

DIFFERENT



STROKES

Icons of the lesbian/gay community. Grammy award winning recording artists. Champions of environmental and civil rights issues. Mesmerising live performers. Scourge of the conservative right. Indie label boss and restaurateur. Damn fine singer/songwriters... The Indigo Girls manage to wear a dazzling range of hats and could come with just as wide a range of expectations and prejudices built in. However, stealing a few moments during their recent UK tour, Trevor Raggatt discovered that they're also precisely the sort of people with whom you'd love to spend a half an hour putting the world to rights over a cup of coffee...

“Despite our Differences” has just come out in the UK. How do you feel about the new album?

Emily: I think it's my favourite record that we've made, honestly. I sometimes wonder if I think that about every record but I really think this one will stand the test of time. If it's not our best it's one of our strongest, partially due to the fact that Mitchell Froom produced it and that Amy had a great bunch of

songs. And I felt really good about my stuff too, the material was there. Mitchell was in on the process from the beginning; helping us arrange; or at least bouncing off ideas about arrangements. I mean, we'd get together and start the arrangements but then send him MP3s and he had his input... from the very beginning, preproduction right on through. We developed a really trusting relationship with him because usually

people don't mess with the harmonies or the structure. You know, once it's done. It's done. But he had great ideas like we'd be in the studio and he'd say, “You know, I don't think that harmony note's quite the right one; I think you could find a better one!” And you know, he'd always be right. We recorded in his home studio and we had a new engineer in David Boucher, and new team, a new record label... I think there was just lot of life infused in the project. It's kind of stripped down production, just to let the songs come through - so that's how I kinda feel about it.

Amy: Yeah, we cut it live. But when we arranged the songs, we arranged them as a duo and then we got together with Mitchell. Before the band got involved he went through and fleshed things out with just us instead of fleshing them out with the band - which is a bit different from the way we work.

Why did you choose to work with Mitchell? He's not necessarily an obvious choice for your sound...

Emily: Ah, you know he's eclectic...

Amy: Yeah, you know, he's done Crowded House but also, like, Los Lobos, Costello and Sheryl Crow, Suzanne Vega... hey, we were just great fans and when he said he'd work with us we were very excited about it. You know, it's more like a fan of thing, you know we really just wanted to work with him!

He doesn't seem to have imposed his sound. It's more as if he's created a “heightened” Indigo Girls experience.

Emily: Yeah, he's like he's the invisible producer

Amy: You know, I talked to him about this and he said he goes through different phases like any artist where he has a different approach to the artist or the record. And on some records and in some phases I think he was kinda heavy-handed on purpose and the artist wanted him to be; you know, like Suzanne Vega where he really reinvented the sound. And he's in this place right now where he just doesn't want to do that. He wants to just bring out the artist - it's just a place he's at! You know, we were wanting him to play on every song and sorta almost do that “recreation” thing ourselves. And he would be very very humble and say “Well you know, I don't wanna play over everything.”

Emily: ...but then he'd pick just three brilliant notes and totally make the song!

Amy: Yeah, he absolutely would and make such a huge difference.

This is your 10th album in 20 years of recording. Do you look at these as landmarks or is it just business as usual?

Emily: I mean, we always try to keep it fresh and working with Mitchell was kinda like that with us; going out to

California and working with the new team plus the new record label... So there were some milestones... but you know, we started in 1980 in high school, so it's even longer than 20 years. I don't think we spend a lot of time looking back on how long it's been or anything because this is just life. It comes very naturally to us. But you know when you do stop and look back and think it's quite remarkable that we've been able to maintain this musical partnership and friendship through all these years. And to make a record that I feel so good about and to still love working with Amy so much. I think that's pretty cool and rare! So I do think it's good to take note of that.

that a little more "present", maybe a little more surprising, to be talking about stuff like Bush and patriarchy in the church while you're strumming a guitar and singing a lively melody...

You're not hoping it might get picked up as Hillary's campaign song?

Amy: Ha!! Well of course that would be Emily's choice...

Emily: [Laughs] ...Hey, that would be okay with me... But you know we haven't decided who we're supporting yet...

Amy: ...Yeah, that would mean we'd have to write a song for Barack Obama too, because, you know, we like both of them... in fact, we like all the Democratic possibilities...

that should have happened, whether it's a media thing or something but there's been a shift...

Emily: And don't forget her second term was on a landslide. You can't deny her viability any more... she's not just Bill's wife, who's behind the magic curtain pulling strings...

Amy: And maybe people just want to change because it's so dire right now. People are tired of being lied to. And also a lot of Republicans seem to feel betrayed by what's going on. Particularly from the heartland, the farm community and workers; they all feel betrayed by their party because their situation is worse than it was...



