

## ZZ WARD STEPS IT UP A NOTCH WITH 'THE STORM' (INTERVIEW)



**ZZ Ward**, the singer-songwriter with a blues edge and a rock & roll kick, is back with a vengeance on her new album, *The Storm*, out this past Friday, June 30. With lyrical bite marks and a whole bunch of sassy melodies, Ward has gathered up all her gnawing aggravations, anger, hurt and frustrations of past relationships and simmered them together into a witch's brew that makes for one heck of a sophomore record. Interestingly, this was not her original second album. That one she scrapped because she felt it lacked depth. So she went deeper and in time had songs like "Cannonball," "Help Me Mama," "Ghost" and "She Ain't Me." And Ward hasn't sounded better than right now.

Raised in Oregon but now an LA girl, Ward made her debut with the 2012 EP *Criminal*, followed by her full-length *Till The Casket Drops* later that year. Since then, she has toured, played some of the big festivals, had her music appear in such TV shows as *Pretty Little Liars*, *Reckless* and *Justified*, and added her vocals to guitar player Robben Ford's song, "Breath Of Me."

With songs that tend to hang out at the core of an open wound, Ward has never been reluctant to sing about those emotions onstage, as **she told us during a 2013 interview** – “I feel really comfortable when I’m onstage, just letting it all out there” – and again when we spoke to her on the eve of her new album’s release. Appearing onstage comes naturally to Ward, who began singing in her father’s blues band before her teens. “When I was like twelve, I would shake a lot when I got on stage, get really nervous, but then eventually you do it a lot and you kind of get over it.”

In fact, she was more nervous about moving from the country to the big city. “It was terrifying for me to move from Oregon,” Ward said. “It’s a totally different world, but I love it. I love LA.” And that’s where the singer was hanging out when she phoned *Glide* to talk about *The Storm*.



**Your new album is just coming out. How long had you been living with these songs before you decided to put them onto a record?**

Not that long, really. I had made a whole second album and then when I started to go out on the road with it, I felt like I could have gone deeper into what I wanted to create so I scrapped the whole record and then I wrote this record. These songs weren’t hanging around very long before we put them out.

**Did you realize this record was going to have a theme and that theme was kind of the sting of past relationships? Did you notice that while you were writing these songs?**

No, I didn’t really realize that while I was writing them. I think that’s something that was like a natural progression I feel as an artist. I think if it’s too planned out, it might not be natural. So I wasn’t really planning on doing that. As things started to come up, I just started to feel these heavy emotions about a lot of past relationships. You know, as an artist, when I get a feeling, when I catch a feeling somewhere, I follow it. So it really just kind of progressed as I went, as I kept kind of digging in my closet, finding these things, and I felt so angry about it, I felt bad about it, you know.

**Were those feelings showing up in lyrics first or in melodies?**

Both. My process, personally, is I usually come up with a melody before I come up with lyrics. I think that's just a primal thing. I think I feel like I can sing a note before I can think of the words and I think that kind of brings out more of an emotion in my work.

**The song "Cannonball" is really slinky and you play harmonica. Did the melody come first?**

You know, I was in LA and the power went out in the house and I couldn't use my computers and I wanted to write. I had planned on writing that day. So I lit some candles, and it was in the wintertime and it's LA so it wasn't that cold but it was cold (laughs). So I got some blankets and I was in the living room with some candles and I think there was something kind of magical that day about not having any electronics to really rely on. I just had to sit there with my guitar and figure out a song. And I had to come up with something that I wouldn't really have to lay down to remember it. So I just started playing over 1-4-5, which is a rhythm, like a blues rhythm, and that is kind of where that song kind of came from. It happened that day.



**"Bag Of Bones" doesn't have a lot going on with it. It's more subtle and raw.**

"Bag Of Bones" is interesting because I wrote "Bag Of Bones" for the other record that I ended up not putting out but I never actually put that song on the record. I wrote that song in a hotel room in Alabama when I was on tour. I don't know, it was just something about where I was that really made me want to write a really stripped down song. When I was going back and thinking of songs for the new album, I had a little demo of that that I put down on my computer and I thought, you know, there's something here, I want to explore this song. And that's where that one came from.

**I see you're listed as an engineer on this record. Do you like being all hands on with all the knobs and everything?**

Well, I've had my moments where I've gotten really into production and things like that but it depends on who I'm working with. Sometimes if I'm working with a producer and they're a little bit more independent, I'll let them do their thing. But I'm always in the room with the producer and I always have a lot of ideas because I feel like nobody knows my music like I know my music, how I want my music to be. I also have a lot of amazing people that support me on this record but at the end of the day, as an artist, you need to know what you want, because you can't look to someone else to come up with it for you. It's not going to happen. And some of the engineering that I am credited for is like some of the vocals, like the "If You Stayed" vocal. I recorded my vocal myself at my house on that song. I wrote that song and I sang it down and when I sang it down I captured the raw emotion in that vocal and I didn't want to lose that. So I never re-recorded that vocal. That was just me recording myself in my garage.



