



The Indigo Girls: Equal Partners In A Mystery

Indigo Girls Amy Ray and Emily Saliers once tried to write a song together and it was horrible.

"We ripped off a lot of Bob Dylan lines and stuck a chorus on it," laughs Emily. "It was really bad. Emotionally, we just couldn't grasp it. It was just... fluffy."

The Georgia duo, who gave their only New Zealand concert in Auckland at the end of February, are distinctly different on stage. Yet they are also extraordinarily complementary. As close friends since the ages of nine and 10 (by which time both had begun to write songs), and performers who are almost joined at the hip in the way they get it done, the question of how they write together has to be asked. But they can't.

"Our personalities are so different. We use different words and different chords. And we write too differently. Amy is stream of consciousness and doesn't censor herself at all. And she writes at night. She's much more in touch with her anger and getting that out. I can't really get to an aggressive dark place like she can. My writing, which I do during the day, is more narrative, more specific. I can't imagine ever writing with anyone. You come up with a line that comes right from the heart, and the other one goes... naaaahhhhh."

So you don't reject each other's songs?

"Once, a few years ago, Amy brought me a song she had written about Squeaky Fromm and I couldn't relate to her perspective on it. That's the only one. Now I wouldn't mind. I'd be willing to learn it. It's a great song. We don't actually critique each other very much. Amy was a bit worried when I wrote 'it's only life after all', in 'Closer To Fine', but she came around to it. We always make sure we understand each other's songs."

Emily lays herself pretty bare in her lyrics, carefully taking apart each breakdown or personal failing...

"There are certain lines I wouldn't cross, but I don't mind talking about myself, my faults. I don't know what people are saying. I just don't think about it."

Amy hauls some pretty heavy emotional carnage along too. One of the remarkable things about the Indigo Girls is they can sound so uplifting and inspirational; yet, in their lyrics, their lives are often hurtling down the toilet, with the prince of darkness banging on the door, wanting to close the lid.

"Yeah, it's a funny thing isn't it? So much of life involves struggle. I do think there is a lot of beauty in sadness. We're all so complicated, it's all about balancing joy and pain. But I think both Amy and I are vibrantly alive, we have great hope for humanity. Plus, we have such a great time playing."

Amy and Emily come from a part of America where fervent religious behaviour is almost ingrained. Amy's frenzied shrieking on the now-never-performed 'All Along The Watchtower', and her similarly scary vocal antics on Neil Young's 'Cortez The Killer' near the end of their Auckland encore, suggest the stuff that haunts Jerry Lee Lewis haunts her as well.

"Amy and I were actually both raised as Methodists, but that Southern American black gospel thing, the speaking in tongues, it's all rooted there, sure. Amy majored in religion and my father is a minister. I still hold to most of the beliefs I grew up with, where Amy is more native American, spiritually. We're both very spiritual."

In 1993 the duo performed in an Atlanta production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Perhaps fittingly, in view of the adoration the Indigo Girls seem to attract, Amy, in a gender balanced cast, played Jesus. Emily was Mary. It has since become the biggest seller on Amy's own label.

Some interesting people have sung and played on Indigo Girls albums. REM not only turned up on their eponymous second release (the classic that won the Grammy), but the punters got a big sticker telling them that on the cover.

"Amy met Michael in a bar in Athens and invited him to come and hear us. We finished up hanging out a lot together and they came and sang on our album. Michael is lovely. But I haven't seen him in a while."

REM took the Indigos off on tour — into the big hockey stadiums.

"Yeah, that was amazing. Madison Square Garden and Amy and I with our two guitars, like tiny ants on the stage."

David Crosby sang backup on 'Galileo', the hit that should have been off *Rites Of Passage*. So, was the Croc carted into the studio in a wheelbarrow, revived with a bucket of ice-cold water, and gaffa-taped to the mic stand? Huh Emily? Is it time now for some hard goss?

Emily isn't having any of it (and this from some-

one who writes songs about women doing cocaine in her bathroom).

"David is such a good singer, such a great harmoniser. We were pretty good friends and he always said he wanted to sing on an Indigo Girls record. So, I called him up. I grew up with Crosby, Stills and Nash, so it was pretty special for me to have him singing with us. He actually recorded my song 'Fare Thee Well', but it didn't come out."

