Written by Jeff Ignatius
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Shilpa Ray has a voice with the unpolished force of PJ Harvey and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' Karen O on their early recordings, and she sometimes unleashes an uninhibited bluesy growl. Yet she's also capable of reining in her vocals to suit the song, as when she sounds (intentionally) a little sloppy/slurry/drunk on "Beating St. Louis" but also manages to nail a passage of higher notes.

She has a testimonial from the king of dramatic singing, Nick Cave: "She has a great voice; she writes great songs, great lyrics."

And Shilpa Ray - who will be playing with her backing band the Happy Hookers on January 16 at RIBCO - also plays a portable harmonium, a reed organ she picked up while studying northern-Indian classical singing from ages six through 17. (The instrument sounds a lot like an accordion.)

That dominating, rough-edged voice is unusual enough in its devouring confidence, and matched with the harmonium there's a compelling dichotomy. The organ is hardly dynamic, but its anachronistic drone defines the songs as much as Ray's singing. She compared it to gesso in preparing a canvas for painting: "It changes the atmosphere," she said.

But the first time she performed at an open mic, she sang unaccompanied.

"Do you play an instrument?" she was asked.

"I was really embarrassed to say, ... 'Yeah, I play the harmonium,'" she recalled in an interview this week. "I had that feeling like when I was in grade school; my mom ... packed curry in my lunch, and all the other kids brought sandwiches. I was so embarrassed to bring curry to lunch,

even though my food tasted way better than their food did."

That's a good comparison - someone as an adult recognizing that being unusual often brings more benefits than fitting in, which is especially true in the crowded indie-music world. The organ gives even punk-ish songs a dusty, ethereal vibe, and the rest of her band is forced to bridge the gap between it and that modern, carnal voice. The ensemble can be dreamy and delicate to match the harmonium, but it's also adept at guitar-driven rock to complement Ray's wilder vocals.

Ray began her musical career as the pseudonymous Beat the Devil, and it eventually grew into a trio. But she suggested that it died because of interpersonal conflicts. She approached her current outfit - now a little more than a year old - differently.

"A lot of important things about being in a band have nothing to do with leading a rowdy lifestyle or being crazy," she said. "It actually has a lot to do with understanding people and the way people work. When I started this new band, my policy was: I don't want to play with anybody who doesn't want to play with me at the time that they're playing with me. So it's become incredibly interchangeable." A liquid lineup has meant more work because new players have to learn the band and its material, but she said the trade-off in attitude and enthusiasm has been worth it.

The group released *A Fish Hook an Open Eye* last year, and a new album is on the way. Ray characterized the the debut as a required stepping stone, but sounded jazzed about the forthcoming record, some of whose songs were previewed in the band's Daytrotter.com session.

A Fish Hook was done quickly and with a relatively new ensemble, and Ray said the most important thing was to finish it. "You actually have to put something out first before you fine-tune what you're putting out," she said.

But the rawness of the album didn't prevent Cave from name-dropping it. Ray said that author Larry "Ratso" Sloman told her he was going to pass the recording along to his friends Bob, Nick, and Lou - not realizing that he meant Dylan, Cave, and Reed.

When she discovered whom he meant, she didn't believe him. "I thought he was just sort of making it up," she said. "I've got imaginary friends, too."

But Sloman wasn't joshing, and Ray has the quote to prove it.

No word, though, on what Bob or Lou thought.

Shilpa Ray & Her Happy Hookers will perform a Daytrotter.com show on Saturday, January 16, at RIBCO (1815 Second Avenue in Rock Island). The all-ages show starts at 7 p.m., tickets are $7, and the bill also includes Steve Shiffman & the Land of No.

To listen to the Shila Ray & Her Happy Hookers Daytrotter session, visit Daytrotter.com/dt/shilpa-ray-and-her-happy-hookers-concert/20030833-3738148.html . To listen to A Fish Hook an Open Eye, visit KeplerMusic.com/shilparay/listen.php .

For more information on Shilpa Ray & Her Happy Hookers, visit ShilpaRay.com or MySpace.com/shilparay .