Poster Girl with No Poster

No Walls and the Recurring Dream: A Memoir

By Ani DiFranco

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Reviewed by Hannah Wallace

When I first heard Ani DiFranco sing about her abortion at a small auditorium in the Pioneer Valley during the spring of 1992, I felt as if my head would explode. A freshman at Mount Holyoke, I had never had an abortion, but I’d had several close calls (who hadn’t?). The honesty with which she wrote about her experience in “Lost Woman Song”—how she linked it to the anti-abortion politics that were (and still are) so pervasive in parts of this country—was brave and rightous. My friend Grace and I were hooked. After that, we saw DiFranco wherever we could, driving to Boston or New York to see her perform in bigger, flashier venues. We were high on her lyrics—which were as urgent, feminist, sexy, and independent as (we hoped) we were.

For many budding feminists in the early 1990s, DiFranco’s lyrics were more than just songs. They were a roadmap for how we wanted to live our lives—or, in some cases, affirmation for how we were already living. Her music was powerful, addictive—watching her on stage produced feelings of euphoria like no others I hadn’t experienced often in my forty-five years. Her small size—she stood five foot two—belied her power as a singer and a performer. She belted out her songs; she attacked her acoustic guitar, playing persuasively loud and used fake nails reinforced with electrical tape instead of a guitar pick. Her sound was exciting, but her lyrics were electrifying. DiFranco sang about topics no one else our age dared to speak about: abortion (“Lost Woman Song.” “Tiptoe,” “Hello Birmingham”), periods (“Blood in the Boardroom,” “My IQ”), sexual assault (Gratitude), atheism (What If No One’s Watching), and women who settle (“The Slant,” “Fixing Her Hair,” “Worthy,” etc.). And, like any self-respecting folk singer, she sang about heartache, love, and sex—sometimes all in the same song. Though on the surface DiFranco came across as angry and provocative (especially to her male listeners), her songs were also poetic, reflective, and downright seductive. “Overlap,” a brooding song on Out of Range, starts, I search your profile / For a translation
I study the conversation / Like a map
‘cuz I know there is strength in the differences between us
and I know there is comfort where we overlap

Because she was so prolific—producing, on average, one new album each year—we fans never had to grow tired of what DiFranco had to offer. First there was her eponymous album (I still have the worn-out cassette version) then—in quick succession—Not So Soft (1991), Imperfectly (1992), Puddle Dive (1993), Like I Said (1993), Out of Range (1994), and Not a Pretty Girl (1995). We haven’t even gotten to Dilate—which may be my favorite of her albums, full of righteous anger—or Little Plastic Castles.

DiFranco’s fans were legendary for their intense identification with her and her music. When I took my male cousin with me to see her perform at New York City’s Irving Plaza in the late 1990s, he marveled at how her audience knew all the words to all her songs. “That doesn’t happen at a Liz Phair concert,” he said. In her new memoir, No Walls and the Recurring Dream, she expresses gratitude to these very same ardent fans:

Even in deepest obscurity, I was blessed with listeners who supported and affirmed my existence in the way that I so craved, but also, right from the beginning, I was challenged by their high demands. The intensity in me, naturally found its likeness in the world.

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ni (pronounced “AH-nee”) DiFranco was born Angela DiFranco in Buffalo, New York, in 1970. Her father was the first American-born son of an Italian family from Campobasso (near Naples), and her mother, who studied architecture, was Canadian. In the memoir DiFranco provides an indelible image of a kid who embraced being different from an early age.

I was the wildly expressive girl with the rainbow socks pulled up over my overalls and pigtails in my hair. A bright smiling clown. I was my wildly expressive mother’s undersudy and I earned the label “weird” from the other kids.