You mentioned signing to Hollywood Records, were you ever tempted to go on Amy's label, Daemon, instead?

Amy: Nooooooo! Coz it's like my label's so small and although we've done some really big projects... I'm just not sure... I think it would be a conflict of interests and the label doesn't do "pop" or commercial stuff really. I'm not sure I'm equipped for it. We were very tempted, though to just do it ourselves in a very sorta internet sort of way and to try to create our own infrastructure... but it wasn't something that was going to work when we really looked at it. So we decided it might be better off if we go with Hollywood...

Can we talk about some of the songs on the record. Pendulum Swinger is a protest song but it's also a great pop song. Isn't that a bit of a strange counterpoint?

Emily: Well, you know, we like to do that, either put really intense dark lyrics in a ballad or a protest song in a pop song... well it's not that I do it on purpose to affect the listener but I think the end result is that it makes you listen in a way

Yes, the UK press has made a big thing about having a credible woman and black man running for President at last...

Amy: Well you know, I thought that Al Sharpton was a credible black man. A lot of people are saying that Barack Obama is the first credible, articulate black leader, which is so offensive because there've been so many, Sharpton, Jackson... You know, sooooo many great ones and so many women too. But of course no-one's gotten this far.

Emily: Yeah, yeah, that's the difference...

Do you think the US ready to take a step further in that direction?

Emily: I hope so, but we don't know...

Amy: You know, I've been surprised at some of the people that would support Barack or Hillary... I live in a very conservative rural area and we'll sit around and talk... coz a lot of my friends up there are Republican and they're like "Yeah, Hillary's alright." And I'd be really surprised because it used to be that everybody hated her and she was just completely vilified. I don't know why

Must be a politically uncomfortable time in the States as a liberal thinker...

Amy: Oh yeah, it's hard. And you know economically people are poorer. No matter what they say about how well our economy is doing. It is the disparity between the rich and the poor... it's practically like the middle class is disappearing. And you know, it's like Hillary, she's not like a radical left. And neither was Bill. Of course, they seem pretty radical now compared to what we've got with Bush! So there shouldn't be any misapprehension that if she gets into office it'll be with this radical left perspective. But that would be a socially radical perspective compared to Bush as far as racism, socio-economic issues, Gay issues, health care issues... I hope that would be radically different. And you know Barack Obama may be more liberal than her even...

Emily: And I think that she'd open the door and all that in politics... I hope...

Rock 'n' roll Heaven's Gate seems like a vehement indictment of the industry...

Amy: Well, I have a love/hate sort of relationship with the industry. Because



I've had a label myself for so long I'm obviously interested in the business side of things as well as the art, you know, for some crazy reason. But that song it's about... I had some friends in some notable punk bands which broke up over a pretty short period of time and it's a kinda tribute to them, their power of survival, keeping going. Because they had already reinvented themselves once or twice in the small community that they were in. And it's kinda like just keep going. Yeah sure, things can get to you but this is about the survival of the community and sticking together. It's not like a world perspective song about all the bad things that are going on in the world... it's just, like, hey... Women Power! Queer Power! Rock'n'Roll... [laughs]

So how did the collaboration with Pink come about? She's not an obvious choice to sing on Indigo Girls album

Emily: She likes all kinds of music though and is inspired by all different kinds of music. She invited us to sing on a track on her album called *Dear Mr President*, which is a beautiful song, very poignantly political and very human and moving. And so we had a nice chemistry and sang well together so we said, "Well, we're out on the West Coast making a record. If you're around you want to come sing on ours?" And she said "Yeah." And so we called her up and she did. And you know Pink is mostly known as a pop artist but she loves acoustic music too, she grew up on gospel... yeah, she's a mixed bag.

Amy: [laughs] And she can sing the third part to maybe 60% of our songs - I dunno, it's really flattering that she's a fan and we're big fans of hers. So I guess it's all worked out.

Dirt and Dead Ends seems to have a bit of Dylan vibe going on, was that a conscious thing?

Amy: No not a conscious thing, I mean, I love Dylan but it's just a story from my community... a true story... I just wrote

it. It was just one of those songs that kinda came out and I'd buried it. I was listening back to tapes and stuff and I'd forgotten I'd even recorded it. But then when I heard it again, it was almost a full song. And that's the live demo, it's just me at home. [**Emily:** *Yeah, now that was cool!*] And they took the track off this little DAT tape that I use to just record everything onto when I'm writing, did some sonic magic on it to take some of the crap out of it... and that's it, basically just the demo. Oh yeah, and then Clare came in and we added the bass. We put the song in the middle and the bass on either side and Mat came in and played toms and we put that on either side. So it became this, like... montage... and it's cool. Just really cool, you know, the technology and all that.

