

**NOTE:** As we get close to *City Stages* turning 21 this coming weekend, we figured we'd take a few moments and do a couple of things to get you into the mood. Guest contributor Jeremy Henderson gets us started by sitting down with [Amy Ray](#), one half of the Indigo Girls.



“Lesbian” and “indigo” both have three syllables. The syllables are identically stressed. When I first heard them - les-bi-an, late 80s, walking home through the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade suburbs of old Vestavia; In-di-go, early 90s, in a church van, radio blasting, scruples flaring, girls pretending to French each other - they were both followed by snickers and dirty winks. I think that’s what did it for me. For a split second, I totally thought they meant the same thing, or that one implied the other, synonyms in a sinner’s vocabulary. Both words sounded so... exotic. So... earthy. Onomatopoeitic even.

Amy knows what I mean. She remembers the first time she heard ‘indigo.’ It was 1985. She had a dictionary. She was looking for a word to go with ‘girls.’

And when she dials from her private number in the North Georgia Mountains, we’ll talk about how people who live in the North Georgia Mountains (she’s been there 17 years) love to say ‘North Georgia Mountains.’

We’ll talk about her youth group skate nights with the Methodists as a teenager in Decatur, Ga.

We’ll talk about their 1997 show in Auburn with The Rock\*A\*Teens the spring before my freshman year. They had to reschedule. One of them had a sore throat.

We’ll talk about how their new independently released album, [Poseidon and the Bitter Bug](#) (which references North Georgia in the second line of the first song), is kind of incredible and how it just might be the best thing they’ve ever done, which I’ll tell her I really wouldn’t know much about because other than recognizing that one song from the church van, I don’t know anything about their music. I only own one of their records - that one, the newest one, and only a promotional download version at that, which cracks her up. “That’s refreshing,” she’ll say.

But for most of the 20 minutes, the [Indigo Girls](#)’ Amy Ray and I talked about the word “lesbian” - about our first times to hear it, how we both instantly knew it was bad, and how it sounds so different now.

I went first.

Keith Nowell and I were on our way home after school rapping lines from [Parents Just Don’t Understand](#). Ten yards behind us were these girls. Kelly Somethin’, the 5<sup>th</sup> grader. But more importantly, Jessica Jackson, the boss. She was in our class but she was way taller than us. Already developing. Hot. Mean. She put bleach in her water gun.

She kept shouting the word. She wouldn’t stop. It kept buzzing from her mouth. “Lezzzzzzz...” she kept daring me to say it. She got ahead of me and got in my face.

"You don't even know what it means, do you," she laughed.

"Yes I do."

Dear Lord, no I didn't. The only thing I knew was that 'lesbian' sounded dirty as hell. I ran.

Ray laughs.

"What about you," I ask.

"Oh God," she says. "I think I was probably in high school, which would be in the late 70s, early 80s. I think someone was making fun of one of our coaches. It was definitely a negative thing, definitely negative. I remember thinking I had to go along with that. I didn't even know what it meant but I had to go along with it. As the years went by I fell in love with a girl and really didn't know what it was. I just knew I was in love with a girl. I was in the suburban South. There was no vocabulary for it."

Now, 20 years after [Closer to Fine](#)'s break-out hit harmonies made her one of the most famous ones in music, she has to think about it a little while when I ask her if she's ever made it through an interview without using the vocabulary.

"Ha! Um... yeah, I have," she says finally. "There's been different periods of time where it felt like everything had to refer to the makeup of our audience, assuming it was mostly women when it isn't actually, and also what our lifestyles are. We weren't really talking about the music at all for a while there. It doesn't feel like that happens that much right now for some reason."

Present interview excluded. I mean, I really do like that new record. I'd wear an Indigo Girls t-shirt proudly, even in Vestavia. The music so deserves to be talked about. But I can't help myself. I've got 20 minutes and all I can think about is what it would feel like to be crowned as hook-savvy poets by music fans of all creeds (even conservatives, like her very proud Dad) yet spend 20 years prostrate to the angle-horny higher mind of music journalism as lesbian folk rock, lesbian folk rock, always lesbian folk rock? To have your career condensed to a punch line? To have your name rain from gossip blog tag clouds as evidence that [Ellen Page](#), who burned with 'sister fire' during a 'big lezzy jam' of *Closer To Fine* ("that is such a memory song for me!") at an Indigo Girls concert in a 2008 [SNL](#) sketch, might really be gay? To watch cartoon third graders in the first-season suburbs of old South Park crank up your CD so they can be lesbians?

Ehh... Ray doesn't know. Or doesn't care. She lives in the North Georgia mountains for a reason.

"I just sort of do my own thing and play music... I'm not in the pop culture kind of world," she says. "I think that I don't totally take all that stuff in because I try to live outside of that place."

But she does receive visitors.

"The other day a friend of ours said 'hey, I was watching [30 Rock](#) or whatever and they mentioned you.' Some cultural references to us - sometimes it makes you feel good, sometimes it feels like it's derogatory.

"[SNL](#) did some spoof on us. I remember sorta being rubbed the wrong way it at first. But then I was like, I should lighten up. They also did these fake public service announcements that made fun of our activism. It was kinda like, ouch, you know? You try to do something good and you get sorta panned for it and distilled down to a bleeding heart lesbian activist and not taken seriously. Sometimes that kinda hurts."

But it's nothing, nothing, she says, compared to pain of the old days, the self-loathing of high school. The jokes, when she hears them, or is told about them, she can handle. They've changed. Everything has changed. Ray thinks things are closer to fine now than they've ever been.

Her thoughts on Birmingham are a perfect example.

"So, the Magic City," I say, "What's the first thing that comes to mind? What, to you, is synonymous with Birmingham?"

Man, how will the lesbigo folk rock activist answer... [Courtney Cox?](#) [Bull Connor?](#) [Letters from a jail?](#)

"Music, actually," she says. "Music and Thai food."

**Photo:** courtesy of the artist.

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*The [Indigo Girls will be playing the Legacy Credit Union Stage on Friday](#); they're scheduled to start at 10 p.m. Of course you can always check out the rest of the City Stages schedule over [here](#) and [tickets are still available](#).*