

LOCAL MUSICIANS: AMALIA RAY

Marty Sattell talks to the talented artist about how she has forged her way forward in the music world

In the scant two years I've been interviewing musicians and writing medium-length profiles about them — their histories, idiosyncrasies and aspirations — I've noticed a pattern among them in terms of their outlooks: excepting only a few artists or outfits, they give the impression that they are borderline obsessed with their band, their music or the prospect of "making it". Amalia Ray is exemplar of such few-and-far-between anomalies to the trend. To her, music is little to become excited over for it is a constant in her life, deserving no mania nor instilling excitement in her at its mention.

Yet nonchalance does not equal laziness, nor is it a proper reflection of talent (at least in this case) since Ray's long career as a musician contains clear evidence of devotion and ability; from her appearance on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, to her forthcoming and seventh self-released record, it is obvious she is no dilettante.

From the sofa to the stage

The multi-instrumentalist/vocalist ended up in Madrid after a two-month stint in Amsterdam studying Dutch. "I had a friend here from university in San Francisco who said, 'Well, you could come and sleep on my sofa'," Ray says between bites of a double-decker sandwich. Two years later and she's become a regular on the Madrid music circuit, performing either as a solo act or with her backing band, the enigmatically named *Conjugal Experiment*.

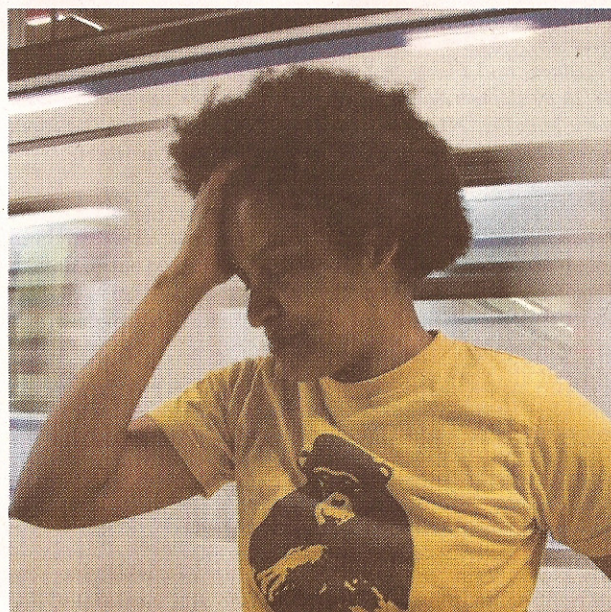
Making music is no novelty to the San Jose, California-born Ray. "I've been playing and singing all of my life", she says. "Playing guitar since I was seven; writing songs since I was eight."

A current self-avowed part-time English teacher and full-time professional musician, Ray began playing in cafés and seriously song-writing at 14. In 1993 at 16, she recorded her first album (on cassette) and continued self-producing albums through 2006 while still a student of French and Western European History at San Francisco State University. She continues still. The upcoming and likewise self-produced *On*, which she says will include reggae, poprock and funk tendencies, drops on 22 April. It will be her first release in Spain, available through her website and at her shows.

A girl with style

Ray looks to her time spent singing in her local church choir as both the basis for her interest in music and as inspiration for her music even unto today. "If you listen to gospel chord progressions they say, 'Go God!'" she says. "That sort of exciting way to structure a song really stuck with me."

But Ray's music is not strictly a religious experience. She also draws influence from a diverse array of artists (George Michael, King Crimson and Nina Simone, to name a few) to forge her unique concoction of soul, rock, jazz, country, pop and blues that has built upon



Feeling inspired

Photo: InMadrid

the foundation of her gospel roots. Perhaps she explains it best: "There's the gospel in my music, but at the same time there's always this seven- or eight-year-old rocking out to Bon Jovi behind it".

That auto-description, laden with juvenile connotations, however, does not sufficiently nor justly describe Ray's music, since she expertly commands various styles and genres, and her lyrics often revolve around a certain sociopolitical gravitas. (Although she does have one song about the Ashlee Simpson lip-syncing incident.)

Ray's gospel-rock anthem "Who'syerdaddy", is a perfect example. It is at once a response to the failure of the US federal government to aid Hurricane Katrina victims and a cleverly composed tune, incorporating pristine vocal harmonies and a suggestively timed bass solo. More recently, Ray performed at the Democrats Abroad Super Tuesday voting party in Madrid.

Music as a story

In spite of all this, Ray explains she is not a very political person and the occurrence of politics in her lyrics is not fundamental to these songs. "I guess sometimes I can be a little political, but no more

than the average person", she says. "If you read the newspaper there are going to be things that affect you. I'm no Joan Baez. I'm not a political folksinger or anything. If there's something that upsets me then probably I'll write a song about it."

That may account for the appearance of politics and pop culture in her songs, but what about the remainder of her repertoire? "I like to tell stories", she explains. "Sometimes I see someone on the bus and I think, 'Oh what's their story?' So I make one up for them." Maybe the most poetic of these storytelling ventures is a song she wrote after finding a photo of a shirtless young boy apparently sitting on a vertically striped lawn chair in a park in Paris; in which she proposes three different possibilities of its origin.

Going it alone

Truth be told, it is hard to describe Amalia Ray since her soft-spoken and easygoing demeanor make her distinct from the majority of other musicians. She doesn't slip into the frequently heard grumble of not having a record contract, instead taking the lack thereof in her stride. "Depending on what the terms were, I would want one just because it would make my life a lot easier", she says. "Then I wouldn't be having to do this all by myself." And after 12 years of seriously making music she tells me she's never encountered a dire problem nor thought of giving up. "It's difficult working with musicians of course", she says. "In a band it can be difficult sometimes. But it just comes with the trade. So far so good. No complaints."

It seems as though it wouldn't be as difficult as she says, however, if more musicians were like Ray. She's dropped the egoism and profit-motive all too often encountered in contemporary music without compromising the energy and significance of her work; continuing to create and evolve for the sheer fact that, for her, music is and has always been a part of her life.

Amalia Ray will be playing next at: El Vagón, Parque del Castillo s/n, Burgos, tel: 94 726 43 83. 21 April, 10.30pm. Free entry. See www.quintavenida.com/html/conciertos.htm for venue information.

El Juglar, CD release party. c/Lavapiés, 37, tel: 91 528 43 81 (Metro: Lavapiés/Tirso de Molina). 23 April, 10pm. Entry: €6. See www.salajuglar.com for venue information. See www.myspace.com/ameliaray for more information about Amalia Ray.