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For Ani DiFranco, the Past Didn't Go Anywhere

by Sandra Ebejer, December 20, 2021

Twenty-five years ago, Ani DiFranco was a 26-year-old singer-songwriter making waves in the folk music community. She'd released eight albums on her own indie label, Righteous Babe Records, and had spent much of the decade touring relentlessly, bringing her aggressive fingerpicking style and fearlessly blunt, politically charged lyrics to venues across the country. Her May 1996 release, *Dilate*, had landed on the Billboard charts and was garnering her attention from mainstream media, including MTV. And yet, she wasn't entirely embraced by her peers.

"I started going to these folk festivals, and I was being judged a lot by the broader folk community," she says. "I looked different. I acted different. I sounded different. I was shaking things up and was not all the way welcome by some of the folk traditionalists."

Instead, DiFranco found that acceptance came from an unlikely place: the notable folk elders who saw something of themselves in her. “Utah [Phillips], Pete Seeger, Tom Paxton, Si Kahn, Peter Yarrow,” she recalls, were “the old folk fogies who were like, ‘Ah, come here, kid. You’re one of us.’ [They] saw in my work a continuation of their own work.”

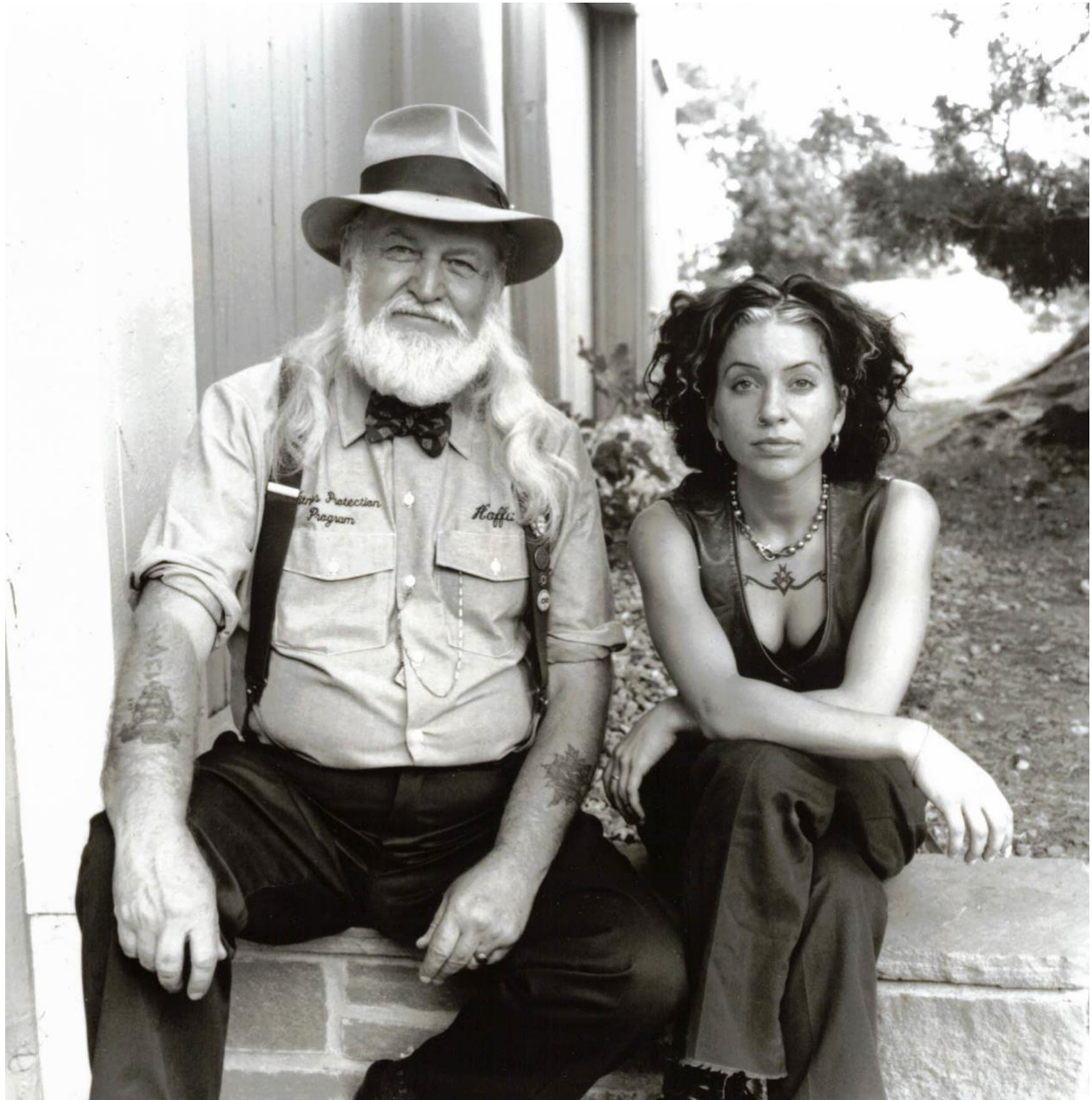
Utah Phillips, in particular, formed a bond with young DiFranco. The two were represented by the same booking agent, and often found themselves sharing the stage at political song workshops or benefits for activist organizations. Phillips was a self-described anarchist who had served in the Army during the Korean War. By the time he and DiFranco met in the early 1990s he had spent decades touring, performing his original Woody Guthrie-esque folk songs and telling anecdotes about riding the rails, war and peace, and the working man. It was his stories, in particular, that engaged DiFranco.

