

- Front Page
- News
- Opinion
- Sports
- Weather
- Artsweek
- Science
- Feature

- Archive
- Contact Us
- Write For Us
- Classifieds
- Advertising
- Best of Survey

Daily Nexus > Artsweek > Volume 86, Issue Number 101

## L.A. Confidential

Singer-Songwriter AM Ventures North and Rocks SOhO

By Aly Comingore

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It's no wonder so many music fans hate L.A. With its congested freeways, overpriced concert tickets and pretentious, industry-driven scene, the setting seems bleak for anyone trying to make it big (unless, of course, you've got an in with a member of Joe Simpson's clan). Cue up-and-comer AM. With his melodic brand of country-meets-blues acoustic rock, AM just may be the most successful Los Angelino without a U.S. recording contract. Heralded as the Best Singer-Songwriter of 2005 by L.A. Weekly and currently playing the part of "that guy" on the soundtrack to nearly every decent program left on television, AM now occupies a semi-permanent Wednesday night slot at L.A.'s chic Hotel Cafe - and is on the lookout for some label lovin'. As he anxiously awaits the U.K. release of his self-titled debut and his musical guest spot alongside an over-sexed Bill Paxton, AM is planning his European tour and finishing up work on his sophomore LP. Never one to take a day off, AM hit the stage at SOhO this past Tuesday with pal Gary Jules and took some time out with Artsweek to discuss the joys and pains of living the life of a not-so-starving artist.

I heard you recently performed at South by Southwest. Was this your first time attending?

AM: It was my first time. I got invited down there by KCRW 89.9 FM. They're really amazing, those guys and they asked me to come down and do their showcase down there. It was amazing. We had a great night. The place was packed. I also recently signed a deal in the U.K. to release my first record, so the label was there as well. It was just an amazing experience.



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Did you get to go and see other shows while you were down there?

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Not really, it was a lot of meet and greet. I tried to go see the Flaming Lips. That was not happening. It was crazy. The Beastie Boys were doing secret shows; the Flaming Lips were doing secret shows. It was just a madhouse. Wow, sensory overload.

I know you have developed a very close relationship with Nic [Harcourt] and the KCRW gang. How did that come about?

I believe somebody handed him my album and said, “You’ve got to listen to this” and I was just lucky enough that he really took to it. He started playing it constantly and people started calling in and requesting it, so he kept spinning it. Then TV [executives] started to put my songs into shows. And then I got a deal in the U.K. and L.A. Weekly gave me this Best Singer-Songwriter award last year. It just all [started] playing into itself, but it all really resulted from him starting to play [the record], and he’s kept playing it. The key about him is he’s not afraid to play what he likes, despite anything else. If he likes the record he’s gonna play the record, and that’s just so rare in radio.

You’ve done a really good job of shopping your songs out to television shows. How do opportunities like these come about?

They’ve come to me so far. They hear [the songs] on the radio, they go down to the local record store, they buy my CD, then they send me an e-mail and say, “We really want to use this in our show, or our movie.” I’ve placed every song off my debut album. It’s been insane. The two most recent ones are HBO’s “Big Love”...

Have you seen the show?

It’s great. What an interesting storyline. Hats off to Tom Hanks because he was all into his war pics and everything. He’s getting all edgy again.

And now we get to see Bill Paxton’s ass once a week.

Yes. Isn’t that lovely? They’re going to use a song of mine called “Gone Away,” which will be in the eighth episode, which airs, I believe, on April 31. And, I just yesterday I got a call from ABC to do “What About Brian.” I think that’s going to be in the second episode.

Do you see any drawbacks to showcasing your music via alternative outlets like television?

If it was like, selling diapers, I don’t know if I’d let them use my song, but so far everything I’ve been involved in has been pretty cool. I really think, in this sort of climate, especially as an up-and-coming artist, you can’t really be picky at this point because you’re still trying to get people to recognize you. Once you’re huge, you can be a little bit more picky about what you do. It’s good to align yourself with stuff that suits your music, but, again, I don’t have any regrets about anything I’ve done. And, TV is kind of becoming the new radio. It’s tough not to crack, and TV is much - I don’t want to say easier - but they’re willing to take a lot more chances.

On that note, how do you feel about the cross-consolidating of media and the role that TV and the Internet is now playing on the music business?

