Written by Jeff Ignatius
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The first impression of Anna Ash's *These Holy Days* album is her distinctive, boldly quirky singing – soulful, pliable, and off-center, comfortable in breathy coos and pointed, high-pitched peaks. The title track features a piercing vibrato that's ethereally visceral, both heavenly and a bit frightening. That's the kind of voice that sounds like a natural extension of personality honed over a lifetime, an idiosyncratic instrument that nobody ever had the heart to constrain or correct.

But in a phone interview this week, Ash – who will be performing at Rozz-Tox on December 16 and recording a Daytrotter.com session the next day– revealed that she only discovered this marvel over the past five years, and she's still exploring it.

"I didn't really even know what my voice sounded like until I was like 19 or 20 years old," she said. " I was very shy about singing as a kid. I was never very good because I was so scared and so nervous."

So in college in Michigan, she took private opera lessons. A few weeks into studying arias, her teacher asked her whether she'd ever sung jazz standards: "I had never even listened to jazz," Ash said. "I grew up on rock-and-roll and Joni Mitchell."

While *These Holy Days* has an undeniable indie-rock aesthetic in its longing ballads and playful, slinky tunes, you can hear how jazz opened the door on the lounge-y "Strangers Again"; the vocals just fit that context. "All of a sudden, I had a voice," she said. "It made sense. I could hear ... what I was supposed to sound like, and a lot of things clicked." That gave her

confidence to express more through her singing, and she began to shape her writing to better suit it.

Ash moved to the Oakland, California, area three years ago and now, in her mid-20s, is preparing to make a go of music as a career. She said she's about to quit her job, and her Rozz-Tox show is part of her first proper tour.

While her voice is a relatively recent revelation, she said the idea that it possesses an "old soul" appeals to her – that it has an inherent wisdom and character over which she has no control. But harnessing that has been a learning process, and she cited two epiphanies – both of which involved making the people around her speechless.

The first came in the recording of her 2009 EP *My Oh My*. The release – tracked live in a church in Michigan – includes the song "Why Don't You," and when she and the band nailed it, the take wasn't greeted with the normal chatter among the musicians. "I remember just standing there afterwards," she said. "It felt kind of dumb after a couple of minutes, but there was this silence that happened after we finished. ... It struck us personally ... . This means something bigger."

And a few years ago, she was playing a show – for an audience of mostly friends – at a San Francisco club and decided to do a song by herself. The heretofore rowdy patrons "went silent," Ash recalled. "And it was such a striking, terrifying – but also super, super humbling – experience to feel what it feels like to make a group of people silent. That was definitely a turning point. That was a moment when I kind of woke up and said, 'I feel a social responsibility at this point to keep trying, keep working ... .' That's a pretty rare and special feeling."

Ash is also gaining poise as a recording artist. The textures and vibes of the songs on *These Holy Days*
– recorded with three different groups of musicians in three different cities and mixed and fleshed out in Montana – were largely shaped by producers, she said: "I was letting a lot of outside people influence me. ... After making a record like that, I have a lot more self-confidence with myself as a producer."

And she said she's eager to take the reins on her next album, for which she's already written

roughly 10 songs: “I’m excited to be directive for the first time.”

Anna Ash will perform on Sunday, December 16, at Rozz-Tox (2108 Third Avenue in Rock Island, RozzTox.com). The show starts at 8 p.m., and cover is $5.

For more information on Anna Ash, visit AnnaAsh.com .