

THE ASPEN TIMES

ZZ Ward sings the blues at Belly Up Aspen



[ZZ Ward](#) has the blues in her blood.

The daughter of a blues singer and harmonica player, she started singing and playing in her dad's band as a child in Oregon.

But, like just about anybody born in the 1980s, she's a hip-hop kid who was shaped by sounds of Jay-Z and Nas.

As she matured as a musician, it was only a matter of time before the sounds of blues and hip-hop started melding in her performances. She'd be going to Freddie Gibbs shows, she recalled in a recent interview, and she'd be singing hooks for rap artists. But then she'd pick up her guitar and play straight blues in her bands.

Once she started writing songs, however, the poppy hip-hop blues hybrid sound that has helped Ward make a name for herself poured out.

"The scenes were so separate and the opportunities to express myself in either genre were so separate," Ward said from a recent tour break in Los Angeles. "But when I started writing, that was when I was able to put them together in my own songs and stories."

Touring with a three-man band, Ward will headline Belly Up tonight before playing the Ride Festival in Telluride on Saturday.

Ostensibly she's on the road supporting her most recent record, "The Storm," which was released last summer and hit No. 1 on the Billboard blues chart. But in truth, Ward — a hard-touring and hardworking rock star on the rise — never leaves the road for long and doesn't need anything to promote in order to put on a show.

"At this point I have a lot of material," she said. "So it's fun to put together a live show."

Early on, it was her bluesy cover songs that helped make a name for Ward — genius and novel takes on Drake or Nick Jonas with slide guitar and harmonica.

"I never want to cover something that's a straight-up blues song," she said of her eclectic cover choices. "It just depends on whether I can put my own spin on it."

The closest she might come, she said, is in her version of Son House's "Grinnin' in Your Face," which fills in the stark a capella and hand claps of the original with a beefy full band treatment. While Ward is no secret to blues-heads and the crowds she's won over with her tireless concerts, Ward recently found a massive and mostly new audience as NASCAR's theme song performer — the equivalent of Hank Williams Jr. and Carrie Underwood's ubiquitous NFL spots for racing fans.

Since last month, NBC's racing broadcasts have opened with Ward singing a cover version of Tom Petty's "Runnin' Down a Dream."

As she recalled, network execs had heard her song "Ride," a collaboration with blues guitarist Gary Clark Jr. featured on the "Cars 3" soundtrack, and sought her out.

"They loved the feel of that song and how it lent itself to making you want to move and move fast," she said. "They saw that and they were like, 'This is our girl.'"

The Petty cover is due to run on the network's broadcasts for two years. And this big break is a full-circle experience for Ward. As she recalled, in her time as a kid playing in her dad's blues band, Petty's songs were in constant rotation.

"We did 'Mary Jane's Last Dance' all the time," she recalled. "He was such a great writer that a lot of people can sing his songs. It's a testament to how talented he was that his songs are so sing-able. ... I wish it could have been a duet."

Ward has found a loyal fan base here in Colorado. She started coming to Belly Up early in her career and makes regular stops in mountain towns and in Denver, where she sold out the Gothic in February.

"I love playing in Colorado," she said. "People get into it, and that's a dream for an artist — to find people who get into it and they're right with me on the journey of that live show."