**You wrote three of the new songs by yourself and then the rest are collaborations. What are you most comfortable doing?**

I'm comfortable co-writing and writing by myself. I think sometimes that writing by yourself it can be more challenging because you don't have anybody to help carry the weight of the song. It's all on you – the melody, the lyrics, everything is on you. But also, when you're co-writing with people, it has to be the right people to write with. Sometimes when you get in the room with people, they just want to write something quick or they don't have the patience to keep writing and trying different things or they don't trust you knowing what you want in a song. I was really fortunate that the collaborations I did on this record and the co-writers I wrote on this record with were very supportive writers.

So I don't know that I necessarily prefer a certain way. Like, one day I may be feeling a certain kind of way and I have a lot of emotion and I'm ready to write something and that's great; but there might be days where it's a little harder to get in touch with that and you need people around you to kind of push some buttons and get you into that certain kind of mood. So I think however I can get a great song.

**Do you think you're more lyrically honest writing by yourself?**

I don't think I would say more honest by myself. Because I've been in a room with other people where you say what you're thinking and then they ask you, "Oh, is this what you're thinking? Are you thinking about it like this?" And you're like, yes, that's exactly what I mean. So it can also help you get more honest.

**Have you ever been writing a song that was getting really raw with the emotions and you had second thoughts about going that far because you knew in the back of your mind you were going to be performing this in front of a lot of people. Has that ever swayed your lyrics one way or the other?**

It doesn't sway the way that I write. It might sway the way that I talk about a song though, because I think for me, I don't ever want to put my hands behind my back lyrically when I'm trying to write something, to say something. That's my freedom as an artist to say what I want and to say some of the hard stuff that people don't want to say. There are artists that have come before me that have done that and paved the way and made that okay. So I would never want to edit what I say in concern of what people would think. But I do think sometimes when I'm explaining a song, I don't want to explain it too much because sometimes I want this song to really be a part of someone else's life. I think after I write these songs, they help me get through things and then what I've noticed, like with my first album, was that they've helped other people get through their own situations. So sometimes I don't want to talk about what my story is with the song too much because it's kind of becoming somebody else's in a way and I don't want to take that away from them.

**To you, what is the most powerful line or lyric on this record?**

There are a lot of different lines but I noticed some people have been bringing up this line and it is kind of powerful, "Us moving forward is me moving backwards." And I do really like that line. I'd say that one is my favorite for right now.

**Which song would you say changed the most from it's original composition to it's final recorded version?**

That's a good question. I would say "The Storm" probably changed the most because of all the things we added to it. Working with someone like Neff-U, he's so gifted at supporting the song. I wrote "The Storm" just guitar and vocal and then the beautiful string section on that song and I think Neff-U did an incredible job on that one. He really supported what the song was.

**Was "Ride" specifically written for the new movie *Cars 3* or was it something you already had?**

No, it was written specifically for the movie. They really liked my sound and my style and they had asked me if I would write a song for the movie. So I did. I wrote that song with Evan Bogart and Dave Bassett and then after we wrote it, Gary Clark Jr was nice enough to come play some guitar on there and sing a little bit on that song.

**The last time we spoke, we were talking about Big Mama Thornton and Etta James and their influence on you as a singer. Have you noticed if your go-to musical inspirations have changed much since that first album?**

No, I don't think they have. I think that's the one thing about this record for me is that it's a different way of changing for me because I don't feel like I've evolved on this record by doing something different or trying to be someone that I wasn't. I feel like on this record I evolved by simplifying things, by really thinking about the music that I love and what kind of album I want to make and just making that and really supporting that. So no, I don't think my influences have really changed. I think if anything they just got stronger.



**You seem to prefer to play acoustic guitar over electric.**

Yeah, I guess I play more acoustic than electric. I started off on acoustic. I'm more about what does it feel like when you sit in a room by yourself and play a song – no sound, no plugged in. What does it feel like in your bones? And I think that's probably why I play more acoustic than electric.

Everybody is different. Billy Gibbons won't touch an acoustic guitar. He'll never touch an acoustic guitar. But he has his own reasons for that. We're all different artists and different musicians and have different strengths and weaknesses and I think one of my strengths is my honesty in my music. I think just sitting there playing a song in a room is kind of what is going to tell me about that.

**A few years ago you did a song with Robben Ford called "Breath Of Me." How did that come about?**

I think that Robben is an incredible guitarist and he's a very creative person and I thought it would be really cool to work with him. He was making his album and they reached out to us and asked us if we'd like to collaborate on something and that's how that song came together.

**Do you think you have now purged all your anger and frustrations of the past on this album so that we'll start hearing some happy, perky, contented ZZ Ward songs in the future?**

(laughs) Yeah, I don't know about that. You know, we are who we are. I'm a moody girl and I grew up listening to moody music and that's what I like and that's what I react to. I would love to say that I just got it all off my chest and I ain't got nothing to complain about anymore but that ain't true (laughs). You know, I think it's for the best cause I think people like me singing the blues.

**Are you going to be on the road for most of the year?**

Yeah, we're going to be on the road a lot. We're opening for Kaleo coming up in the fall and then we'll have another headlining tour after that. We'll be out there playing a lot of music.

