

ZZ Ward is someone you haven't heard before.

Hold up, let's amend that: With early praise from *Esquire* ("damn near NSFW") and *Marie Claire* ("will raise goose bumps down your spine")—not to mention buzz-building appearances at South by Southwest and on *Last Call with Carson Daly*—this bold new voice may indeed have captured your attention already. And if that's the case, then surely you know the deal: ZZ Ward is doing something all her own.

She calls it "dirty shine": the bone-deep wail of old-fashioned blues crossed with the big-city gloss of cutting-edge hip-hop. Currently based in Los Angeles, Ward forged her one-of-a-kind sound growing up in small-town Oregon—"out in the sticks in the middle of nowhere," as she puts it. "There was nothing to do, so that gave me a whole lot of time to play around with music."

Her dad owned a pair of Hammond B-3 organs, and she learned to play those; guitar came a little later, as did the remarkable vocals she first honed singing with a blues band at the age of 12. (Yes, she sometimes had trouble getting into the clubs she was booked to play.) Then, at 16, Ward entered the world of rap—which she'd first discovered thanks to her older brother's CD collection—in a scene that sounds like something out of *8 Mile*: She drove an hour and a half to Eugene, walked into an underage hip-hop club, found the dude in charge and proceeded to tell him she should sing his choruses. "And, of course," Ward remembers, "he was like, 'Who the hell are you?'"

Soon enough, the members of Oregon's hip-hop scene knew exactly who Ward was, as she crafted hooks for rappers and proved her mettle as a songwriter in her own right. Part of that meant developing the confidence to be herself—to accept that her style doesn't slot easily into any of the music industry's current categories.

"People wanna know what my music is, because they're comfortable with what they know," she explains. "But I'm just doing what's authentic to me." It's that sense of commitment she inherited from some of her idols: Muddy Waters, Big Mama Thornton and especially Tina Turner, whom Ward says sings in a way that "leaves no separation between her and the song—she puts everything she has into her performance. That's what I wanna do."

A chance meeting with A-list tunesmith Evan "Kidd" Bogart—who'd run across ZZ's MySpace page while checking out up-and-coming artists from Oregon—resulted in Ward's signing to Bogart's Boardwalk Entertainment Group. Once there, she began work on her debut album—as well as a four-song EP,*Criminal*—with a jaw-dropping array of collaborators, including Ryan Tedder, Pete Rock, Theron "Neff-U" Feemster, Ali Shaheed Muhammad (of A Tribe Called Quest), Ludwig Goransson, Blended Babies and Fitz (of L.A.'s Fitz and the Tantrums).

“Being in the studio with these people I’ve looked up to for so long was completely incredible,” Ward says. In fact, the experience was so inspiring that even as she assembled her EP and album, Ward found herself itching to make more music. So between studio sessions she cranked out *Eleven Roses*, a free mixtape on which she offers her interpretations of recent tracks by Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino and Tyler, the Creator. For “Criminal” she borrowed the beat from “Oil Money” by Freddie Gibbs, who was so impressed by Ward’s remake that he asked to contribute a guest verse to the official version on the EP; something similar happened with Kendrick Lamar, whose cameo in “Cryin Wolf” comes after Ward used his “Look Out for Detox” on *Eleven Roses*.

Other album standouts include “Til the Casket Drops,” inspired by Ward’s love of Alan Lomax’s influential field recordings, and the provocative “Charlie Ain’t Home,” which the singer conceived as a response to “Waiting for Charlie” by the great Etta James. And in “Put the Gun Down” Ward reaches back to her blues-bar roots in order to address a “woman trying to take my man from me,” as she puts it. Strong cuts, all—yet they scarcely prepare you for “Last Love Song,” a stunning soul ballad that the singer calls the final tune she’ll write about the heartbreak that led to so much of her current work. “The title pretty much says it all,” she admits with a laugh. “It started to make me cry as was I writing it—that’s always a good sign.”

And so it is. But for this exciting young artist on the cusp of a breakout, those tears also serve as a reminder of where she came from. ZZ Ward hasn’t forgotten anything. Now you won’t forget her.

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