alone with his granddaughter, my adoptive niece. My niece was four—the same age I was when he started interfering me. I realized that if I didn't take action and charge him, I would be responsible for what happened to her as well," recalls Russell from her part-time residence in Chicago.

That something was an arduous legal process undertaken by the then-20-year-old. Like most survivors, Russell went through the process with little to no family support.

“It was a source of great conflict, which is almost always the case,” says Russell.

To add to the conflict, her mother resumed living with Russell’s step father immediately after he was released from prison. While women in similar situations would see this as an act of immense betrayal, Russell has found a way of dealing with it.

“She’s 26 years older than me, but I think of her as another abused kid. I have as much of a relationship with her as I can. I treasure that. But I can never go visit her at her house.”

Despite the stress of fractured familial relationships, it’s clear that Russell has no regrets when asked what advice she’d give women in the same position.

“My advice would be that they should absolutely charge their abusers. The sentence was a slap on the wrist compared to what he’d done, but it gave me a sense of closure. And it was good to be acknowledged by our judicial system that what he did was wrong. As a condition of his parole he won’t ever be allowed to be alone with children.”

While Russell says she’s mostly healed from the abuse, she admits vestiges remain.

“There’s always going to be things that linger. But charging him really changed things, it allowed me to go forward.”

What also helped her through the process were the reassurances she received from friends and associates.

“To go through this, you have to have a really strong support group. Awna was amazing. She really encouraged me to both write ‘No Shame’ and perform that song in concert,” says Russell.

Awna is Po’ Girl member Awna Teixeira, who initially recorded the unflinchingly honest “No Shame” with Russell as part of a CD released under the band name Sofia. It was a song written in 2006 upon Russell’s adoptive father’s release from prison.

In 2009, “No Shame” was re-recorded for the Po’ Girl album *Deer in the Night* and became the title of the tour in support of the band’s fifth album. Being public about her experience has not only helped to heal Russell from the 10 years of sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of her adoptive father; it has also helped raise awareness and funds for two organizations that support sexually abused kids: Canada’s Little Warriors and the National Children’s Alliance in the U.S.

“He took 10 years from my childhood/He spent three years in jail,” she sings on “No Shame,” her matter-of-fact delivery making the reality of the situation even more horrifying. But in the last two verses of the song, Russell takes her life back, stating: “I won’t be sad. I won’t be silent. I won’t let him steal my joy.”

With an estimated one in four girls and one in six boys experiencing unwanted sexual contact, Russell knows she is bound to hear the stories of a couple of audience members whenever Po’ Girl plays “No Shame.” It’s an experience she finds both heartbreaking and really positive.

“Unfortunately, there is always recognition. But it’s a good thing to talk about it and encourage people to press charges. If we don’t talk about it and do something about it, it just keeps happening.

Now 32, Russell is a survivor committed to creating as much joy in her life as possible. Talking to Russell, it’s impossible not to catch her enthusiasm for the roots-derived music she has been making for well over a decade. More impressive than her vast musical knowledge are her openness, her spirit of fun and her generosity.

She can’t say enough positive things about the artists she works with as part of Po’ Girl and on other projects, including the Gus Cannon-inspired musical theatre piece, *Sankofa*, and a collaboration with her life partner, Chicago songwriter J.T. Nero, on which she flexes her musical muscles.

Sankofa’s inspiration, Cannon, was a black vaudeville performer who helped to popularize jug bands in the ’20s and ’30s. Cannon’s rockin’ blues has been a source of inspiration for a number of bands, including The Grateful Dead and the Carolina Chocolate Drops, a critically acclaimed South Carolina group that’s reviving the sound of the traditional African-American String Band.

With a handful of other musicians, including The Lovin’ Spoonful’s front man, John Sebastian, the Carolina Chocolate Drops developed a musical theatre piece under the name *Sankofa Strings*, as a tribute to Cannon’s groundbreaking work. When one of the ensemble’s members had a baby, Russell was asked to step in. Fellow Canadian Ndidi Onukwulu, an amazing jazz vocalist, joined *Sankofa* soon thereafter. In addition to traditional songs, many of the artists, including Russell, contributed new songs to the project. Having dropped “Strings” from the group’s name, this consortium of Americana artists is releasing an album based on the theatre piece.

“*Sankofa*” derives from a word in the Akan language of Ghana that roughly translates as “go back and get it”—a seemingly perfect concept for a project that chronicles and celebrates the African-American roots of American music. Reclaiming the past musically is a subject dear to Russell’s heart, even though critics and audiences have sometimes had a hard time defining her band’s musical style.

