



SPIRITED AWAY

Prolific songwriter Ani DiFranco has released her 17th album and will perform in Brisbane in February, writes **Sally Browne**

THERE are free spirits, and then there is Ani DiFranco.

Bursting on to the scene as a spritely, sometimes angry, but resolutely upbeat folk singer in the early 1990s, she captured the attention of thousands and quickly developed a devoted following of feminists and forward-thinkers.

Her songs are from political rants to wry looks at herself (*Not a Pretty*

Girl, Pick Your Nose) and her live shows are full of levity and insight.

The prolific guitarist from Buffalo, New York – who has released a record every year since she was 20 – has just released her 17th album, *Red Letter Year*.

This one took her (gasp) two years to make – and the reason is small and totters around on the floor.

DiFranco's work involves many

more interruptions now that daughter Petah, who at 18 months is already a seasoned traveller, is on the scene, but it's been a benefit to her life and her art.

"This record sounds better because I took a little time with it," she says. "I've got my baby and her daddy to thank for that."

On cue, Petah gurgles in the background, entertaining herself in yet another dressing room.

"She's really well behaved," says her mum. "We have a 'trick' baby, we say, because it makes all of our friends want to have babies. She's pretty easy going."

In January, DiFranco, who now lives among the bayous and banjo players of New Orleans, comes to Australia for a tour that reaches Brisbane on February 4.

Despite being calmed by motherhood, there's still a lot of fire in her belly. *Red Letter Year* flies the flag on subjects from love and happiness to her frustrations concerning the "insanity" of the Bush years.

The title song is her reaction to the Hurricane Katrina crisis. And the

song *The Atom* is an open letter to fundamentalist Christians, suggesting that they devote their energy to preserving God's creations by taking a pro-environmental stance.

Present/Infant is a more personal song about self-acceptance.

"It's about laying eyes on my daughter for the first time and going, 'Oh no, she looks like me!' And then going, 'Oooh, that's a f--ked-up thing to think'. And going from there into having to address wholeheartedly my self-loathing before I teach it to her."

Her natural approach and rallying call of confidence ("I am not a kitten stuck up a tree" she sang in *Not a Pretty Girl*) has made her a feminist icon.

In 2006 she received the Woman of Courage Award from the US National Organisation for Women.

But she admits below the surface, on the level of "subterranean goo", she doesn't always feel so strong, hence she has developed a career of "singing herself into being", as she puts it.

"The 'me' that I write in my songs is the me that I'm trying to become."

Her wealth of inner strength might have come from survival skills she developed living on her own from the age of 15. She started her own record label at 19.

In the early years she was portrayed as an "angry young woman", but that didn't really fit.

"Certainly all those other young women that were coming out right from the very beginning to my shows, they seemed very excited and very joyful at hearing the things we were saying and it certainly made me more joyful," she says.

Right now she is abuzz with the general celebratory atmosphere in the US following the recent presidential election.

DiFranco, who has been asking audiences to come out and vote for years, says she was thrilled to see queues around the block at 6 o'clock on the morning of the election.

"It's a mood of total celebration and relief."

Red Letter Year is out now. Ani DiFranco performs at the Tivoli, Brisbane, on February 4.

Jonathon Moran

CD reviews

indie

Disco Biscuit Love
The Jezabels
(MGM)

★★★★★

The Jezabels are an indie band that you'll want to know, and *Disco Biscuit Love* is a catchy pop rock track worthy of commercial radio attention. Lead singer Haley Mary's vocals have drawn comparisons to Chrissie Hynde and P.J. Harvey. Expect The Jezabels to release their debut EP, *The Man Is Dead*, in February.



mixed

Making Waves
Mixed
(ABC/Gadigal Music)

★★★★★

A lot of good has come out of Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu's incredible debut solo album, *Gurrumul*, and *Making Waves* is a compilation of some of the country's most accomplished indigenous musicians, including Glenn Skuthorpe and Dan Saltan. Former *Australian Idol* winner Casey Donovan contributes the hauntingly beautiful track, *Help Me*.



country

Little Wildflower
Catherine Britt
(ABC)

★★★★★

It's about time we gave Aussie country music artists a go. Catherine Britt is a star but most people probably haven't heard of her in the mainstream music scene because she's dismissed as a country singer. Britt has got the whole package: stunning voice, sexy look and potentially hit songs. This, her third album, scored her an ARIA nomination this year.



pop

The Circus
Take That
(Polydor/Universal)

★★★★★

There are some things better left in the past. I'm just not sure about these boy bands reforming as man bands. I have to admit I didn't mind a bit of Take That when I was younger but, now, with the band nearing 40, it really doesn't work. Catchy pop tunes with simple and uncool lyrics aren't a good recipe. The third track *Hello* can only be described as cheesy.



rock

Chinese Democracy
Guns N' Roses
(Universal)

★★★★★

It's easy to approach this album with disdain, but that's before you give it a spin. After a 15-year gap, countless disputes and Axl Rose making a clown of himself, *Chinese Democracy* speaks for itself. This album swiftly serves up a reminder of the might these one-time stadium giants possessed.



Scott Podmore