In 1996, she proposed that the two make an album that would weave her music with his tales. She did so, she said, because “I felt like the essence of his art was not being documented. ... I felt like so much of the vitality of his art lived in between the songs on stage. I felt a lot of connection with the stories that he would tell, and yet, the only documents are of the songs. But meanwhile, what he [did] on stage was so much more than that.”

Once he signed on to the project, Phillips, then 61, sent DiFranco his only copies of his live recordings. “It was a box full of cassette tapes,” she recalls. “He sent them through the U.S. mail and I received the recorded history of Utah on stage in a little cardboard box.” She wrote in the liner notes of the completed album that she drove with the cassettes to the recording studio in Austin, Texas, listening “to Utah for three days at 75 mph, alternately laughing, weeping and jotting cryptic notes on napkins while swerving lane to lane.”

The finished product, *The Past Didn't Go Anywhere*, is an amalgam of genres — from acoustic folk to beat-thumping hip-hop. Throughout, DiFranco skillfully layers her vocals, guitar, samples and beats with Phillips’ often humorous stories on children, war, aging, politics and more. Though, looking back, she’s stunned that she was able to pull off the project at all. “I had none of the gear that this kind of production necessitates,” she says. “I had this Eventide H3000 effect rack. I think it had an eight-second sampler or something that you would tap with your finger. I had an actual analog board, and I was recording on tape. It was only blind ignorance that would make me think that I could do such a thing with none of the gear that is really kind of necessary.”

She admits that initially her album did not make her any more welcome to the larger folk community. “I’m sure a lot of those folk fascists were thumbing their nose at me and my crazy record,” she says. “What did I think I was doing with Utah?” But in the end, she’s enormously proud of the work. “What happened is exactly what I hoped would happen, which is that Utah’s voice reached so many new and younger people than he was reaching. It was palpable in the last few years of Utah’s life. There was a lot of young people turning up at his shows. It gave his wisdom and his knowledge a place to go, and younger people to carry that forward through the world — the history that he was sharing, the stories that I hoped would live beyond his own life. I think I brought a lot of young people into the scene myself, and then I brought them before Utah, too.”



DiFranco found acceptance from notable folk elders, in particular Utah Phillips, with whom she formed a bond and began collaborating. // Steven Stone

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DiFranco and Phillips released a second collaboration, *Fellow Workers*, in 1999. This time they shared a stage, recording songs, stories and poems before an intimate live audience. The album, which would go on to receive a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary Folk Album, was the duo’s final project.

“We kept in contact,” DiFranco says. “And we found ourselves on the same stage again [at] benefits [and] folk festivals. But Utah started slowing down. He traveled less. We intersected less and less in the years before his death, but we still stayed connected one on one. We were pen pals in the last few years as he was at home more in Nevada City. We corresponded, which is to say that I wrote him letters and he recorded, again on cassette, letters back to me. So I have a box of Utah recordings that are direct letters to me.” Phillips passed away in 2008.

Today, DiFranco is 51 and resides in New Orleans with her husband and two children. In January 2021 she released her 22nd studio album, the critically acclaimed *Revolutionary Love*. Righteous Babe Records, which she founded in 1990, continues to be an indie mainstay, and has released albums by Anais Mitchell, Andrew Bird, Toshi Reagon, Michael Meldrum, and Nona Hendryx, to name a few. In 2020, DiFranco launched Righteous Babe Radio, a 24/7 free streaming radio station, which features music, book excerpts and interviews.

When asked what the future holds, DiFranco ticks off a number of projects, including a Righteous Babe Radio podcast on the subject of restorative justice, a theatrical musical and a children’s book. She also shares that she’s in early discussions to turn her *New York Times* best-selling memoir, *No Walls and the Recurring Dream*, into a series.

