

Small Town Heroes, by Hurray for the Riff Raff

reviewed by [Steve Thorngate](#) in the [September 3, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Small Town Heroes

Hurray for the Riff Raff

ATO

At the height of gangsta rap, commentators lined up to decry the subgenre's violent and misogynistic lyrics. Conspicuously absent was much condemnation of a deeper American tradition that efficiently combines violence and misogyny into a single

narrative trope: the murder ballad, in which a character, generally sympathetic and male, tells of how he killed another character, generally voiceless and female. Sometimes the killer also helpfully explains why he did this (he didn't want to lose her, she done him wrong, the devil made him do it, etc.).

Alynda Lee Segarra is tired of these murder ballads getting a pass. The Puerto Rican Bronx native's fifth album as Hurray for the Riff Raff includes a standout track, "The Body Electric," that takes the tradition on directly. "Delia's gone," she sings, a reference to a well-known specimen of the genre, "but I'm settling the score."

Not that the song is a woman's revenge fantasy, itself hardly a fresh idea. Segarra wants to disrupt this violence-against-women script, not flip it, and it's powerful stuff: "Said you gonna shoot me down / Put my body in the river / While the whole world sings / Like there's nothing going wrong."

It's not the only time Segarra wraps social commentary around an Americana reference. "Baby, please don't go down to New Orleans!" she sings in "St. Roch Blues." That line is the start of a classic blues number, sung in the voice of a lovesick northerner. But Segarra, who now calls New Orleans home, takes it elsewhere: "Cause you don't know the things that I've seen / Them bullets are flying." Elsewhere she cites folk and country standards, never simply paying homage but instead interrogating the tradition and twisting it to her purposes.

Travel and restless wandering are major lyrical themes for Segarra, as the music itself reflects. It's an Americana gumbo, with echoes not just of New Orleans but Texas, the Delta, the Piedmont, Nashville, northern Appalachia, Chicago—all filtered through low-key arrangements and Segarra's unadorned singing. Her band's there mostly just to support her sophisticated writing voice, which captures heaps of American restlessness, earthiness, and weary hope. At turns political, romantic, and just plain sad, her songs sound less like old-timey genre exercises than a 21st-century Woody Guthrie, traveling the land and giving voice to its timeless joys and woes.