

## Q&amp;A



Patti Perini

## ANI DIFRANCO

A hard-driving, hard-rocking modern folk pioneer learns to take her time

FOR A DECADE AND A HALF, ANI DiFranco was among the most prolific acts you could name. Between 1990 and 2007, the Buffalo, N.Y., native released 16 studio albums of new material, not to mention a handful of live collections, compilations and EPs. But the latest, *Which Side Are You On?*, is her first new offering in almost four years—and the primary reason is obvious. “The short version is that I’m a mother now,” says DiFranco. “That’s the explanation. That’s my main job, and then music is my side job.”

The January 2007 birth of daughter Petah to DiFranco and her husband and producer Mike Napolitano fundamentally

changed the way the artist thought about her so-called “side job.” “It’s the best thing that ever happened to my relationship with my work,” DiFranco says. “I learned that if you take your time, you can make a much better record.” For *Which Side*, that approach allowed DiFranco to soak up more of the influence of New Orleans, where she has lived since 2003, as well as to recruit guests like folk legend Pete Seeger (who plays banjo on the title cut). The new album finds the singer, songwriter and guitarist addressing motherhood and marriage, as well as her ongoing commitment to social activism. We caught up with DiFranco at home, where she gamely spoke with us over

the racket of a jackhammer. “We have some renovations going on,” she explains. “It turns out the back of our house is built on a cement monstrosity filled with garbage. We’ve found toilets, hubcaps, radiators—we’re waiting to find a body back there.”

**How has New Orleans affected you?**  
I’ve been happier in this city than any other time in my life, and of course my music is something that changes along with that. So you can hear New Orleans in the subject matter, you can hear it in the way I make recordings and the people who I make recordings with—and also in the more relaxed sound of my voice. I feel at home here, and

the pace of life is beautiful and graceful. It’s a very inspiring place to live. History is alive here. From my house I hear the boats on the river, I hear the trains going by, I hear the clip-clop of the horses and carriages, I hear kids walking down the street playing trombones. I’m somebody who revels in that.

**Have you mellowed stylistically?**

It hasn’t drifted away as much in live performance as it has on record. But yeah, the new songs that I write tend to be a little more chilled out in general. I guess maybe that’s because I’m 41 instead of 21. When you’re home alone it’s hard to work up the kind of energy that you have onstage. When you’re at home in a quiet state you tend to create quiet music. It’s been a challenge lately, because I get onstage and the only rockers are the old songs. I have to keep reminding myself to try and write some more upbeat stuff.

**How has Mike affected things?**

It’s never been my instinct to reach far outside myself. I’ll just automatically plug my usual stage guitar into my usual stage amp and say, “OK, I’m ready!” Mike will stop me and say, “We can get a better sound than this.” He nitpicks everything and gets it right in a way that I never had the ability or will to do.

**What guitars are on the record?**

One of the things Mike has been encouraging me to do is to get some different guitars. I play these Alvarez Yairi guitars onstage, which are wonderful. I think my stage sound has really developed by playing them over the years. I like a lot of punchy low end, not a lot of high end, and they’re great for that. I’ve tried different guitars onstage, and I keep coming back to Alvarez. But I’ve brought in some other guitars for recording the last few years. I bought a Martin D28 and a Gibson. Mike found a little homemade parlor guitar, which was kicking around the house for years. Finally we got it fixed and it sounds gorgeous.

**How do you record guitar tracks?**

On any of the songs on the record, there will be about four guitar tracks. One guitar performance will be a DI [direct injection], mainly for punchy low end. Then one with an acoustic microphone to get the sound of the actual guitar. After that it’ll usually be going through two amplifiers—one for clean and vibrato, and the other for crunchy distortion. If you have these different flavors, as you

overdub and the track develops you can dial it in to fit the overall mix.

**What about live?**

I play six guitars onstage: two WY1 Yairis; one big-bodied Alvarez Dreadnought acoustic; a tiny-bodied, backpacker-type Alvarez; and a baritone guitar that Alvarez built for me. They’ve worked on building me several guitars, and this new baritone is the best of all of them. It’s got a warm, rich sound, and I don’t have to do as much EQing to try and get it to be big and luscious.

**Is your daughter OK with touring?**

She’s an amazing traveler, having done it since 5 months old. But I’ve been leaving her behind more often than not these days, because she’s in school. It’s weird. My

**As a writer, can you separate the personal from the political?**

I’ve always felt them to be one thing. What I’ve written about politically is stuff that I feel passionate about, that affects me emotionally. These are things that we grapple with emotionally. So when I’m writing, that’s all one thing. My love, my passion, my happiness and my unhappiness, they have very personal inward and outward sources—and the connections between them are fascinating to me. That’s where a lot of my songs hinge. That very juncture, I think, is where my writing has pitched its tent over the years.

**Do you have a goal in mind?**

I want to get over myself. I feel like I’m slowly doing it. Like many people in this world, I



Onstage at the Rothbury Music Festival, Rothbury, Mich., 2009

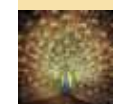
© Flanagan/Getty Images

**‘What I’ve written about politically is stuff that affects me emotionally.’**

whole life I always joked that I’d make a great father—I want to be the one who comes and goes, where I’m the hero of the universe and I don’t have to do the daily grind of actually being there. But now that’s the position I’m in. Oftentimes when she stumbles down all sleepy in the morning she’ll go and sit on her father’s lap, and when she gets out of school she’ll run to him. And of course there’s a lot of work and a lot of energy drain in being the go-to parent, but there’s a lot of reward, too. So now “Be careful what you wish for” is ringing in my ears.

have real self-esteem problems. I dwell on them and obsess about them. It’s becoming more and more apparent to me in my old age that’s very self-absorbed behavior. The less I do that, the more energy I have for the world. So I want to grow beyond myself. That’s what I’m working on now.

—Chris Neal



**‘You can hear New Orleans in the more relaxed sound of my voice these days.’**