Okay, the Roches?

"I've been listening to them since I was a baby-sitter, aged 13. Their harmonies are as good and their lyrics are so wacky, so original. To me, they were the pioneers of women with guitars."

Emily says the first record she ever bought was 'I Want You Back' by the Jackson Five. From that she went on to all the Jackson Five records, and then on to a multitude of singer-songwriters. Amy admits to Elton John's *Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player* as her first, followed by a lot more Elton John, a heap of her sister's records ("Grace Slick and some psychedelic stuff") and then a total embracing of post-punk. She is a big Replacements fan and, as you see on stage, she is as much a rock 'n' roller as Emily is a folkie.

So what's the duo role model here? The Everly Brothers? Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris? (They did a killer version of 'Wild Horses' at the sound-check).

"Well, we have been given the Everly Brothers one."

So you beat each other up off stage?

"No, not at all. We're like sisters, real close. But in terms of sensibilities, and I'm not talking about talent here, don't get me wrong, it's most like Neil Young and Joni Mitchell. Neil's got the rock 'n' roll and the yelling and Joni does the intellectual narrative thing. It's kinda like that."

The Indigo Girls are one of those bands who beg you to write to them on the back of their albums. Like the Chills — Martin Phillipps tells this touching story of actually entering into serious counselling with some of his more troubled correspondents. Then when Slash went cold on the Chills, they went cold on his mail as well, and nothing was sent on.

"I was still in the middle of therapy with some of these people," wailed Martin over dinner one night.

Given that yer average Indigo Girls lyric cuts a

bigger piece from the heart than yer average anyone else's, they must get some pretty damn interesting letters.

"Oh yes, we certainly get that," says Emily. "I don't read them all 'cause we just get too many now, but I read some, and there are some weird ones — real intense."

Amy's song 'Blood and Fire' is about as powerful a love song as you'd want.

"I remember when she brought me that one, she was a little insecure about it. She played it to me and I thought: 'Oh my god this is a great song. You need to keep this one.' It is a very clear memory. People love that song. It's so powerful and real."

Emily has two interesting ones about rock stars — 'Left Me A Fool' and 'Fare Thee Well'. So who's the rock star then?

"Neither were about real relationships. They were just created."

Oh, Amy now. She certainly had a piece of Nashville on the *Rites Of Passage* album ("Nashville... I fell on my knees to kiss your land / But you are so far down I can't even see to stand / Nashville you forgot the human race"). But the Indigo Girls then went to Nashville to make their next album, *Swamp Ophelia*.

"Amy had a year at college there and she had a very hard time. She found it very racist and couldn't get any musical breaks. But we enjoyed working there. It's as interesting as Las Vegas from an Americana point of view."

Swamp Ophelia is the biggest seller of the duo's five albums, at just over 800,000. Each album has outsold the one preceding it. The Indigo Girls are clearly poised for The Big Push towards mega-stardom, but they are taking a break. They'll tour until June and then have some time off before putting together a live release. Then a bigger lay-off to recharge the creative batteries ("when you start you've got a billion songs from your past and the list keeps getting smaller and smaller as the time to write disappears") before the next studio album, a good two years distant.

