

Featured article...

American singer/songwriter Michele Ari chats to Subba Cultcha

When you struggle past the barbie doll lyrics, candy floss tunes and patronising dance moves you very quickly find people like Britney Spears have fuck all else to offer. Such vapid, money making mediocrity must, surely, be the kiss of death to any other solo American female artists who haven't firmly established themselves within their own rock n roll zenith. But as unsigned champion of DIY's singer/songwriter discord, Michele Ari has continually proved - you can be as great as your peers but remain glaringly overlooked even when proving damned hard to write off.



Descriptive lyrical observations sketch out another nameless protagonist documented on the dramatics of a song. Delving into the beating heart of the human condition with such an indulgent romanticism for the narration of what swings from crippling confessional outpourings to brutal insecurities worsened under the glare of being showcased so publicly. Writing songs that you know will be heard by others, is surely such a solitary pursuit, and no business for the introvert. And the music - a series of reference points from where it derived from. The jarring post-punk edginess which brings an urban rock fanzine kinda shimmer to the very aesthetics of all she stands for. Blurred together with feral garage moments and skipping indie jauntiness. Even sweet stringed, heart wrenching backdrops can be pulled from such 'tough as nails' euphonies for the purposes of poignant, forlorn ballads. This is everything - from recognisable radio transmissions of the distant past to bang up to date rock & roll. Catchy, riff laden songs possibly too quixotic for mainstreams ignorant claims of incandescent grandeur - a short lived, dictated shelf life anyway that no serious musician would be comfortable wallowing in. With Michele Ari it's her seamless changes of direction, the genuine desire for making music she was born to. That's the moments that remind me just how accomplished she really is. Scrunched up messiness and euphoric, wide eyed prettiness - she's all of that, with the intensity of a snarling tiger for a soul.

You've received favourable mentions in the UK music press on many occasions which is a great achievement for an unsigned artist from America who hasn't yet set foot on British soil. How difficult is it to try and keep that momentum going when you're so far away?

Thank you. If you consider how difficult it can be to get out your art just around the block you will have your answer. I'll never forget the day I got my hard copy of my first glossy interview in the mail. It was in an internationally distributed music magazine from the UK. I showed it to some guys who worked at a record shop in Nashville where I was living at the time. My CDs were in the "local" section which is generally where dust likes to hang out and one of the guys said he doesn't push our stuff because "local music doesn't sell." I suggested moving it to the "Just happens to live here" section. I could get played on Radio One by someone who interviewed Pete Townsend but not get into a Nashville music festival that I could walk to. So, the difficulty has been more of how to make my mark in both places, or all places, when I am just one person and I'm funding everything alone. I've recently moved to NYC to remedy my southern blues but it's come with a price tag. Raising your cost of living is about the dumbest thing you can do as an artist but the south just wasn't cutting it for me as much as I miss the fresh air. I needed to be somewhere more progressive and accepting of new ideas and although Starbucks has taken over every corner of the city there is still some bite to the place if you know where to look and I think that I do.

You've released two mini albums/EP's to date so far and, with a new single, a third is on the way. Was the writing process different on each record?

Yes and no. The place from which I write is always the same. It all comes from the soul and even a collaboration is all under my direction. My ability to cut to the chase has improved and the "muscle" I use to write with has become more developed. As time passes I

live more life to write about and learn things that open up new viewpoints to write from and about. To prove to myself I could do it alone my second EP '**mal a' propos**' was all me. I collaborated on the new material for "Uncharted Territory" but by then I had the confidence to prove or not prove anything at will. Who knows what I will do next? I would love to write with all kinds of people then return on my own, rinse, repeat sort of thing. It's all exploratory and always experimental. I never want to make the same song or record twice. I don't want to bore people though of any accusation leveled at me "boring" has not been one of them.

It's always an uphill fight for unsigned musicians trying to get themselves and their music noticed by the right people and for the right reasons. How tough is it to crack America for people like you? Is there a tried and tested circuit that A&R men frequent when searching for something new ignoring anything or anyone not gigging at those particular places?

It is an uphill battle, and I don't think there is a tried and tested circuit, but I don't determine any of my actions by the norms of the day. You can check back with me on my death bed to find out if I was right or wrong about this. I try not to be swayed by press and bar talk because today's "next big thing" could be tomorrow's horror story. I wish people well but I have been bar stools next to people who just got let go from their label or who went on some hot tour and fell apart or got fired. It's not pretty. The whole thing is very arbitrary. What works for one person may not work for another. It would be nice if there was just one answer but in my experience it is not the case. For all I know it takes a thousand little answers to answer the big question and I may have already gotten a few right. I think a bigger problem is that too many are willing to accept mediocrity—because there is money behind advertising it—than one should. That's the kind of thing I just need to ignore or it will upset me. If people want to listen to Black Eyed Peas they can. I don't know that many words that rhyme with "party" so they can have that share of the market if they like.

I know that your plans to come to the UK a few years ago fell through quite dramatically at the last minute. Do you still intend to make it here eventually or is that no longer a priority for you?

