

The Oregonian

Ashleigh Flynn debuts 'A Million Stars' on Friday at the Alberta Rose Theatre

By Ryan White, The Oregonian
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Ashleigh Flynn: 8 p.m. Friday, Alberta Rose Theatre, 3000 N.E. Alberta St.; \$10 advance, \$12 door; Sarah King opens

Imagine being an African American woman in 1928 singing the lyric, "Went out last night with a crowd of my friends/They must have been women 'cause I don't like no men." Ma Rainey didn't just sing it, she recorded it, and Paramount, who released "Prove It On Me Blues," advertised it with an illustration of three women headed out for the night, a policeman watching them from the shadows. "What's this?" the ad reads. "Scandal?"

"They're so brave," Portland singer-songwriter Ashleigh Flynn says of Rainey (considered the mother of the blues) and her crew, which included Bessie Smith. "They probably didn't feel brave. They were just having fun and following their hearts."

A mere 84 years later (this past October), Flynn and her crew -- fans, friends, anyone who wanted to pony up for access to a recording party -- gathered to help Flynn finish her first record in five years. One of the three songs worked that night was a boozy, juke joint-inspired take of "Prove It On Me Blues."

"These women in these stories, they deserve to be known," Flynn says.

"A Million Stars," the finished product she'll celebrate tonight at the Alberta Rose Theatre, is full of those stories, many pulled from the edges of history and the frontiers of this country. Stories of determined women cutting their own path through the world.



The title track follows Cattle Annie and Little Britches, outlaws who roamed the plains in the 1890s moving liquor and possibly disguised as men. There's an ode to Calamity Jane ("The West Was Won"), and another to Prohibition Rose, who legend suggests had a hand in about every vice available in Portland once upon a time. "Dirty Hands and Dirty Feet" is inspired by Loretta Lynn.

"A Little Low" was written for Flynn's friend Nancy Bergeson, an assistant federal public defender whose 2009 murder at her Portland home remains unsolved.

"Now you're hanging up there on the moon, a laughing smile and twinkling eyes," Flynn sings. "I bay like an old hound dog. I'm missing you across the miles."

Flynn's go-your-own-way spirit, so evident in the story-songs she writes, helps explain why it has been five years since she released her last record, "American Dream."

"When I have to produce something, it's up to me," she says.

She's been busy. There's the day job; Flynn's a grant writer for Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare. And since "American Dream," she's toured Europe four times -- and stopped at music festivals like Bonnaroo, Bumbershoot and High Sierra. She's opened for John Hiatt, Shawn Colvin, the Wood Brothers, and toured with Nanci Griffith.

Perhaps more important than any of those, she's become a regular opener for Todd Snider, the Beaverton-born Americana star who now lives in east Nashville. Snider makes a cameo on Flynn's new record, offering an anti-bullying sermon on "See That Light" with the same sharp wit that has propelled his career.

What finally pushed Flynn to deliver the new record was a painting. Cecilia Hartge, Flynn's 13-year-old niece, is the artist (she did the painting when she was 9), and what she put on paper was a girl on a pony, rope at the ready, under a vast, starry sky.

It got Flynn thinking about the women of the frontier. "What would my experience be like?" she wondered.

From there, she went looking for the characters that populate "A Million Stars." Hartge's painting became the cover, and Flynn went to work with multi-instrumentalist Chris Funk (the Decemberists, Black Prairie) producing, and brought in many of the usual and talented suspects. All of Black Prairie is on there. Members of the Stolen Sweets add vocals on four tracks.

The next challenge was figuring out how to release the record. She held a party at the Portland studio/office space of Search Party Music and raised \$2,000. She turned to Kickstarter and, as of Tuesday morning, had raised more than \$10,000 against her original goal of \$3,000. A \$1,250 grant from the Regional Arts & Culture Council is earmarked for a new digital store. And she plans to make a push to Americana radio stations and other media outlets. "To market it with a little bit of oomph," she said.

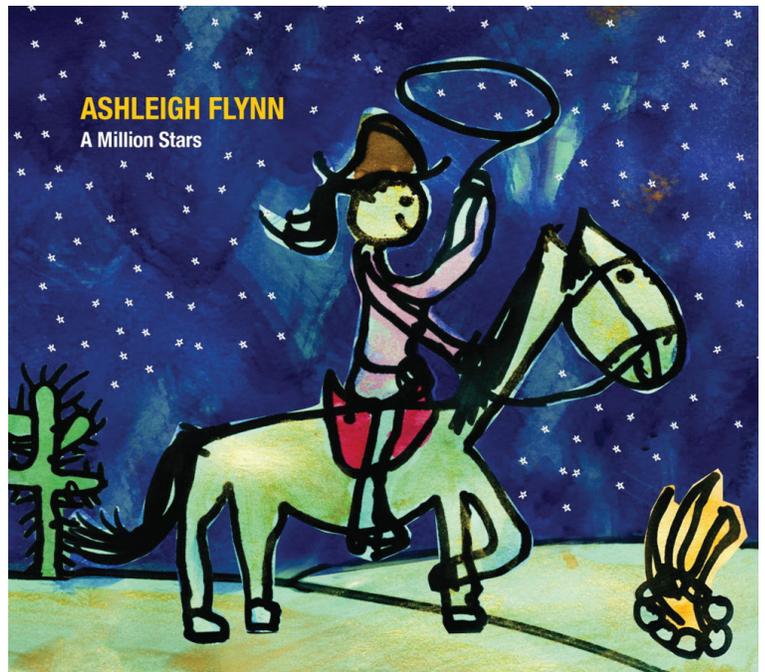
The characters of "A Million Stars" deserve it.

-- Ryan White



PHOTO: Richard Hallman

Ashleigh Flynn celebrates the release of her fourth album, "A Million Stars," on Friday at the Alberta Rose Theatre.



ALBUM ARTWORK: Cecilia Hartge

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http://www.oregonlive.com/music/index.ssf/2013/02/ashleigh_flynn_debuts_a_millio.html