



ZZ WARD released a mixtape in February.

ALTERNATIVE BY EMILY ZEMLER

LIVING PROOF

ZZ Ward delivers genre-bending debut

ZZ Ward's label deal with Hollywood Records happened almost instantaneously. The musician, who had already moved to Los Angeles and signed with Evan Bogart's management company, Boardwalk Music Group, performed four acoustic songs for a slew of label executives in June 2011 and, according to Disney Music Group executive VP Ken Bunt, everyone was ready to sign her. "We wanted to partner with her as soon as she played the last note," he says. "It's one of those old-school things where if you had the contract right there you'd slide it across the table."

Ward, who hails from Roseburg, Ore., spent the rest of last year working on what has now become her debut album, *Til the Casket Drops*, which arrives Oct. 16 on Hollywood, a follow-up to her May EP, *Criminal*. Although Ward had spent time perfecting her craft in a series of co-writing sessions, she elected to hole up in her apartment and write alone, focusing on a unique blending of genres that seems both inventive and logical. Encouraged by Bogart, Ward penned tracks that merge blues, rock and hip-hop in a soulfully slick package.

"I just knew what I wanted to do, which is half the battle," Ward says. "When you're trying to find yourself, especially when you're young, you don't necessarily know who you are. I had always loved the blues and hip-hop, and I was a little bit scared to just embrace that because nobody else was."

It took Ward and the label a while to pick a producer. Eventually, she ended up in a Los Angeles studio with Nephew, who's worked with 50 Cent and Michael Jackson. The pair began with "Put the Gun Down," the album's first focus track, and found a cohesion that led to Nephew helming half the disc. "I had worked with a lot of producers where it didn't work, or they would want to change something," Ward says. "Nephew never wanted to do that. He believed in the music."

But although hip-hop had a dramatic influence on Ward (rappers Kendrick Lamar and Freddie Gibbs each guest on two tracks), her songs are bluesy and sultry, allowing the underlying rap beats and rhythms to bolster her powerhouse vocals. "Put the Gun Down" is being pushed to triple A and alternative radio, and Bunt sees

Ward having mainstream success in the same way as Mumford & Sons or Adele. The track, which has been heavily played on SiriusXM's Spectrum channel, has recently been put in rotation at alternative stations like KTCL Denver, a bit unusual for an act whose music has appeared in campaigns for ABC Family's "Pretty Little Liars" and MTV's "Awkward."

"We see it as [having] a wide demographic, but certainly the first audience we see is that triple A/alternative audience," Bunt says. "We're not trying to aim so narrowly, but the focus early on is making sure there's a built-in foundation for her to be a career touring artist. We're going to be working this [track] for a long time. If it reacts the way we think, this song could ultimately cross to other formats."

Like hip-hop? Hollywood isn't necessarily intent on pushing Ward into that market, but the label did support the release of a mixtape, *Eleven Roses*, in February for which she created new songs using tracks by artists like Gibbs and Tyler, the Creator. It's perhaps the first memorable instance of a non-rapper releasing a mixtape. "In retrospect, because I didn't know what it meant at the time, it makes me really happy that I put it out," Ward says. "It was a great introduction to what my music would be. Because I don't want to be subtle with my music." ●●●