On this album it seems Amy's writing focuses more on that story song thing whereas Emily's is a bit more... internal?

Amy: Yeah, maybe. I guess I've been in a sort a phase [chuckles]

Emily: Yeah, but I think that's right.

Amy: It's a phase...

How do the songs change... when you bring them together to the group?

Amy: Well that one was really a solo song. So that one was a little different. But to me I like to try to think about Emily when I'm writing. Sometimes it's weird because some of the story songs work better as solo songs - which is something I'm trying to crack because I don't want to be that way! You know, I want to have some story songs and be able to write them so they work... But you know it all kind comes together and we both have a lot of faith in the process so that even in the beginning when we both feel like "So how on earth are we gonna make this work?" - and we always feel that way, every time - we also know that we just going to work on the arrangements and they're going to fall into place and come together... and that's just so cool.

Emily: And I always think my songs are made much better by what Amy puts on them. And I know that because when I go to sing solo and don't have Amy's parts it just feels so empty. And it's not just because I think I'm used to hearing her parts. It's because it really just elevates the songs.

Amy: Yeah, I don't even try to play any of our stuff on my own - there's just no point! [laughs] I think Emily can get away with it more than I can do because she is already playing a load of the complex guitar stuff anyway. When I play by myself it's just all strum strum!

So many people focus on your singing and writing do you feel your musicianship is under-rated?

Amy: Mine's not! I'm not that good, ha ha!

Emily: You know, we just use what's at our disposal. It's like I learned to play some banjo, to add a different texture. But I'm not a real banjo player I just play it like a guitar, or ukulele the same. And Amy plays harmonica.

Amy: Yeah, but Emily is a great guitar player; she's just got the gift! I mean I'm not a "player" but I consider Emily to be a player. Like the mandolin, that's Emily, well I played one simple little part, kinda basic... but Emily plays most of that.

Emily: They're simple little sort of melodic things.

Amy: Yeah, though, I think women don't always get credit as players, that's true. But I certainly wouldn't use us as the shining example because we know a lot of women players that are just amazing and don't get the credit they deserve as players...

I've seen your writing partnership compared to Lennon and McCartney - Amy bringing in some of the cynicism, while Emily softens that... and vice versa. Is that a valid comparison?

Amy: Hey, I think Emily songs are pretty cynical [laughs].

Emily: Yeah, on this record I'm definitely more cynical. But, yeah, I think it's true to a certain extent. It's just that, hmmm, in my heart of hearts I want to be Lennon, you know! So it's a hard pill to swallow. But you're right I do think my songs tend to be sweeter.

Amy: Yeah, but Lennon's dead! McCartney's still alive and created like this serious catalogue of pop songs. I mean, I love John - huge John Lennon fan - and I would never compare us to them, because that's like a whole other realm

Emily: Yeah, that's like sacred! [laughs] **There seems to be a lot more rock influence and crunchy guitars on this album.**

Amy: Well we did a couple of records like *Come on Now Social* that had some rock stuff on but I think we'd gotten away

from that for a couple of records. Part of that was I expressed a deep desire to do very acoustic records because I felt like that would be fun, and our forté. But on this record we tried to make sure we weren't limiting ourselves.

Emily: Yeah, on this one it was a mix, definitely a mix. And I think we got a good balance in terms of that.

That's interesting because, Prom was so different from the Indigo Girls and had such a garage band feel.

Amy: [Laughs] Yeah will that was all I could afford! No no no, it's not that at all. The funny thing is that in our group, Emily has always stressed wanting to have more electric stuff that we've ever had. But then there was me going, "Oh, but I did electric thing by myself so let's go play some acoustic guitars!" so actually, we're pretty equal on the wanting to play the electric guitar thing. Of course, some of these songs like *Rock 'n' Roll Heaven's Gate* do grow out of that side of me. Just so happens the ended up on an Indigo Girls record. Me, my goal is to write more *Three County Highways*,

which is very sort of duo harmonies, because I love that shit. Love it.

Speaking of Amy's last solo disk, is there any chance of seeing Emily's much anticipated solo album?

Emily: Oh my God, if I can only get off my ass! I wrote some songs I thought were going to go on a record last year. But then those songs, most of them, went on the Indigo Girls record - which I'm really happy about, because of the way they turned out. I have started thinking about it, thinking more about writing again, and I have some other songs that I've written. But I don't think I'm an overly motivated person. I think it just has to be the right time and I think that some of it was a confidence issue. But I'm over that and I think it'll just be when I get another block of time to produce it, and then I'll do it.

