

Amy Ray's progression as a singer/songwriter has taken her up and down all of the switchback trails of the South, from the dive bars of Saturday night to church on Sunday morning, with some coffeehouses and arenas along the way, too. *Goodnight Tender*, her first country album, integrates all of these influences in fresh, surprising ways and testifies to her range and virtuosity as an artist who is always game to follow a thread of melody into new and rugged territory.

"Although Southern Rock was standard fare at my high school in Decatur, Georgia, I didn't really grow up with the country music I love now," she says.

Instead, she and her high school friend, Emily Saliers, would sneak into bars with fake I.D.s and play covers until they began writing their own poetically rich folk material that made the Indigo Girls one of the most successful and enduring duos in contemporary music. They continue to grow as collaborators, writing, recording, and touring together, and critics and listeners still marvel at their generative and resonant eloquence as artists and social activists. Meanwhile, Ray, a self-described "workaholic," also has established a solo career, initially surprising everyone with her hard-driving songs and defiant, rocker's growl on *Stag*, her first solo release in 2001, which she since has followed with *Prom*, *Live from Knoxville*, *Didn't It Feel Kinder*, *MVP Live*, and *Lung of Love*.

Her extracurricular forays, musical curiosity, and jams and late-night conversations with other artists led her to conclude that punk and country are, in fact, kissing cousins.

"The Southern punks I knew listened to and got their swagger from classic country as much as anything else," she says. "Simple country tunes, mountain songs, and heart-breaking honky-tonk sounds held the same populism and rebellion that I loved about punk rock. Neko Case and Loretta Lynn were cut from the same cloth. The Clash and Hank Williams were the heartbeat of populist songwriting. Danielle Howle and Patsy Cline were long lost blood relations. George Jones and Paul Westerberg had the same demons. There was hillbilly rock running through the veins of The Cramps."

Similarly, the urgent, plaintive ache that characterizes all of Ray's powerhouse vocals lends itself beautifully to country music, though her singing is soft and gentle here, suited to back-porches and small campfires.

"In the 90's, I went out and bought classic country vinyl and fell in love with it," she says. "I pulled out the old field recording LP's my grandma gave me and listened to them with a whole different ear. The sounds of an old woman singing Appalachian murder ballads in her kitchen, the chain gangs working the fields, songs from the mountain to the coast reflecting a beauty that was rough and honest. Alan Lomax became a fixture in my life, and I realized a new perspective on singing and songwriting. I moved up to rural North Georgia in 1993, to a town I had gone to church camp in as a kid. The rich Appalachian culture and music started seeping into my life and songs. The first song I wrote that came out of all this was a little mountain ditty I recorded for *Stag*, a hanging song called 'Johnny Rottentail.'"

Ray continued to write material in that vein, songs that did not quite fit into the Indigo Girls catalog, or on a rock or punk album. "Goodnight Tender" evokes a loving lullaby from a traveler far from home and also happens to name-check her dog, Tender; "Anyhow" came to her when she watched her dog, Chevron grappling with a copperhead snake in the woods ("I was thinking about half a life left"); and "My Dog" is a ditty she originally wrote on a Bouzouki. "This is a dog-heavy album," she says with a laugh, which should please good ol' boys and girls. There are also traveling songs, songs of lost love and regret, (the tunes "More Pills," "Broken Record" and "Time Zone") and a couple of gospel numbers, "The Gig That Matters" and "Let the Spirit." In fact, her spirituality – Ray was a religion and literature major, and always puts those studies to effective

use – pervades much of this album, including “Hunter’s Prayer,” which was inspired by her flannel-clad neighbors in north Georgia and her work with Native American causes, along with the meditative “Oyster and Pearl.”

During this time she began approaching other musicians who caught her ear – high-lonesome vocalists and other players who knew their way around a banjo, dobro, mandolin, fiddle, and pedal steel. Some, like her, also claimed punk roots. “I wanted to get just the right mix of musicians together, and stay true to old recording styles, using old microphones and old reverb plates, and the right set-up, like an old-school Nashville studio,” she says. “I knew the music would fall into place then and take on a life of its own.”

As always, she was striving for a certain purity.

“We played together at a songwriters-in-the-round event in Durham,” says Phil Cook of Megafaun fame, “and the next day, she called me and said, ‘I’ve got a feeling here – what do you think about helping with a country project?’”

He ended up playing banjo, electric guitar, Wurlitzer and singing on *Goodnight Tender*.

“This project felt and sounds so spontaneous because Amy has an uncanny ability to latch on to the energy in a room and encourage its flow,” Cook says. “She recognizes the spark in every situation and every artist and knows exactly how to fan it. I think Amy went back to the land and found she has a country soul. She was singing from her core, as if she were born to this style of music.”

Using her intuitive, organic approach, she assembled two different combinations of players for the album. Jeff Fielder (guitars, dobro, banjo, piano, bass), Jim Brock (drums), Jake Hopping (stand up bass), Matt Smith (pedal steel) and Adrian Carter (fiddle) helped round out the first group. Ray knew the teen-age Carter “walked the line between his high school punk band and Nashville fiddle workshops” and lured him to the studio during the middle of his senior finals. Multi-instrumentalist, Jeff Fielder became a center-piece for the record, and drummer, Jim Brock anchored the songs firmly in southern and country traditions. She brought in Asheville’s Matt Smith for pedal steel, the instrument that defined the original, tear-stained “Nashville Sound.”

For the second combo, she convened Phil Cook (banjo, Wurly, guitar, vocals), Justin Vernon (mandolin, banjo, guitar, vocals), Brad Cook (bass, vocals), Terry Lonergan (drums), and vocalist Heather McEntire. “Heather’s voice is both the call of the banshee and the siren,” Ray says. “She has sung over thrash bands and in alt-country, so I tried to learn from her, how to make that transition and modulate my vocals.” McEntire also wrote and sang lead on the song “When You Come for Me,” the only one not penned by Ray on the album of 12 originals.

Blueswoman Susan Tedeschi contributed vocals to “Duane Allman,” a tribute to one of Ray’s heroes, who left a “god-sized hole,” and belter Hannah Thomas added harmonies to “Hunter’s Prayer.”

Ray enlisted the vocal stylings of “long time friend and vocal icon,” Kelly Hogan for harmonies on the songs “Goodnight Tender” and “Time Zone.”

“The bloodlines and kinships in music feel pretty powerful and infinite to me these days,” Ray says. “I’ve heard some folks say that country is where punks go to die. I don’t know about all that, but I imagine the last mile is the most lonesome, and there’s nothing like the sound of a pedal steel to keep you company.”