



DiFranco, Ani (b. 1970)

by Linda Rapp

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Ani DiFranco.
Photograph by Danny
Clin courtesy Righteous
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Independence and individuality are the hallmarks of the life of singer Ani DiFranco. Once called "the thinking person's acoustic punk feminist," she has drawn on an eclectic mixture of musical traditions to create a style distinctly her own. Her music is characterized by an extensive vocal range, percussive guitar technique, and intensely personal lyrics. In order to preserve her artistic freedom she founded a recording company, Righteous Babe, that has become extremely successful.

DiFranco has never hesitated to defy convention or to speak her mind. She has been forthright in expressing her views on political and social issues and has been candid about her bisexuality.

DiFranco, born September 23, 1970, is a native and lifelong resident of Buffalo, New York.

She got her first guitar at the age of nine and befriended the salesman, a local musician who brought her to his shows. Within about a year he began including her in them, launching her musical career.

When DiFranco was fifteen her parents divorced. Not wanting to leave Buffalo, she had herself declared an emancipated minor and supported herself by working at local clubs (although she was under-age) until she graduated from an arts high school.

She next moved to New York City to play in clubs but soon embarked on a nation-wide tour, living out of her car as she moved from one gig to the next. Fans clamored for albums of her work. There being none, she borrowed \$1,500 to make cassettes and sold them as she toured.

DiFranco put out her first album, *Not So Soft*, on her own label, Righteous Babe, in 1991, although the company was not officially incorporated until 1993. Righteous Babe, which DiFranco describes as "a people-friendly, sub-corporate, woman-informed, queer-happy, small business that puts music before rock stardom and ideology before profit," has always been based in Buffalo. DiFranco has demonstrated her commitment to her hometown not only by providing jobs but also by contributing to civic projects including historic preservation.

DiFranco has declined offers to sign with major recording companies in order to maintain artistic control of her career. She credits Scot Fisher, president of the company as well as her former lover, with building the successful business. By 2004 Righteous Babe had sold more than three million recordings.

For a number of years DiFranco was the label's only artist, but she is a prolific one, having produced over twenty albums by 2004. She has also created a notably diverse body of work.

Originally a solo singer and guitarist, she used an aggressive playing technique to lend force to her performances. Eventually she added a band, but she returned to her roots with *Educated Guess* (2004), which she produced herself and on which she played all the instruments.

DiFranco has always been open about her bisexuality, stating in a 1994 interview that "in any marginalized community, whether people identify themselves or not affects us all." From the beginning she has written and sung intensely personal songs about her love for women as well as men. As a result gay men and, especially, lesbians have been an important segment of her fan base from the start of her career.

Some felt betrayed, however, when she made an opposite-sex relationship the centerpiece of her album *Dilate* (1996) and subsequently married her male lover, her sound engineer Andrew Gilchrist, in 1998. The couple divorced five years later.

DiFranco has never been loath to tackle political and social issues in her music, addressing such topics as racism, gun violence, domestic abuse, and corporate culture. A self-described "fierce patriot," she expressed her love for her country in "Grand Canyon" (on *Educated Guess*) and her reaction to the events of September 11, 2001 in "Self Evident" (on *So Much Laughter, So Much Shouting*). The latter poem, begun in New York on that date, dared to question American foreign policy.

Although DiFranco writes most of her own songs, she also performs those of others. Her rendition of Dusty Springfield's "Wishin' and Hopin'" was featured in the Julia Roberts-Rupert Everett film *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997).

Previously honored with four Grammy nominations, DiFranco won her first award (shared with Brian Grunert) for art direction on *Evolve* (2003).

DiFranco spends considerable time touring, but Buffalo is still her home base. She also maintains apartments in New York and New Orleans, a city that she calls "a musical epicenter," adding "I just go there to be fed." She has set up a recording studio in her place there, which she considers a sanctuary where she can develop creative ideas.

That she has become a successful businesswoman seems to have come as a surprise to the anti-establishment DiFranco, who has spurned both major record labels and their marketing strategies, such as elaborate videos and expensive advertising campaigns, in favor of a sparer and more intimate operation. Her approach, however, garnered an industry award for Righteous Babe as the best mid-sized independent label.

That she has achieved recognition as an artist comes as no surprise to her loyal fans or to critics. A *Billboard* reviewer called her "one of the smartest lyricists in music today" and "the sexiest voice on the scene," and cited her "typical disregard for expectations or the flavor of the month."

DiFranco has chosen to use her talent to speak for social justice and joyously proclaim her own identity.

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