



Indigo Girls

by Carla Williams

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Lesbians Amy Ray and Emily Saliers are Indigo Girls, one of the most successful folk/pop duos in recording history. Ray and Saliers have carved out an enduring career that is due largely to the fierce loyalty of their fans, many of them lesbians.

Ray, a native Atlantan, and Saliers, a transplant from Connecticut, met in grade school in Atlanta and became friends. They shared a talent for writing and music and began playing together in Ray's parents' basement. During college at Emory University, they played club dates in and around Atlanta as the "B Band" and later "Saliers and Ray," developing their following and reputation as a particularly strong band in live performance.

Beginning in 1981 they released several independent records on tape and in 1985 released a vinyl single, "Crazy Game." That same year Ray selected the name Indigo Girls on "sort of a whim," she explained in an interview years later. "I found it in the dictionary . . . it's a deep blue, a root--real earthy."

The duo signed with Epic Records in 1988. Their first record for Epic, the multi-platinum *Indigo Girls*, included their best-known song, "Closer to Fine." That year they were nominated for two Grammy awards--Best New Artist (they narrowly lost to Milli Vanilli) and Best Contemporary Folk Album, which they won.

To date they have released twelve albums that include original material, including the most recent, *Become You* (2002) and *All That We Let In* (2004). Seven of their records have been certified gold or platinum.

While Indigo Girls never denied their sexuality, early on it was not made explicit in their work because they did not want to be pigeonholed as a "lesbian band." However, there were hints of it that whetted the appetites of their large lesbian audience, who were constantly looking for some sense of identity and pride and solidarity.

Rites of Passage (1992) included an impassioned cover of Mark Knopfler's "Romeo and Juliet," sung by Ray in the voice of Juliet's lover. In 1994 and 1995, the women appeared in *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Atlanta, Austin, and Seattle, Ray playing the title role opposite Saliers' Mary Magdalene. Their performances drew the ire of conservative groups who could not abide a female Jesus, let alone a lesbian one.

It was not until *Shaming of the Sun* (1997) that an explicit statement of either's homosexuality appeared--in Saliers' "It's Alright": ". . . and it's alright if you hate that way / hate me cause i'm different / you hate me cause i'm gay. . . ." Also in 1997, Indigo Girls found themselves at the center of controversy when schools throughout the South banned them from appearing on a planned high school tour.

They were banned because of their homosexuality and because another song on *Shaming of the Sun*, Ray's "Shame on You," includes the word "fucking."



The Indigo Girls Amy Ray (left) and Emily Saliers performing at Park West, Chicago, in 2005.

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Nearly as well known for the causes they support as for their music, Indigo Girls have demonstrated an enduring commitment to social and political causes, ranging from Habitat for Humanity and handgun control to gay and lesbian rights and same-sex marriage. Their touring and support for the grassroots environmental organization Honor the Earth has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for indigenous groups in North America.

To demonstrate her support for independent music, in 1990 Ray founded Daemon Records, a small not-for-profit independent label based in Atlanta. In 1999 Ray released a solo record on Daemon, *Stag*, backed by The Butchies, a North Carolina-based lesbian punk trio.

The record includes "Laramie," a song about the murder of Matthew Shepard, and "Lucystoners," which takes gay *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner to task for his magazine's lack of coverage of serious women musicians.

Although not as commercially successful or as famous as lesbian singers k.d. lang or Melissa Etheridge, Indigo Girls have nevertheless infiltrated popular culture. An Indigo Girls benefit concert is the backdrop that threads through Stephen King's novel *Rose Madder* (1995).

They appeared as a bar band in the lesbian-themed film *Boys on the Side* (1995) and as themselves in "Womyn Fest," a 1998 episode of the television show *Ellen* that spoofed women's music festivals.

In late 2001 "Indigo Girls" was the \$64,000 answer on a special "supermodel" episode of the popular television program *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* (In the show's tradition, the audience had to be polled to help model/actress Carol Alt win.)

They are also the inspiration for the independent feature film *Chasing Indigo* (2001).

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About the Author

Carla Williams is a writer and photographer from Los Angeles, who lives and works in Santa Fe. Her writings and images can be found on her website at www.carlagirl.net.