

The Indigo Girls (Emily Saliers and Amy Ray) released their sixteenth studio album, *One Lost Day*, on June 2nd. Vast in its reach, but unified by the traveler's sense of wonder, gratitude, and empathy, *One Lost Day* moves like a centrifuge, pulling the listener close to linger in the small moment, then casting out onto sonic currents. This is music of the past, present, and future — a boundlessness earned and not bestowed. *One Lost Day* has a feeling of music composed *across* time, not just *in* time. These songs are rooted in tradition and inventive, too: nourished in dark soils, leafing and luminous.

Memories here are more than specters; they are evolutions. The album maps the dim corridors of the heart and mind, lifting and landing the listener across state lines and continents. Place is a character rich in the universal specific: "Boots on a board in a barn" in "Texas Was Clean," boys "under the bridge on the river shoals off GA 9" in "Fishtails," the New Orleans' 1788 fire and the fence around the St. Louis cemetery in "Elizabeth," the "sunny twist of Venice Chez Jay" in "Southern California is Your Girlfriend," and the devil-spawned Angola prison in Louisiana where three black men sat wrongly convicted for decades, confined in solitary.

The dirge-like ballad "Findlay, Ohio 1968" opens with a searing string and piano arrangement that feels like slipping through a tear in the space-time continuum. After we reach the violin's held high-C and the heartbeat drums, and before Saliers kicks in with her chilling vocals, we hover, suspended in time, before landing gently on the hot asphalt of Grammy's driveway in 1968, "poking hot tar bubbles with a stick...the smell of the trash and leaves burning in the can." What unfolds is pure narrative intuition, wherein the stuff of life, life's inventory — the pall of the impending Kent State massacre, Sexton's poetry, Cathy's grief-stricken, beer-drinking mom, the dad who never returned from Vietnam, the fence-scaling girl ripping jeans, the boy with wandering heart and hands, the smell of Trenton's refineries and the slapping of the station wagon's wheels — are the metaphoric legs that carry the story and this song across time and distance.

"Fishtails" tackles similar themes — loss of innocence, coming of age — but through a much different lens. Here, the narrator is the observer reflecting on the tender recklessness of neighborhood kids, killing time in an abandoned copper mine, waiting to flee the confines of their small world, raging and hoping and "fishtailing in the dark from the time that they are born." But the song is infused with new meaning in the juxtaposition of the boys' lives with Ray's father's long-ago Florida boyhood — so similar in its restlessness, its sweet violence. Circularity rings like a keening bell, dazzling and devastating. A multi-layered instrumentalism allows the long notes of the past to cradle the mid-tempo of the present, a lush but understated orchestration.

Regarding the aching ballad, "If I Don't Leave Here Now," Saliers says, "The song explores the terrible affliction of addiction and was partly inspired right after Philip Seymour Hoffman died. I was deeply affected by his death, but also know that addiction seldom spares the user. It is a song about the desperate attempt to leave a bad situation where no amount of anything is ever enough." The elegiac, stripped-down sound pairs beautifully with tender lyrics that recognize addiction not as a denial of life, but as a dangerous insatiability for life ("Killing yourself to keep from running out of life") — turning the conventional addiction narrative on its head.

"I'd rather have the strength to see through the lens of reality than rose-colored glasses," Ray says in reference to the raucous, rollicking "Happy in the Sorrow Key." "Musically, I was inspired by the feel of Paul Weller and The Jam, but then I also wanted this big orchestral bridge to mirror the feeling of lying in my bunk at night on the tour bus and drifting off to sleep — scared but in awe of the process of life." The dissonance between the plaintive lyrics and the quick-tempoed, lush instrumentalism nails the ambiguity of the emotion, while also managing to create a rock song that is both fun and dirty.

A majority of the songs in this collection explore a time and place endemic to the narrator's sense of self. "Texas Was Clean" is a plucky, whispery elegy to lands loved and left behind. "It became about how a place gets reinvented and defined by your experiences over time," says Ray. "When I was young, Texas seemed so far away and remote, but now it feels like it is part of me — for the lives it's claimed and for the life it's given to me." "Elizabeth," the album's joyful opener, takes place in New Orleans, "with its ghosts and underbelly," explains Saliers. "It's the story of kinship and music and whiskey, L'il Queenie and the Big Easy whose bloody print is indelible. It's denying Facebook and simply allowing someone from your past to remain in all her splendid glory." In fact, much of this album seems to argue against our culture's obsession with immediate gratification, both a musical and lyrical affinity for the journey and not the journey's memento.