I think the model of being an artist has changed. You can't go for the world - you just have to go for your niche. And if you can reach a group of people across the world that like what you do - and it's enough people to keep your career going - that is all you really need. And I think [that's] possible because of stuff like TV going to independent artists and the Internet. The drawback with that is the over-saturation. Anybody can put up a MySpace profile. Anybody can record in Pro Tools and make an album, so unfortunately there's a lot of garbage and it's hard to weed through. But I think the talented people and the hardworking people end up persevering. I'm definitely well aware of how closed off a lot of avenues are, but when avenues get closed off new ones come up. That's the way it's always been. That's the way it was in the '60s with the record business. You just gotta kinda grin and bear it and make sure you're in it for the right reasons. Are you in it to be famous, or are you in it to make music for people? Don't get in it to make money. Go to law school.

I know you're from New Orleans. How long have you been in L.A.?

I've been in L.A. for a few years. I came out here and jumped right into the Hotel CafŽ songwriting scene. Gary Jules was largely responsible for building that scene. It was a coffee shop before then. That's when I started sniffing around, and that really was the place where I was able to kind of develop my sound and meet my band.

It's a very different venue.

It's very intimate. It's more spacious now; you can fit 180 people in there. It's a real deal place. It's L.A.'s SOhO.

As an up-and-comer in Los Angeles - the perpetual breeding ground for singer/songwriters - what have you learned? Do you have any advice to give to fellow musicians in search of their big break?

I'm going to recite advice that I learned from someone else. There's this guy Derek Sievers, he owns cdbaby.com. He said, "You know the one thing people should always remember is to stay in touch with people, because five years down the line, you're gonna need help from some of those people." I can't tell you how many times I've benefited from friends that I've had for years. He said, "Don't alienate yourself from the people you grew up with," because everybody will need everybody's help eventually. In terms of building a following, build it where you are. Don't overextend yourself I guess is what I'm trying to say. I think when some people think of this whole notion of "making it big" they think they're just going to get plugged into this whole pipeline and then everything is just going to come rushing in. But that's not how it works. If you read a little bit further about these artists that are, quote-unquote overnight successes stories, you'll look in and see that they've actually been plugging away for years. Don't rely too heavily on other people because when you're hot, everybody's gonna want a piece, and when you're not, everybody's gonna go runnin'. That's L.A. law #1. Sometimes you need more than a business relationship in the music business in order to stay afloat.

Do you find it discouraging or troublesome to be constantly compared to artists like Beck and Pete Dinklage? Can these associations be a sort of double-edged compliment as you start to get your name out there?

When you're first starting out, if you don't compare yourself to anybody, nobody knows what you sound like. Even if you think you have the most unique sound in the world, you still have to use comparisons to describe yourself. People that say, "Oh, I'm just totally unique;" that's not a selling point. But if you say, "Ya' know what, I kinda sound like Wilco," [the response is,] "Oh well I like Wilco, maybe I'll come to your show." I think the use of comparisons is necessary in the beginning. And then, once you've reached enough people, then you've got more of a license to be like, "I have my own sound." That's when people will start using your name to describe their sound.

So, what's in your CD player right now?

This question is always weird because the kind of music I listen to is nothing like what you would expect after hearing my music.

Are you going to throw out some underground hip-hop reference right now?

No, not that far. I've been on a really big jazz and bossa nova kick lately, and that's really all I've been listening to. Guys like Jorge Ben, he - and Antonio Carlos Jobim - wrote most of the big Brazilian hits that made up the '60s. I've basically been listening to what Brazilians thought was hot in the late '60s. As far as new artists, I think Jose Gonzalez is really cool. Tina Turner is doing some cool stuff. And Gary Jules of course, his stuff is amazing. Wilco, the Flaming Lips - those guys are tattooed on my back, not really.

What's the one band or artist you would kill to open a show for?

I'd have to say Wilco. Wilco or the Flaming Lips, it's a tough call.

What band or artist would you want to have open up your first headlining tour?

Wow. I have a good friend, Shane Alexander, who's a really talented guy here in L.A. I would take him out.

What's the current state of the second album? Are you particular about who picks it up?

I only work with people that want to work with me. The second record is going to be done in about a month. As far as releasing it, that is still uncertain because things are really picking up for my debut in the U.K. That album release is in June, so that should spur a whole sort of resurgence of activity on the first record, which could push the second record down another six months.

Is that weird for you?

I feel it needs to be heard and however that needs to happen, great. If it happens a little later down the line, great. I do hope to get the new record out before the end of the year. That's the tentative plan.

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