Written by Jeff Ignatius
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It might seem strange for a European to be born into the blues, but that was the case for Ana Popović.

"This is the only thing that I remember as far as music growing up in Serbia," said the Belgrade-born singer, songwriter, and guitarist in a recent phone interview. "We never listened to Serbian music, and basically none of the European stuff ... ."

The blues came both from albums -- "I learned a lot of English from the records," she said, and "I sang those songs way before I could imagine and understand what they were talking about" -- and home jam sessions led by her father. (She eventually wormed her way into those sessions because she learned slide guitar.)

Her first concert (at age 13) was Tina Turner, and one can hear the vocal influence in the fiery defiance and soul of "Wrong Woman," from her 2009 album *Blind for Love*. Pair that with the subdued, quiet confidence of the same record's "More Real," and it's evident that this is an artist capable of nearly boundless blues. It's overstating her skills, but think Turner paired with Stevie Ray Vaughan and you'll get some sense of this woman's multifaceted attack.

The 34-year-old Popović -- a nominee for "best new artist debut" in the 2003 W.C. Handy Blues Awards -- said that the aim with her albums is to provide a well-rounded batch of songs over a variety of genres.

"I like to have a little bit of each style on the record ... ," she said while on vacation in France. And while her own songs have increasingly dominated her albums -- she wrote or co-wrote all the songs on *Blind for Love* -- she plans for her next studio album to be split evenly between originals and covers. (She'll be recording in November, and in the meantime a live CD/DVD filmed at a medieval Italian castle is due this summer.)

She said she's now going through recordings by Jimmy Reed, Howlin' Wolf, and Elmore James, looking for relatively obscure tracks that she could do for the next album. She called her approach "going a little bit back to the roots."

That's partly reverence for her blues elders, but she also considers covers complementary to her own songwriting. She featured Snooky Pryor's "How'd You Learn to Shake It Like That?" on 2007's *Still Making History* because "I don't even think I can write that song that way," she said.

Popović isn't giving herself enough credit. *Blind for Love* has a wide breadth and deep skill, and she never sounds like she's stretching or beyond herself. It's rare that a singer and guitarist doesn't out of necessity lean heavily on one or the other skill, but both her instruments are capable of carrying any song, and the result is an album with a lovely balance between hard and soft, fast and slow, emotion and technique.

Cautioned by her father about the perils of betting on a music career -- specifically of reaching middle age still waiting for a big break -- Popović learned graphic design, and she studied jazz for three years at conservatory. The goal, she said, was to develop her own sound rather than just copying her forebears. She got that, but she quit her studies before they were finished.

"I went really far from where I came from," she said. "I was starting to play too many notes. And it didn't really make a lot of sense with where I came from. It was stopping to be groovy and bluesy, because that's what these studies do to you."

Many performers go to conservatory as hard-rock or blues players, but "at the end, they were all mixed up," Popović said. "Not good enough to become great jazz guitar players, but these four years they lost what they were actually good at. I promised this wasn't going to happen to me."

While her performing schedule contributed to her choice to abandon her studies, Popović appears to have a healthy awareness of herself and the music business. "Don't waste your four years [at conservatory] trying to be John Scofield," she said. "The most important time of your life and your career is actually the 20s. That's when you really need to make your sound and style. Don't waste it on style you're not going to be making money with."

And she said that she has always been willing to give up her music career if it didn't work out.

But, she noted, "that point never came."