As she thinks back 25 years to *The Past Didn’t Go Anywhere* — the first Righteous Babe Records release to feature an outside artist, she comments on its flaws, calling it “some kind of crude folk singer version of a hip-hop production made with sticks and marbles and some string.” And yet, she can’t help but smile when she talks about it. “At the end of the day, though I would do many things differently about that record, like all of my records, I’m glad I made it. I think it’s served its purpose.”



Luca Carlino/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Ani DiFranco's Favorite Songs By "My Friends on the Folk Circuit"

In a nod to her longtime relationship with the late singer Utah Phillips, singer-songwriter Ani DiFranco chose to pull together a collection of songs by "the kindest, sweetest people that I met through the folk underground."

***Aragon Mill* performed by Si Kahn**

"Si, still, every time I'm in his neck of the woods, he'll come out to my show and say, 'I've got this project, Ani, and that project, and here's this revolutionary from Argentina, and they're trying, and you could da-da-da-da, let's do some shit!' That's him, you know, still."

***Which Side Are You On?* performed by Pete Seeger**

"Pete rerecorded that song with me when I put out a version. So, that song and he and I have this special connection. I remember when I showed up at the Clearwater Sloop club, with my couple of microphones and a little laptop and we were going to record his banjo on the song and he said, 'I could play the intro like I did on the 1958 version.' I was like, "F---, yeah!" And that's what he did. So listening to the banjo intro on this has a very special place in my heart, as does he."

***When I Was a Boy* performed by Dar Williams**

“I just saw her at the Mountain Stage radio show. She talked about me that night and what it meant for us to be breaking onto the folk scene together at the same time, [as] young women, and how I was an inspiration for her feminist awareness and she was an inspiration for me in many ways. This song, ‘When I Was A Boy,’ I remember the first time I heard it. We were on a workshop stage together at one of these Canadian folk festivals. It’s just such a badass song. She is a top-notch songwriter, and this is the type of Dar Williams song that just slays me and inspires me to work harder as a songwriter.”

The Poet Game performed by Greg Brown

“Another super kindred spirit. We have different approaches to our music and our songs and performances, but there’s something that I think we both feel in deep connection with each other. I remember the first time I showed up to The Cedar Cultural Center, one of these out-of-the-way folk spots that you only know if you’re part of the community. It’s 1992 or ’93, and I played and [Greg] had played a few nights earlier. And I remember he had left a note for me saying, ‘Your music sounds so good to my ears.’ This song, ‘The Poet Game,’ it’s just classic Greg. I find a lot of inspiration in his songs.”

Bring Me performed by Pieta Brown

“Pieta is Greg’s daughter. I remember the first time I met her. I think it was at the eTown radio show. She is a very beautiful woman and I remember one of the hosts of the radio show saying, ‘And this is Greg’s beautiful daughter, Pieta, and her friend.’ And Pieta turned to the person speaking and said, ‘Beautiful friend.’ She was a very young woman at the time with the presence of mind to deconstruct, in the moment, that hierarchy of women. Anyway, Greg and I have not been pen pals for a while; Pieta and I are now. The other night I was listening to a few new songs that she’s produced that are coming out on Righteous Babe. It’s been weeks and weeks since she finished them, but just the other night I finally found the time to listen to them, and she texted me instantly, ‘I’m thinking of you very strongly right now.’ That’s me and Pieta these days.”

D.I.A. performed by Peter Mulvey

“Peter, like Pieta, [is] closer to my age, not necessarily the older generation of folk singer, but an important person, songwriter, artist in the folk world. A top-notch performer, writer, being, endlessly giving, endlessly generous, kind, thoughtful, beautiful man. And a true inspiration to me with his writing. It’s always such a pleasure to share the stage with him. He brings so much with him when he shows up. [‘D.I.A.’] is a song [from] an album that I produced. We made it at my house, and he used my band, and my husband was the engineer and I was the producer. So, this song comes from an album that we worked on together.”

The Last Thing on My Mind performed by Tom Paxton

“Tom [is] another elder who embraced me instantly and always on the folk scene, always kind and welcoming. He’s another one of the guys that when we cross paths at folk festivals, it’s like seeing family. It’s like seeing my uncle.”

***Semper Fi* performed by John Gorka**

“John I haven’t seen in many, many years, but we used to intersect a lot. An incredibly kind, gentle spirit. There are moments in his songs that stick in my consciousness, and this is an example. There’s an image in this song of Eleanor Roosevelt giving his father a blanket when he was a wounded soldier in an army hospital, and ‘some forget the kindnesses that others never will.’ There’s something about that line and the image of Eleanor Roosevelt, who is a hero to me, and this blanket that John probably now possesses that was his father’s that was given to him by Eleanor. There’s something about that that feels very poignant and resides deep in me. John and his songs are just another part of my songwriter DNA.”