*It is a priority that sits in the pit of my heart repeatedly stabbing me till I bleed—should you want insight into the drama. I accepted bad advice to fly on a one-way ticket and buy the return later. In our post 9/11 world that sets red flags flying and, as I am not a terrorist, I simply didn't think to cover my bases in that way. Trying to convince immigration that I was a nice girl was futile. The interview process was unwinnable as their minds were made up. They held me behind guarded doors and then shipped me back. It was really ugly and depressing. I had no choice but to persevere and so I moved to Nashville, toured, released another EP and am now in NYC doing it again. I'll get to the UK. I'm certain of it. Until then I got everyone back with the song "**Little Wars**" which will be on "**Uncharted Territory**."*

You're a big fan of the music scene in the UK. Who is the UK equivalent of you, musically?

I hope nobody though I've come to realize I move onstage much more like Richard Butler than I do any female in music that I know of. I had not been cognizant of it before I saw them live recently and there it was—in the body of a man. Perhaps mine is not a direct steal but a similarity rooted in similar wavelengths. I'd say I come from a Furs/Smiths/Costello/Bush lineage more than Spice Girls or Coldplay. Really though, I don't want to be "just like" anyone or "the next so and so." People can be "just like" Michele Ari if they want but not the other way around.

You are your own manager, booking agent, press officer, tour manager, pr and promoter. Such versatility must wear you out completely sometimes. Does it all get in the way of the other parts of your life, which also rely on your input?

More than the versatility the big factor is the one people don't see which is the human one. The amount of volatility, emotion and, let's face it, total insanity you can have surrounding you is often the largest distraction besides financial ones. My story as an artist is no different from any other artist's story in this way and I am lucky to be surviving it at all. I hear a lot of stories from artists who have quit, some overtly and some covertly. I know why people feel that way. I have days that are just dreadful. This is a tricky bit and I think the more you stick your neck out the more likely you are to have your head chopped off. Some carelessly call these things "bad luck" but I call it the chance you take and the price you have to pay to. In the end it's only a head.

When did you first begin to seriously realise that being a musician was actually all you wanted to do?

Day one. I had a lot of ambition and smarts and, sadly, that's just not that cool when you are a kid. If not for my intense interest in music I never would have made any friends. Like every other outcast I sought out the "freaks" and thank god for that because I was utterly out of place anywhere else. I always knew I was different but it took me a while to figure out why and be OK with it. While I loved my family I saw suburbia as a prison. It worked on me ceaselessly and my frustrations with it ran perpendicular to my goals as an artist. I did many other things in the arts to pacify myself until one day the elephant that had been in the room all along trampled me. That was when I was forced to face facts and boy was I in for a thrill ride! It took living some life to really understand for myself that the only way to live life fully and to be happy is to be who you are even if who you are challenges others, something I've come to realize is not my problem. I'm not a lot of fun at Tupperware parties as you might imagine.

If you could have anyone you wanted in your band who would they be – pick a drummer, a guitarist and a bass player?

I don't know how I could settle on just a handful. More than anyone famous what I like are people who are pleasant to be around. I'd even take a lesser player if the better one was a bigger jerk. Skills can be acquired and talents honed if someone basically has the goods. Teaching someone how to be a decent person, if it does not come naturally to them, generally gives one the equivalent of that horrible constant barb-making family on "Everybody Loves Raymond." Rock and roll is not necessarily about having the best player. It's about

having the most passionate. Those are the ones I want to be around because the more passionate they are the better they will want to be without anyone asking that of them. That said, is Paul Weller free by chance?

What influences you both musically and in general?

What really inspires me is the writing process itself. By the time I sit down I have already had, observed or imagined an experience and it has its own value to me. But when putting it to paper and music you can fully control the situation, twist and bend it if you like, find tones to match the mood, give it a happy ending, give someone better qualities than they really had or turn them into a monster or be able to say something you weren't quick enough to say right in that moment. That is a gas. In general what inspires me is the human condition. It is the most fascinating stuff and provides an unending source of commentary, supposition and wonder.

If your career were to end tomorrow would you regret a single part of it?

All things considered, I'm pleased with what I have accomplished thus far even though it isn't anywhere near enough. This started as a "Field of Dreams" proposition. I have been building it. Some people have come. I would like to see more because I feel very passionately that I've got something of real value to offer if only more people knew about it. I know this because people who listen to my music come back with very thoughtful things to say about it and because the allies I have are deeply loyal and supportive. Regret is one of the worst emotions because it says "I was wrong" when in that moment you were certain you were right and that you did your best. You can't build a life by coddling or promoting what is "wrong" about you or what others find disagreeable about you. I think you can only build a life by strengthening what is right about yourself because we may be more right than we think.

What 10 words best describe the person you are?

I am Miss 'Tries Very Hard' and not Miss 'Perfect'.

Do you have anything you'd like to say before this interview ends?

God Save the Queen?

Some of the things Michele has inspired the world's press to write about her include

'a relief to encounter an artist who tells it straight'
(BluesBunny, Glasgow)

'an intensity of unquestionable depth'
(Subba Cultcha)

'ari has a bittersweet vocal style that is at once enigmatic and revealing'
(Whisperin And Hollerin UK)

'a talented artist'
(Collected Sounds)

'a poignant songwriter'
(Florida Entertainment)

For further press quotes, detailed info, discography, contact details and more...please visit the Michele Ari homepage at.....<http://www.micheleari.com>

Photo Of Michele Ari: Linda Covello

Alan Baillie

<http://www.subba-cultcha.com/features/article.php?contentID=27872>