DiFranco expressed her independence from a young age. At eight or so (she doesn’t give an exact age), she read about a horse camp in the back of the Sunday New York Times and negotiated with her parents to pay half. (She earned the remaining half by selling pressed-flower greeting cards, babysitting, and busking.) At age 15, she became an emancipated minor, renting a room from a Lebanese woman in Buffalo, while gigging around town with Michael Meldrum, her first musical mentor. (She relied on her dad’s Social Security check to pay rent, but later got a job waiting tables at a Greek diner.) In high school, she told the principal that if he didn’t allow her to graduate in three years (still squeezing in all her needed credits), she’d quit and get a GED. He assented, as long as she promised to be discreet. “It was a theme that was just starting to appear in my life: Okay, I will let you be the exception, just don’t tell anyone,” she writes. “I didn’t know it at the time, but this theme was to carry all the way through to my eventual relationship with the music industry and its gatekeepers.” She recorded her first demo tape in 1990, the same year she founded Righteous Babe Records, her label. She was not yet twenty years old.

She moved to New York and attended the New School in Greenwich Village, studying poetry with poet/musician Sekou Sundiata, a lasting influence on her writing. She also took Feminism 101, where she read Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, Ntozake Shange, and Carol Gilligan. “I knew it right away: I am a part of the feminist continuum. I am entering myself,” writes DiFranco of that education. This class was also where she re-discovered the poetry of Lucille Clifton, whose “lost baby poem,” about having an illegal abortion, helped her put words to

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her own abortion. DiFranco’s *Lost Women Song* is dedicated to Clifton and she’d often recite “lost baby poem” on stage as an invocation before singing her own.

DiFranco’s memoir is as bold as her songwriting. In straightforward, vivid prose, we learn about her brother’s mental illness, the circumstances surrounding her two abortions, and details about past lovers. She opens one early paragraph with this revelation: “I’m not sure if this is typical but I personally, had seen a lot of penises by the time I was ten.” Men exposing themselves to young girls “seemed like the kind of thing that just happens, like thunder, to make you suddenly jump out of your skin.” She and her friend Ingeri develop a sixth sense for flashers and learned how to avoid them—an experience which is perfectly conveyed as both horrifying and utterly normal.

On the question of musical influences, DiFranco reveals that she’s always been “somewhat sincerely stumped.” “For one thing, who stops and examines themselves in the middle of a journey,” she asks, quite wisely. But I enjoyed learning that the man she refers to only as “First Boyfriend” exposed her to Santana, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Joni Mitchell, “and a host of other heroes of the hippie cosmos.” Joan Armatrading and British singer-songwriter John Martyn got deeply under her skin, especially Martyn’s record, *Solid Air*. “I believe his guitar playing resides deep inside mine and his circular, jazz-inflected grooves wove their way slowly into my DNA,” DiFranco writes. She also met and listened to Suzanne Vega (“something about her presence provided me with subliminal proof of my own difference”) and absorbed John Fahey and the Beatles. Later, she would discover jazz (coincidentally around the same time she discovered cannabis)—specifically Thelonious Monk, Miles Davis, and Betty Carter—and groove music and West African musicians like Baaba Maal, Mansour Seck, and Farka Touré. Even Prince, who she eventually meets while on tour with saxophonist Macco Parkar, is an influence. (I’ll never forget DiFranco’s rapturous cover of When Does Cry at a concert in Edmonton, Canada.)

Meanwhile, the memorable backstory to her first abortion is a tender reminder of how easy it is to get pregnant—even when you’re educated and responsible and trying so hard not to. She begins by recounting her pre-sex preparations:

I must have been the only teenage virgin to ever walk into the Buffalo Planned Parenthood to properly plan for having her first run-in with a penis because I was an instant celebrity. The nurse practitioner took me around the whole office and introduced me to everyone. They all acted proud of me and it felt like I was giving them hope. Maybe some of the educational efforts they had been putting forth were having an effect on society. Maybe the world was changing for young women.

DiFranco leaves with a prescription for the pill and general approbation, but “in those days the pill was like a hormonal sleddinghammer” and she feels dizzy every time she stands up. Predictably, she stops taking it and, well—“Instantly I was pregnant,” she writes.

“Why, why would you stop taking it?” the nurse asked me as I cried in her office. “I don’t know,” I whimpered, “I just made a mistake.”

