

ZZ Ward is the next ...

By Allison Stewart, Special to the Tribune

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Singer-songwriter ZZ Ward doesn't want to make a big deal of it, but she's good at a lot of things—playing guitar, blues-rock, hip-hop—that historically have not been the province of nice young white girls.

Ward (born Zsuzsanna) grew up in Roseburg, Ore., joined her father's band as a preteen, and moved to Los Angeles a few years later to find the success everyone knew was inevitable. There was the usual series of mixtapes and EPs, and a breakthrough full-length, "Til the Casket Drops," with guest turns from Ryan Tedder (for hits) and Kendrick Lamar and Freddie Gibbs (for cred) released in the fall of 2012.

Success has come slowly but steadily. No one can agree on whether Ward is the next Adele or the next Rickie Lee Jones, but everyone knows she's the next something. It helps that she looks great on late night talk shows, wears a fedora without irony and makes genre-busting, pop-minded songs ripe for placement on CW shows.

Ward, 27, can't remember a time when she wasn't on tour (she plays the House of Blues Sunday night). In a recent phone interview, she discussed breaking trails, avoiding the sophomore slump, and the loneliness of life on the road. The following is an excerpted version of that conversation.

What the road has taught her

I've learned a lot on the road through touring so much. My dad sometimes says to me, We always talked about you wanting to be a recording artist, and it always seemed like it would be so much fun all the time, writing and singing. But we never took into account all the driving.

On being a pathbreaker

To hear you say that, I'm like, 'What? I am?,' because I don't think about it like that, it's just who I am. I think it's good to be different. ... Some people get it, some people might not get it, but I'm more interested in the people who get it.

On meeting resistance from strange crowds

I definitely have people who are like, You sound so different than what you look like. But that's just the way it is. If people don't know me. I don't know what their first impression of me is, but I hope their last impression is that they love my music.

On the dangers of making an unrelatable sophomore album

When I was growing up listening to artists, the songs I connected with had emotions I could relate to. I don't know how many people feel like they're out on the road and they're lonely. Probably not a lot of people. So unless you're going to have followers who are artists going through the same thing as you, you're probably

going to have to think of deeper things that are going on that other people can relate to. Plus, there's not a lot of emotion to being out on the road, to being kind of a gypsy.

On the inadvertent similarities between "Casket" single "Put the Gun Down and Dolly Parton's "Jolene"

I hadn't really heard the song 'til after I wrote (my song), then I was like, Wow, that's really similar. It's kind of funny how that works, but there are so many songs written throughout history ... it's rare that there's a song that's completely brand new.

On not changing her style

I'm sort of a tough chick. I'm more of an empowering singer: "I don't need you and I'm going to get over you" more than "You hurt me and I'm going to give up." You learn things through putting out a record, things that work and things that don't work. I think people change their style because they get bored, or people feel they were put into a box and that makes them angry.

On trying to avoid bad reviews

There could be ten articles that are amazing, and then one person (has) one dig, and then that's all you think about. ... I definitely have my moments where I'll read something and get upset if they don't say something nice about me. I've learned not to read those things, because it's kind of like walking up to a stranger and saying, "Hey, would you tell me what you think of me?" Why would anyone do that? You might get answers that you don't like.

onthetown@tribune.com

@chitribent

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: House of Blues, 329 N. Dearborn

Tickets: \$16 (17+); 800-745-3000 800-745-3000 or **Ticketmaster.com**