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The Artists Formerly Known as Each Other (Almost)

by ROBIN ROTHMAN
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"Just wait till next 1999!"

PHOTO: STEVE PARKIE

In response to a heated argument, I once proffered a (borderline obsessive) theory called “Two Degrees From Prince.” My hypothesis: Even if a person dislikes Prince, he or she is a fan of someone who loves him. Essentially, I claimed, all musicians are either influenced by the man himself or by someone who is. So I compiled a list of acts who’ve been directly impacted by him—covered his songs, played with him, or mentioned him (favorably, of course, often as a “genius”) in an interview: like Cyndi Lauper, Robert Plant, Trent Reznor, Lenny Kravitz, Basement Jaxx, Phish, Beck, Miles, Aretha, Little Richard, George Clinton, and even LeAnn Rimes.

It’s never been trendier to proclaim your love for the guy; in just the past couple months, he’s graced the cover of *Guitar Player*, *Bass Player*, *Keyboard*, and *Mixer*, and had coverage inside countless more magazines. And the superhyped new *Rave Un2 the Joy Fantastic*, which boasts appearances by Maceo Parker, Chuck D, Eve, Gwen Stefani, Sheryl Crow, and Ani DiFranco, only strengthens my claim.

If you’ll pardon me, I’m currently most fascinated by this DiFranco/D’Artist connection. Anyone who knows Ani knows she’s long been an admirer—after all, she’s covered “When Doves Cry” and teased “Sexy M.F.” But it’s the reciprocation that’s most intriguing: Not only does she appear on the Artist’s album; he returns the favor by singing on her newest, *To the Teeth*, which came out exactly a week after *Rave*.

Of course the former “slave” of contractual hoo-ha respects the undisputed poster girl (with no poster) for indie labeldom. But it’s deeper than that. They also share both a sense of ultraperfectionism and a self-defeatingly-vs.-self-perpetuatingly prolific recording history. Oh, and they both dig Joni Mitchell. Ani obviously idolizes her, and the Artist at one point wrote a song for her, which she declined; he settled on namechecking her in “Ballad of Dorothy Parker” and covering “A Case of You” instead. True story. Now he offers an acoustic-ish nod to Ms. Mitchell on a way-too-short *Rave* number entitled “Tangerine,” a sonic expression of color that’s reminiscent of Joni’s “Blue.”

The similarities crisscross between Ani’s and the Artist’s latest albums as if they’d been building careers toward one another for years. Some of the best tracks on both discs, for instance, use James Brown/P-Funk sax master Maceo Parker. On *Rave*, Maceo puts the horn to a hidden cut originally written for Prince nemesis Morris Day; on *Teeth* he adds sax to two badass danceable tracks: “Back, Back, Back”—which, when we heard it live at a prerelease show, a buddy was sure would be Ani’s anticipated Artist tune—and “Swing,” which introduces megaphone, turntables, rap, stomps, and clapping to the mix.

The Artist, as Ani puts it, “sang the shit out of” *Teeth*’s slow, soulful “Providence,” and Ani adds a minimalist acoustic guitar overdub on the *Rave* piano ballad “I Love U But I Don’t Trust U Anymore.” But both contributions are surprisingly subtle. Similarly, on *Rave*, Eve and Chuck D simply add rap interludes to “Hot Wit U” and “Undisputed,” and though the funky “Baby Knows” (Sheryl Crow) and pure pop “So Far So Pleased” (Gwen Stefani) are both great songs, the “collaborations” would be better described as augmentations. Ditto *Teeth*—for the most part, featured guests aren’t equal partners who take these two in new directions, but fun friends who pile (often only barely) atop an already established sound.

Moreover, each auteur essentially returns to his or her original DIY state of production. *Rave*’s title track literally *is* a return (recorded during the 1988 *Lovesexy* tour), and the album’s newer tunes still follow the old pre-symbol Prince “all instruments and vocals by” vibe. “Strange but True,” a spoken-word soliloquy with a funky foundation, comes off like a more positive “Irresistible B . . .”-side, and a club-esque cover of “Every Day Is a Winding Road” (sans Crow) has a powerful Dr. Funkenstein “Flashlight” feel. (But who’s that busting its bottom? Brother Bass Slap Larry Graham is credited only for vocals.)

Not unlike our multi-instrumentalizing cover boy, Ani jumps from guitar to bass to piano to drums to banjo on her new set, playing several tracks—“Freakshow,” “Carry You Around,” “The Arrivals Gate,” and “I Know This Bar”—single-handedly. Her old folkcentric spirit is back—“Providence” would’ve fit just fine on 1995’s *Not a Pretty Girl*—and so are her blatant politics. While the Artist prepares to Rave Un2 the new Millennium, Ms. DiFranco aims to remind us that if we don’t get our shit together, our next century will be as fucked as our last one. Not that she wants to be the “party over, oops outta time” downer; she’s just got heavy stuff on her mind—like attacks on abortion clinics (“Hello Birmingham”) and guns in need of control (“To the Teeth”).

These returns to form clearly set *Rave* and *Teeth* above the current pack. Yet ultimately, within the duo’s respectively tremendous oeuvres, they don’t really quite rank up there with, say, *Sign O’ the Times* or *Living in Clip*. A few years back in “The Truth,” the Artist bragged, “My only competition is me in the past.” Like everything else about him, I guess the same goes for DiFranco. Fine. So let’s see them top it.

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