In the end, severely depressed, she opts for an abortion—“This was a solvable problem, not the end of my life”—and returns to writing poems and songs, playing her guitar, and becoming the significant musician we know her as today. Later in the book, after a profound philosophical disquisition about when life starts, and the admission that she’s happily carried two children to term, DiFranco re-affirms a belief in the right to abortion. “Every situation is unique and every woman is right when she decides what is right for herself,” she writes. “Reproductive freedom should be understood as a civil right.”

Her fan base loved her bold declarations about abortion; her complexity was less tolerated. As DiFranco described in her early (somewhat meteoric) rise, she grappled with the power of her iconography and what she represents to her mainly young and female fans. When she fell in love with and later married Goat (her male sound engineer), for example, a certain portion of her vocal dyke fans felt betrayed—and let her know. Though she now concedes that the media probably gave the conflict outsized attention, DiFranco was hurt by the relentlessness of the criticism. In the memoir, she sums it up:

There had really been no more backlash against my marriage than there had been to every other thing I’d ever done but, after a certain number of repetitions, I doubted even the weight of my own experience.

Even though DiFranco writes that she finds it insulting that someone might ask her who a song is about, one of the great joys of reading her memoir is hearing echoes of her lyrics in the stories she shares. “My parents were patriotic about paying taxes and taught me all of what you get for it in America,” she writes in the first chapter. “They not only voted, but my mother volunteered her time to local candidates she believed in. I sat with her stuffing envelopes and licking stamps in circles of laughing women and I went canvassing door to door holding onto her hand” (a story I’d heard in “Paradigm,” from her album *Knuckle Down*). I’d always wondered about a lyric from “Cradle and All”—and now I know its origins: the Trico plant she refers to in the song (which moved to Mexico) is a windshield wiper factory, based in Buffalo. Later she talks about the end of her relationship with First Boyfriend, and how his resistance to breaking up included punching things. “There were holes in the plasterboard right next to where my head had been,” she writes, an image that devoted fans will remember from *Out of Range*. Sometimes, she even tells us who she wrote a song about. For instance, “If He Tries Anything” was about her Mexican road trip with Shawnee.

*No Walls and the Recurring Dream* is a delightfully picturesque memoir, but there are some glaring omissions. For one thing, though the book is chronological (for the most part), she’s not consistent about giving dates. Also, DiFranco only glancingly mentions her two children—Petah and Dante. (And we never learn who their father is, or if he’s still her partner.) I didn’t expect them to be the centerpiece of this story, but I was curious—as I assume many of her fans are—to hear whether motherhood has changed her priorities and informed her songwriting and activism.

As a parent of a teenage girl, I was eager to know how she navigates the twin issues of screen time and sugar: is she like her dad, who said, “Let them eat a box of donuts? They will get sick and throw up and they will learn,” or like her more structured mom? And how does an artist like DiFranco encourage the kind of boredom that leads to hours of creative exploration, the kind of solitude that she herself knew well as a teen, but that few children experience these days due to the siren song of social media, video games, and Netflix? I’m afraid we’ll never know, although there is one clue to her parental prerogatives. On page 167, after describing the Mexican adventure with her friend-turned-lover Shawnee, she does give a word of advice to her daughter: “It’s all okay but the hitchhiking. That shit’s just too dangerous.”
In her final pages, she divulges that her children have always been jealous of her music. “Both my kids looked instantly upon my guitar as the enemy,” she writes. “Godmother forbid Mommy should start playing and get that faraway look in her eyes... If I am in the same city with them, and they are awake, songwriting is forbidden. It would be like taking air out of their lungs.” Other than that hint, DiFranco doesn’t reveal much of anything that happened in her life after 2001—including the nine albums she’s produced since then. DiFranco writes, You’ll have to forgive me. I only ever intended this book to be the “making of” story. I probably should’ve warned you at the onset. The remake is a story that is still writing itself, right now. A story so much in motion that words couldn’t even begin to nail it down. But rest assured, the greatest happiness, fulfillment, and accomplishments of the girl in this book are still ahead of her.

The inside dope of DiFranco’s life remains hers to reveal to her fans, or not. Her honesty, it’s clear, still shines brightest in her songs—which continue to evolve, as she does.