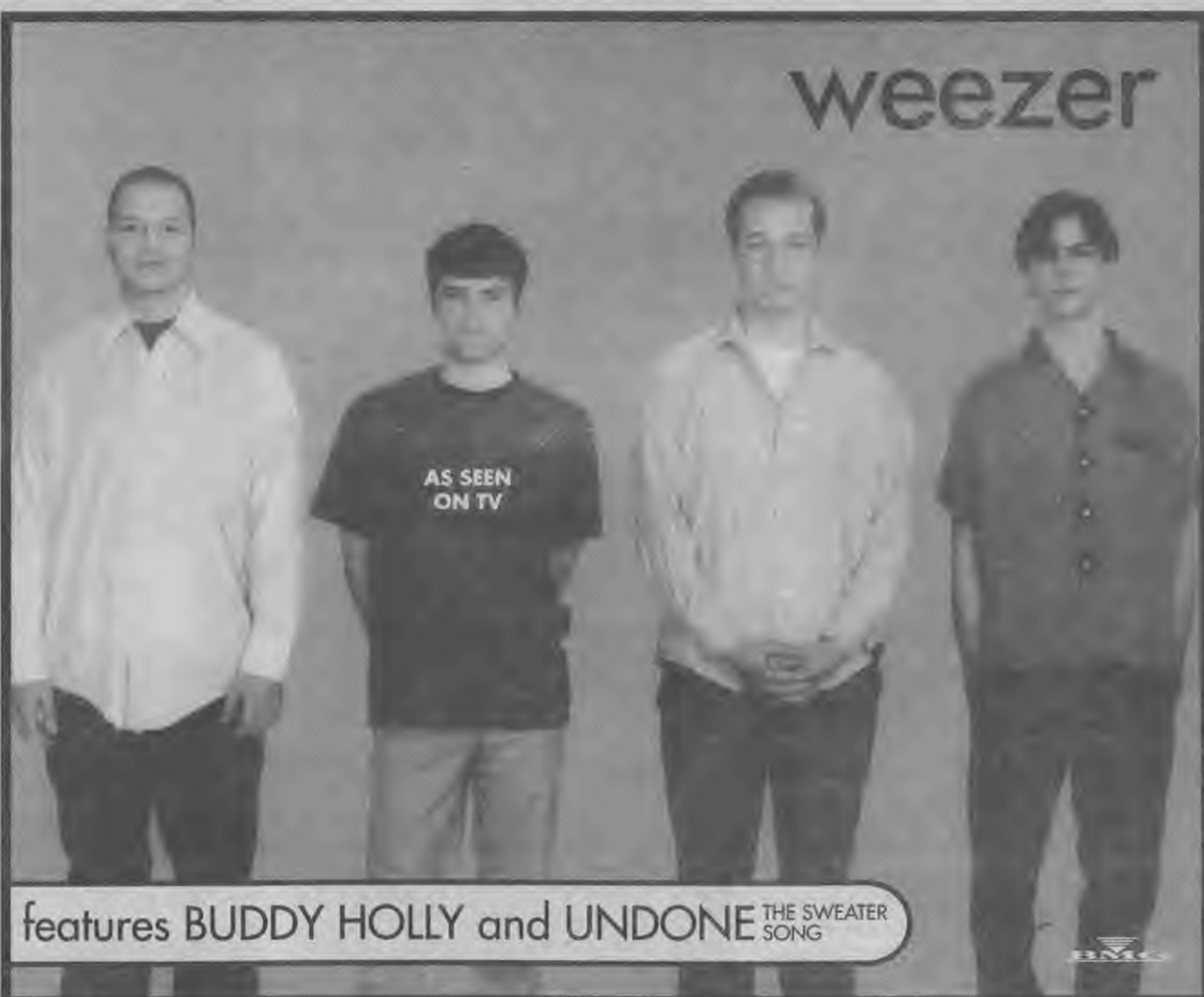
To their credit, Epic have eaten the decision. They probably follow the Tom Petty line, "the A&R man says: 'I don't hear a single'", but they don't tell the Indigo Girls to try and write one. As a result the duo have not had a hit.

"We can't write singles. 'Galileo' had a catchy chorus I guess, but it was pretty heady stuff. We're very happy with what we're doing, and how we're doing it."

The Auckland concert was breath-taking. The women's movement came out strong, of course, but males made up a good 35 to 40 percent of the one thousand-odd there, and they were utterly devotional ("a perfect, perfect audience," Emily said the next morning). Just two guitars and Sara Lee on electric bass. Okay, the twin electric guitar thing at the end was like underdone Pearl Jam, but aaaahhhh, those songs. And those voices. Chris Knox tells me the Indigo Girls are so *bland*, and Chris knows everything. So I guess for all of us there that Sunday night, the women feeling the strange fire, the geeks with their steamed up glasses, the couples hugging, the skinhead in front of us, absolutely transfixed, and the card-carrying hedonists tumbling wow-fuck out into the Auckland rain, well, I guess it must just have been something we ate.

ROY COLBERT

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