



Ani DiFranco – Unprecedented Sh!t

These days, every artist’s album needs to have a story. The music can’t speak for itself.

But after 22 records, why can’t Ani DiFranco’s work speak for itself? Yes, her forthcoming album is shaped by stories — ones about reproductive freedom, the double-edged sword of the pandemic, identity and ever-evolving belief systems that have shaped each of its 11 songs. There are songs that were written in 2011 and in 2022; some for musicals, others for children’s books. The album isn’t linear, but it is inherently teeming with DiFranco’s spirit.

It was paramount to the folk-feminist hero that listeners not be saddled with preconceived notions while diving into her 23rd album *Unprecedented Sh!t*. “I believe there is a rhyme and a reason as to why these songs have come together in this way now and I want people to experience this album as a journey, a piece of art, without being influenced by a cacophony of surrounding narratives.”

While many of DiFranco’s albums were made more insularly, she’s opened herself up to collaboration in recent years. For 21 of DiFranco’s 22 albums, she opted to self-produce. With *Unprecedented Sh!t*, she wanted to try working with a producer and tapped BJ Burton, who produced one of her favorite albums, Bon Iver’s 22, *A Million*. With Burton’s help, largely from afar, they created soundscapes often using only DiFranco’s voice and guitar as the raw materials and manipulating them with effects and filters. “I really wanted to lean into the power of machines in a way that I never have before, so BJ and I communicating through many layers of them in order to collaborate, seemed apropos. This record was made almost entirely by me and BJ alone, bouncing things back and forth.”

The title *Unprecedented Sh!t* is not only representative of how much of a sonic departure the 11-track album is from Ani’s other work, but also a political and social commentary on the current state of the world. “We find ourselves in unprecedented times in many ways, faced with unprecedented challenges. So our responses to them and our discourse around them, need to rise to that level.”

The lead single of *Unprecedented Sh!t*, “Baby Roe” — an anxious folk number that explodes into an industrial-tinged crescendo — embodies that ethos. Inspired by Joshua Prager’s literary masterpiece *The Family Roe: An American Story* which digs into the history of how abortion became a strategic tool for the right to gain power, “Baby Roe”

widens the lens with which abortion rights are viewed to include an existential awareness of non-duality. Of the song, DiFranco says, "In Prager's book we meet all the characters involved in Roe V. Wade, including the adult child of Norma McCorvey (aka Jane Roe), born and adopted-off in the course of her mother's quest for the right to a legal abortion. Baby Roe, unaware of her role in history until she was an adult, remains, nonetheless, in support of a woman's right to choose. As I would be. Life is much longer than the ego would have us believe. It transcends the body, any individual body, and is infinite in fact. Consciousness need not be born into any specific body at any specific time to be manifesting to its fullest. This is one of the ego's many illusions."

The crushing weight of patriarchal systems on the female psyche and the complicity of women in their own oppression are focal points of the psych-folk number "You Forgot to Speak." "Between first sleep and second sleep / I stare into the dark / and I can feel there are two of me / so I put um both on the ark," Di Franco sings with a dreamy lilt. "New Bible" is a rallying cry for a new world order centered around DiFranco's gravelly vocals: "I think we should have a new bible / that just says: mother earth /and I think men should stand down when women give birth."

On "Virus," a symphony of sensual jazz, hand-drumming and Nine Inch Nails-style guitar drops, which samples her 1995 classic "32 Flavors," DiFranco navigates the paradoxical nature of the pandemic, which brought both healing and suffering. "I was given permission to stay home with my family, so it was an incredible gift on that level. It was also a gift to the planet, for our species to shut up and sit down for a minute. Of course, it was also an incredible struggle for humans, full of pain and suffering." "Spinning Room" visits the related subject of an earth besieged by human pollution and exploitation and seems to come from the voice of nature and the voice of the individual at the same time. Within the world of the song, these voices are presented as one and the same, inseparable.

Against a backdrop of finger-picked guitar, "More or Less Free" explores the dynamic of a friendship with someone who is serving life in prison and how they exist throughout the world. "I never thought that I was special / been that way since we were kids / there's a million people that are like me / in this world, stuck doin bids."

Inspired by Ed Yong's tome about perception *An Immense World*, DiFranco contemplates the lives her 1960s army boots have lived and explores the concept of subjective realities in "Boots of a Soldier." "Wherever these boots have been, wherever they walked, now they're on my feet and they're walking my life. If only I could know the story these boots could tell! It boggles the mind, the radically different umwelts playing out around us at any given moment. This animal, this tree, this guitar I am holding, these boots. The multiplicity of perspectives and stories are unfathomable."

What is at the heart of the album is its final track, "The Knowing," a tender, existential lullaby that inspired DiFranco's eponymous 2023 children's book and explores and affirms the importance of selfhood while conveying how the concept can be limiting. In a lot of ways, DiFranco believes if there's an overarching message to come from her record, it's in this song; the idea that we can harness the power and value of identity without being

limited to it. Identity is a tool perhaps, for understanding and affirming diversity, but beyond that, it is an illusion, and our true nature exists on a level wholly more primary than any of the stories we tell.

DiFranco has been known as a feminist icon and pioneer of DIY for nearly 35 years. Since founding her record label Righteous Babe Records in 1990, she has released 22 albums, traversing folk, punk, hip-hop, soul and electronic genres and addressing a range of autobiographical, political and social issues. While her first four albums *Ani DiFranco* (1990), *Not So Soft* (1991), and *Imperfectly* (1992), *Puddle Dive* (1993), harnessed a more raw sound, *Out Of Range* (1994), *Not A Pretty Girl* (1995) and *Dilate* (1996) were more rooted in DiFranco's folk ethos. She released eight more albums over the next 10 years, earning a Grammy Award for her 2003 album *Evolve* and numerous nominations. Her most recent albums include 2008's *Red Letter Year* and 2017's *Binary*. Most recently, fans have been thrilled by 2021's *Revolutionary Love* and the 25th Anniversary Edition reissues of both her iconic 1997 live album *Living In Clip* and 1998's *Little Plastic Castle*, via Righteous Babe Records in 2023.

DiFranco is also an author and poet. She released a collection of poems and paintings titled *Verses* in 2007 and her memoir, *No Walls and the Recurring Dream*, in 2019, which became a *New York Times* Top 10 best seller. She shared her first children's book *The Knowing* in 2023, and her next one *Show Up and Vote* is due in August of 2024.