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With The Accidental, Minrose Gwin has given us homegrown magic realism, a US version of that Latin American genre that brings the tangible intangible to life. Each character lives in their own unique world, yet their desires and acts shape one another in surprising ways. Against a backdrop of mid-twentieth century, with its painful gender and race relations, Cold War menace and fear of nuclear annihilation, each of the novel’s “accidentals inhabit their space and time with ferocious character.

Gwin begins with definitions, the armature for what is to come. As an adjective, the term accidental means “happening by chance, undesignedly or unexpectedly, produced by accident, fortuitous, ... nonessential” (Oxford English Dictionary). As a noun, it is “a bird found outside its normal geographic range, migration route, or season, a vagrant” (Merriam-Webster). A Field Guide to the Birds: Giving Field Marks of All Species Found East of the Rockies lists accidentals as “the rarest of the rarities.” Gwin shows us that every being is the rarest of rarities, how we are all accidentals when it comes to our desires, and the tensions that surface when desire plays itself out within the confines of limiting social expectations.

This is a novel about lies and about truths that fail to make it into words, about betrayal and the need for forgiveness that too often fosters between humans. It is a book about language: how words sound and then, much later, how they get lost when dementia begins to claim them. Alzheimer’s and cancer, the two conditions that most dramatically define our mortality, are treated more realistically—and more poetically—than in most books I have read in which they figure. Memory and its loss are writ large in these pages. And, because of this, The Accidental is also a novel about how a chance comment or instantaneous decision may set in motion a series of events that can end up changing lives, even history itself.

The Accidents opens in Opelika, Louisiana, in 1957, a small busy body town not far from New Orleans, where acceptable women join the Daughters of the American Revolution, Junior League, and Ladies’ Hospital Auxiliary. Olivia McAlister, the fascinating mother of the book’s central family spurns these organizations. “Idiots, every one of them,” she says of the women who join. Characters are finely drawn and satisfyingly developed: Olivia chooses illegal abortion rather than bear a third child she doesn’t want. Her husband, Holly, whose misogyny is laced with tenderness, eventually claims a grandson as the son for whom he has always longed. June and Grace, their daughters, adore and support, then resent and abandon one another at crucial moments in their lives.

A secondary cast of characters includes a couple of young gay male lovers, a female high school friend who practices kissing with one of the sisters in order to prepare for that activity with boys, and a poor waitress and equally poor motel receptionist whose humanity comes to the fore when required. Babies are also present: born out of wedlock (as the circumstance was called at the time), disfigured, near dead but not quite, adopted out to who-knows-where. Among the many successes of this novel is Gwin’s ability to make each of these people come alive in important and believable ways—how she is able to reflect the larger social issues in the everyday lives of ordinary people.

In the opening paragraphs of The Accidents, Olivia tell us: “Listen hard now, and you can tell what they’re saying. This morning, the cardinal. Sweetheart, sweetheart, sweetheart, sweet. Then, two houses down, a mockingbird. Redemption, redemption... Cheer, cheer, cheer. I’m all ears, little wren.” Olivia loves sound just as her husband Holly loves his cherry bounce moonshine and hypothetical son, as her daughters Grace and June love moving determinedly toward their own lives, and as all the novel’s other characters love the idea of what we all want: personal fulfillment in the lives we have.

Animals populate this story: the variety of birds who sing at Olivia’s backyard feeders. The giraffes at the zoo who intertwine and slap their long necks in what might be anger or dance. Dogs, including little Soviet Laika, the mongrel puppy launched into orbit in November 1957 aboard Sputnik 2. She became famous as the first dog in space, a legend of heroism although it is believed she died a painful death inside her cramped capsule and had already expired for most of her 2,570 trips around our planet.

Laika is one of several embodied metaphors that run through this story, standing in for freedom versus confinement, and creativity versus alignment with the status quo. In Gwin’s exquisite prose, these themes come to life, inserting themselves in the narrative in three—or more—dimensions. This novel’s prose reads like poetry; I was propelled by the beauty of the language and force of what lies beneath it. The preponderance and consistency of this gorgeous writing make it hard to quote a few isolated examples, but I offer