“[In Po’ Girl] we’re drawing from older tradition and idioms. We don’t always necessarily know what our influences are. I think Americana is a broad enough term to encompass what we do.”

Americana is a term that also is an apt descriptor for another of Russell’s projects—namely, her collaboration with Nero. This fall, Russell and Nero plan to release *Birds of Chicago Part 1*. The couple is self-producing their debut album with recording costs covered by donations and fan pre-sales through a

*“I won’t be sad.
I won’t be silent.
I won’t let him
steal my joy.”
—Allison Russell*

Kickstarter Campaign. The online fundraising tool is subtitled Arts Patronage for the 21st Century and is an important avenue for creative people—from musicians to filmmakers—to raise funds necessary to complete their projects.

Russell is an ardent fan of her partner Nero, an acclaimed Americana singer-songwriter whose approach differs from Po' Girl's. Nero employs elements of gospel, country and rock 'n' roll in his compositions, which are built on a framework of traditional old-time American music. Russell says the opportunity to work with Nero is a valuable opportunity to broaden herself as a musician and a songwriter.

"It's given me the chance to access different parts of my musical buffet," explains Russell.

Last year, the two embarked on an Eastern Canadian tour that featured Teixeira as an opening act. It was an experience Russell found exhilarating.

"I'm used to being with a full band, and it's a lot easier to travel without a drum kit," she laughs.

Russell knows a lot about travelling with a band. Since 2005, Po' Girl has played as many as 300 dates a year. With such an intense concert schedule, and with upcoming tours and new recordings planned through 2014, taking a break from the band she founded with Be Good Tanya's Trish Klein in 2003 seems like a good idea. (Klein "retired" from Po' Girl in 2007 to focus on her Be Good Tanya's work.)

"If you're going to have a band with true longevity, which is what we aspire to be, you have to make room for people to grow and do other projects," states Russell.

"It allows us to refill the creative well. It's healthy and good to take some time apart. Then we really appreciate each other when we get back together."

Priming the creative well is especially important to Russell and Teixeira, who often write together. Sometimes their collaborations are born out of noodling around on their instruments during sound checks; sometimes they start with fragments they've worked on alone; while other times one of the women will approach the other and ask for input when they're having a problem with a part of a song.

"We've co-written together over the years, and that's been really positive. We write things together than we might not have on our own. We're taking ourselves a lot more seriously as songwriters these days," says Russell.

The two plan to continue to write material during the next year as well as undertake a four-week European tour. Hopefully, Russell's upbeat demeanour will see the band's next release follow in the same vein as 2010's *Follow Your Bliss*, Po' Girl's most uplifting album yet.

"The title is a nod to the great Joseph Campbell, whose writing I have found very inspirational over the years," Russell explains.

Her admiration for the American mythologist fits. Talking to the soft-spoken Russell, it becomes evident that in learning to tell all of her stories she has found a path to peace and bliss.

"My bliss is playing music with people I love and admire and sharing that with audiences," she states.

And she is feeling more joy all the time. ❁

arts & culture

MUSIC

EMBER SWIFT

11:11

Few'll Ignite Sound

REVIEW BY CINDY FILIPENKO

Named for its release date, November 11, 2011, *11:11* is Ember Swift's 11th album and her most ambitious recording yet. Once a darling of the Toronto alternative scene, this queer activist is now a new mother living in Beijing with her Chinese husband and exploring jazz, funk and the five-note Chinese musical scale. Swift has embraced her new home, and this latest offering is an exploration of the life the Asian studies grad is now living.

Like on 2009's *Lentic*, Swift has recorded both Mandarin (she's fluent) and English

versions of the 11 songs that comprise *11:11*. Hearing her funk- and jazz-infused songs in Mandarin is quite a trip. But, as is often the case in inspired songwriting, the sentiments are as apparent in the tunes as in the words.

Standout tracks on *11:11* include the swinging "I've Fallen in Love With You," the funky "Out of Air" and the instrumental opener "Pek."

11:11 is a perfect example of the work of an artist who has continued to grow and to mature over the past 16 years and is now at the top of her game. Buy this and listen to the Mandarin disc as well—chances are, your preconceived ideas about Asian music will fall away, especially when you realize

how cool scattling can sound when featured alongside Mandarin lyrics. Hip stuff.

ANI DIFRANCO

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Righteous Babe

REVIEW BY CINDY FILIPENKO

Ani Difranco's latest release, *Which Side Are You On?*, shows that the original indie girl isn't mellowing with age. Sure, her sound might be softer, but she's as politically astute as ever. The openly bisexual Difranco came to prominence in the '90s with songwriting that was blatantly and unapologetically feminist and leftist and featured some blistering guitar-playing.