



artist bio

PRISCILLA AHN

Singer-songwriter Priscilla Ahn embarked upon a career the old-fashioned way: she packed her belongings in a car—“two guitars, clothes, and some other junk I really didn't need to bring”—and left her Pennsylvania home for L.A. That she found steady gigs, a supportive circle of fellow artists and a record deal in a relatively short period of time—give or take several months of bad waitressing jobs—will come as no surprise after a single listen to “Dream,” the lilting opening track of **A Good Day**, her full-length debut on Blue Note Records. Ahn artfully balances youthful whimsy and grown-up sophistication, playing guitar and singing in a warm, welcoming, and stunningly self-assured voice.

While her peers angle to be MySpace superstars or laptop geniuses, Ahn is impressively old-school. She picked up the guitar at age 14, urged to do so by her classic rock-loving dad, but truly inspired once she heard a guy in her high school play. By the time she was 16, she was looking for the nearest open-mic night, which happened to be at a local Borders Book Store. Getting a driver's license the following year meant she could do even more gigs 90 minutes away in Philadelphia.

Ahn had considered pursuing music in college, but a teacher who oversaw her audition at a state school offered her insights perhaps even more valuable than further study. As Ahn recalls, “The music professor there really got me. He knew that I played guitar and wrote songs and called me up at home and said, ‘Maybe you should think about not going to school right now and pursuing songwriting as a career. After school, your whole life might be so different and you may not have that opportunity again.’ I really thought about it and finally took his advice. And it changed my life.”

One night friends brought her to a recording studio where Blue Note artist Amos Lee happened to be recording his first EP. Ahn landed an internship at the studio, which, she says, really meant “hanging out with them and watching someone so talented recording.” Her own gifts as a songwriter didn't go unnoticed; Lee's producer Barrie Maguire soon started working with Ahn and Lee became one of her first and, as it turns out, most loyal fans. Ahn subsequently took Maguire up on an offer to join him and a fellow musician on a cross-country drive to Los Angeles, where Maguire lived, once he finished Lee's disc.

“It was my first time in L.A. and I loved it right away. It seemed so right for my personality and my temperament. My mom had distant Korean cousins and I moved in with them for the first month.” She became a sort of vagabond artist, living in several different temporary apartments. But she never lost focus on her goal: “I played all the open-mics I could play. I would go to one almost every day. I just tried to learn about the scene and get to know people and work on my songwriting.”

An exhausting year of waitressing, however, almost killed her dream. “My songs were coming out jaded and cynical,” she admits, though not a trace of that remains on **A Good Day**. Then, through a gig at L.A.'s Hotel Café, she met fellow singer-songwriter Joshua Radin: “I loved his voice and he loved mine, and he invited me to sing his songs with him. I did all of his shows,

then he got his record deal and we went out on tour. I found myself in the right place again. I quit waitressing and swore I would never do that again.”

While performing with Radin, Ahn was introduced to drummer and producer Joey Waronker, who has long played with Beck, toured with R.E.M. and recorded with artists ranging from Nelly Furtado to Rickie Lee Jones to the bird and the bee. On a short break from Radin’s tour, Ahn headed into the Waronker’s studio to try recording a few tracks. The sessions led to an independently released self-titled EP in 2006; two tracks, “Dream” and “I Don’t Think So,” were revamped for A Good Day.

Serendipity was again on Ahn’s side: “I heard through the grapevine that Amos was always telling people at Blue Note to keep tabs on me. Amos’s A&R guy came out to see me and then I agreed to do a showcase for the company. I flew in to New York City and it went really well. I’d met with other record companies but that was never what I really cared about it. I just wanted to do my music. But I often said if I were to choose any record label it would be Blue Note because I thought they would get me. So I was very happy when it really happened.”

For A Good Day, Ahn reunited with Waronker, and along with multi-instrumentalist Gus Seyffert—who co-wrote “Astronaut” with Ahn—the trio basically recorded the tunes live. “Gus would play bass or guitar, I would play my guitar and sing, Joey would play drums,” explains Ahn. “Once we laid that base down we would overdub quirky things. After a month of just us, we decided we should get some other people in there and add some new sounds.”

Among the guests making their own memorable contributions were keyboardists Greg Kurstin (the bird and the bee, Lily Allen), Keefus Ciancia (Fiona Apple, Cassandra Wilson, T Bone Burnett) and Zac Rae (Fiona Apple, Macy Gray), guitarist/film composer Mike Andrews (*Me and You and Everyone We Know*); musical saw player Ursula Knudsen; cellist/string arranger Oliver Kraus (Joshua Radin, Beth Orton, Liz Phair); and celebrated jazz keyboardist Larry Goldings. Veteran R&B session singers Jim Gilstrap and Orin Waters lend their voices to “Leave The Light On,” a gentle, folk-gospel sing-along. Ahn herself plays a wide range of instruments including guitar, ukulele, piano, harpsichord, harmonica, and autoharp, amongst others.

Waronker’s approach is elegantly economical. He keeps Ahn’s pristine voice front and center, surrounding her with subtle, beautiful sounds from a range of unusual instruments. A Good Day is grounded in folk, country and pop, yet it’s never constrained by the dictates of any genre. For example, Ahn ingeniously transforms Willie Nelson’s breakup ballad, “Opportunity To Cry” into an upbeat shuffle, while maintaining all its pathos. Though Ahn presents a dreamy, sunny facade in her lyrics, her songs display a serious emotional depth and an almost preternatural maturity. When Ahn impetuously hit the road a few years back, she may not have known exactly where she was going, but A Good Day proves she’s always been headed in the right direction.

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