***When You Give It Away* performed by Bruce Cockburn**

“We had just met and became friends. He was reaching out to me through official channels, asking me if I would sing on his new record that he was making down in New Orleans. I was just on warp speed, so I remember just not having the bandwidth to jump on Bruce’s record that he invited me to sing backup on. And I regretfully didn’t show up for him. Or so I thought, because then I was traveling through New Orleans for the only the second time ever. I was on the back of my lover’s motorcycle, and we were traveling across country. This would have been around the time I was writing the song ‘Gravel.’ We’re driving through New Orleans, and we stop at Kaldi’s coffee shop, which was this awesome classic coffee shop on Decatur Street, and there’s Bruce. He’s at the coffee shop getting coffee. I’m like, ‘Oh! Hey. Hi.’ So I ended up going back to the studio [with him]. It was the first time I walked into Kingsway, which I ended up recording at many times. And from there fell in love with New Orleans, from there never left, here I am now, [due to a] chance meeting of Bruce and I in the coffee shop. I’m so fortunate in many ways that the universe made me show up for him in that way, because I love him. And this song is very much about New Orleans. But for me, it speaks to that serendipitous moment and our friendship.”

***Oh Sister* performed by Dan Bern**

“Dan Bern, like myself, [was] a controversial younger folk singer on the circuit, showing up to folk festivals and singing, ‘The aliens came and f---ed the monkey, they f---ed the monkey.’ His ridiculous, hilarious, challenging, memorable songs that got everybody all uptight, as I did, too, for some reason at the time. This is a song on a record that we made together. He asked me to produce a record and this is one of the songs on it. It has deep memories for me of this intense time we had together. I love and respect him as much as you can, songwriter to songwriter. He’s been endlessly inspiring to me in many ways.”

***Universal Soldier* performed by Buffy Sainte-Marie**

“I don’t know her well, but she’s always so sweet and so cool to intersect with on the folk circuit. I have deep respect for her. She’s [an indigenous] artist who brings a different perspective. As you can notice, on this folk circuit [there are] a lot of older white men holding down these lefty, wobbly, radical folk traditions. Buffy is female, she’s native, she’s a different voice in the chorus and I think brings a lot to the continuum of folk music.”

***My Baby Drinks Water* performed by The Mammals**

“The Mammals [are] more the new generation of folk linchpin artists. Mike [Merenda] and Ruthy [Ungar] are dear, dear friends and important in the folk community. I always relish sharing the stage with them and hanging out with them. And this recording is just so epically beautiful. You can really hear the beauty of their songwriting and Ruthy’s singing and what they bring.”

***Between the Wars* performed by Billy Bragg**

“Billy Bragg, somebody who I was a big fan of as a teenager. Kind of punk-folk. Not so much into the ‘pretty and the polish and the flowers and bunnies’ folk music, but the ‘in your face, challenging the status quo’ folk music. And then, of course, we met and became friends over the course of traveling the same roads.”

***The Wood Song* performed by Indigo Girls**

“[Indigo Girls are] a little bit of an outlier in that we didn’t meet in the folk underground because they were already bigger. They were already really connecting with a big audience and more famous, but we did meet very early on and become friends really early on and have been fellow travelers along the way. We’ve all been one big family for a lot of decades, and I feel so blessed for that.”

***Am I Wrong* performed by Keb’ Mo’**

“Keb’ Mo’, such a beautiful spirit. I always super enjoy his presence and sharing stages with him. He’s always just so, so real and so kind and does a lot of work to diversify these spaces. He’s an African American man who has been on the folk scene for a long time and operating in these dominantly white musical circles, but just inhabiting these spaces totally authentically and unguardedly and generously. And he’s got this awesome groove on his guitar, which I just totally love and relate to.”

***Hello in There* performed by John Prine**

“There’s no one like John Prine, one of our great song crafters and spirits. John is such a huge inspiration to me as a songwriter and as a human. I feel about his songs, not only am I thoroughly carried and inspired by the art of it, and not only am I in school as a songwriter when I listen to his work, but I feel like I’m in school as a person. I just feel the spirit that comes through, his heart that is communicated through his work. And his writing is just sterling. He had a sterling heart. And he’s one of those artists that I feel I learned not just how to do my craft but how to live from him.”

***Ain’t Life a Brook* performed by Ferron**

“Ferron is not as widely known a songwriter as she should be. She was a radical feminist back in the ’70s, intentionally playing shows only for women. In a time when there was a lot of

trriage to be done for women and their survival in this society, Ferron was supporting not just the feminist struggle and uplifting the feminist path, but supporting women and acknowledging the need for safe spaces. I just think of her as a very top-notch songwriter. This song that I chose is one example of the kind of song that's as deep and wide as a song can be, though I don't know that her audience is as wide as it should be for that caliber of writer."