It's odd to think confidence could be an issue for you. It's easy to forget experienced artists are human beings and have confidence crises like anyone...

Emily: Oh no, I don't forget, never. Every day, every single day! [Laughs] I

think it's in the nature of being an artist too, always questioning your art, can you make it better, is it saying what you want to say...

Amy: Well you see the trick with making solo records is not to have very high standards! Ha ha! I mean with my thing, I just needed to get it out of my system. I didn't have any real sense of it going out into the wider world. It was a baby little record on a baby little label so I didn't have any aspirations, I didn't have that confidence thing.

Emily: I get bogged down mentally, you know, the voices in my head... "You're not good enough, it's not going to stand up to what you've done with Amy..."

Amy: You see, that's okay though. I'm always like "Well this isn't going to be the Indigo Girls."

Emily: Yeah, it won't stop me from doing it. But those are the things I struggle with, you know, personally. But I'm actually getting better about now. Thanks for the therapy session! [Chuckle]





Photo: Ian Spain



Photo: Ian Spain

You're both known for your stance on various issues. Do you see yourself as musicians who've been able to use your position to promote the activism or as activists, who just happened to be musicians?

Emily: I think it's both. I think that no matter what we did we'd be activists. Very early on, we just wanted to be citizens and take part because there's a lot of work to be done. We recognized the importance of community and grass-roots activism. And certainly through the music because we've been around long enough and established a certain amount of success we're able to network, be mentors - not just because of the success but because of our resources. Now it's just become like a circular thing; we're activists who are musicians who are also able to be better activists because we're musicians.

Although you're well known for supporting Lesbian/Gay issues it doesn't come through particularly explicitly

in Indigo Girls lyrics unlike Amy's solo albums...

Emily: It does come out though, like in *Rock 'n' Roll Heaven's Gate*

Amy: I think it's just integrated and it's in our language...

Emily: Yeah, if I'm writing a song about another woman I don't have to flesh that out but I'm still thinking about that person while I'm writing the song. Though I have written songs that explicitly talk about being gay; *It's All Right*, other songs like *Philosophy of Loss*. And then in *Rock 'n' Roll Heaven's Gate* "...three political queers..." it's there.

Amy: I think we do just as much work on native environmental issues. And I think a lot of the political work we do just starts informing our vocabulary in songs and they just become part of that. But you know, we're not didactic political writers, necessarily.

Emily: We're not good enough, ha ha. *I felt Amy's own album were more along those lines.*

Amy: Yeah, my solo stuff is all about the queer-youth agenda. And I think because I find when I write about those things, especially the gender stuff, they're very intimate, in particular to me.

It felt very confessional album. I almost felt a little voyeuristic listening to it...

Amy: [Laughs] Well good! Ha ha ha!! But I think that's the community I exist in. In the punk world it's a younger community and very transgender; punks and boys and girls and gay and straight. But a very alternative life community. And so that's the language we use in that community; those are the things we talk about. But I don't want to make ten records about the same thing so I think it's like I've got that out of my system! "Okay so I've talked about that enough! Now I'll write about something else..."

Changing the subject, we're going to see you tomorrow at Brighton. How's the reaction on the tour been so far?

Emily: Fantastic, I mean, Shepherds Bush Empire last night was a great show, a great crowd, lots of energy. And we been fortunate enough that people who are working with us here have got us great radio and press, the BBC and whatever. It's always an honour to be on the BBC, no matter what. And we love touring in the UK, and I want to come over and do it more often, maybe do some festivals. It's always fun to experience a different country.

Amy: Yeah, we've played the Concorde in Brighton a couple of times before. It's gonna be great. Sort of more in your face, closer together, spit flying! It'll be rocking!

Understand you've done some recording at Abbey Road this week too... it's a really iconic place

Emily: Yeah, we did a sort of live web-radio thing there.

Amy: Iconic yeah, I was taking all these pictures. There's been so much in the past happened there, it was intense. I mean, even just being in the UK is iconic. I'm thinking about things like I wonder where Clash played when they were here. I mean in your mind, perhaps because we don't live here, were thinking about all these things...

Emily: Yeah, like Bloomsbury, I saw it on the map and the thought, "Wow, that's where Virginia Woolf lived!"

Amy: Yeah, and her other house is near Brighton I think

I suppose it's that distance thing. It makes everything more exotic. It's like even if Route 66 is just some road in the middle of nowhere. It's Route 66!

Amy: Mind you, Route 66 is very special for us to, I have to say. We have taken a couple of side trips to go there... just visit, ha ha!! Yeah, but I guess for you it's not the same writing about the M6 or the M5 or something...