Venturing further north, "Alberta" is about the indelible impressions of a place and its history, those that we keep close and those that we leave behind. "Olympia Inn" pays homage to a bus driver named Johnny who called everyone "darling" and shared his lost loves, triumphs, and failures late at night as the band toured the UK and Ireland. It's a wild, rocking ride of a song. "It's meant to be romp with some swagger and self-deprecation thrown in for good measure," says Ray. "Emily experimented with different guitar sounds and vocal approaches to bring her parts to life, and then Jordan [producer and contributing musician] put the organ down at the end and used The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion as an inspiration."

Like a good book, *One Lost Day* builds to the climactic "The Rise of The Black Messiah" about two-thirds of the way through the album, imbuing the whole with a structural integrity inherent to the best storytelling. This hard-hitting rock song is chilling, a battle-cry for victims of institutional racism. "My friend I heard you tell of slavery's end but have you heard of mass incarceration/That ol' Jim Crow he just keeps getting born with a new hanging rope for the black man's scourge," bellows Ray. The song was inspired by a letter Ray received about seven years ago from Herman Wallace, one of the so-called "Angola 3": a trio of young black men framed for the murder of a prison guard as punishment for speaking out about the horrifying conditions in the Angola prison in Louisiana. Wallace spent decades in solitary confinement before finally receiving "compassionate release" just days before his death from cancer. In his letter, he asked Ray to share his story, and "The Rise of The Black Messiah" is Ray's anthemic response; a slow-building, thunderous rock song anchored by Brady Blade's spirited, soulful drums.

On *One Lost Day*, the Girl's signature harmonies are in full display: rolling, recursive, hot and capacious as prayer. Through dynamic soundscapes created in tandem with producer Jordan Brooke Hamlin, the album reveals structural innovations that enhance meaning. A classically-trained horn player, Hamlin contributed "layered ethereal horn parts and a strong vision and ear," says Saliers. With Hamlin, the Girls took new risks that paid huge dividends. The collaborative

spirit is loud here, utilizing a host of musicians both familiar and new to the duo. *One Lost Day* was recorded in studios in Nashville, TN and mixed by Brian Joseph at Justin Vernon's (of Bon Iver) April Base Studios in Fall Creek, WI and at the Parhelion Recording Studios in Atlanta, GA. Amy and Emily brought in Lex Price (k.d. lang, Mindy Smith), Butterfly Boucher (Ingrid Michaelson, Katie Herzig, Mat Kearney), Fred Eltringham (Sheryl Crow, The Wallflowers, Gigolo Aunts) and Chris Donohue (Dave Matthews, Patty Griffin, Lucinda Williams, Robert Plant) to bring a good dose of infectious energy and creativity to the scene. Additionally, musicians Brady Blade and Carol Isaacs — longstanding studio collaborators and live-show band members with the Girls — returned, along with the current Indigo Girls' touring band. Isaacs contributes haunting piano parts on songs such as "Come a Long Way," "If I Don't Leave Here Now," and "Fishtails," and sonorous accordion parts to "Spread the Pain Around" and "Findlay, Ohio 1968." Blade offers his free-wheelin', Louisiana drumming style to "Fishtails," "Elizabeth," "Texas Was Clean," and the "The Rise of The Black Messiah." The inputs of many of the contributing musicians are captured in a series of videos by the talented Kathlyn Horan, who filmed the crew during the recording of the album. The videos are available on the Indigo Girls' website and in them we glimpse the ferocity and attention to detail that has helped the Indigo Girls thrive through the various capitulations of a changing music industry. Starting with 2009's *Poseidon and the Bitter Bug*, their eleventh studio album, the Girls formed their own label, IG Recordings, which is now distributed by Vanguard/Concord Music Group. The move aligns with their long held commitment to creative freedom, energy they've also devoted to various social and environmental causes.

The Indigo Girls have spent thirty-five years performing together, produced fifteen albums (seven gold, four platinum, and one double platinum), earned a Grammy and seven Grammy nominations, and have toured arenas, festivals, and clubs the world over. It is rare to find musicians together so long, rarer still with such profound successes. Their music lives in the hearts of generations of dedicated fans and continues to inspire young musicians. This loyalty is not accidental. Perhaps their relevance over three decades can be credited to the mighty collisions of distinct aesthetics forging new paths over time. The Girls' refinement — not only of style and skill, but of their own creative processes — allows access to ever new and liminal spaces.

A long creative marriage fosters its own scrappy beauty, though, and theirs grows more nuanced, weatherworn, and lovely in each successive album. Saliers and Ray live separate lives, take on independent projects, but share "the same set of values," says Saliers. "We both embrace the struggle, share the same energy. We are sisters in our embrace of life. Observers." That sort of artistic kinship is rare and cosmic. Here, then, are the stars of that labor, the next chapter.

- Jessica Hendry Nelson
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