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Page: 11H

Moody Music
In Her Quiet Way, Tori Amos fights the Heavyweights

by Chuck Campbell, Scripps Howard News Service

Tori Amos is the quintessential outsider.

The singer was a quiet counterpoint to the mayhem in Los Angeles during the recent MTV Video Music Awards - a demure unknown who watched the innovative video for her song "Silent All These Years" compete against videos by such huge names as Guns N' Roses, Madonna, Van Halen and Michael Jackson.

Although her video was swept away in the carnival atmosphere (falling to the likes of Nirvana and the Red Hot Chili Peppers), the fact that she was nominated in four categories, no less, is a tribute to the impact of Amos and her deeply introspective music.

"I'm into circuses, but there can be chaos with incredible direction," she said in sly reference to the calculated "anti-establishment" aura of the ever-hyping MTV.

The 29-year-old singer was speaking by phone from Los Angeles, taking a brief respite from a rugged tour schedule. What else did she learn from the MTV extravaganza?

"If you weren't (model) Cindy Crawford, you didn't get to ride in the little cart," she said, breaking into laughter. "I saw them take her off on a little cart, and I thought, 'I'm in the wrong profession!'"

The music on her hit debut album, *Little Earthquakes*, is spiked with bewildered disappointment, anger and fear. Amos said that much of the material is drawn from her growing-up days in Newton, N.C. Although she said she nearly was strangled by her strict upbringing, she found reassurance in such rituals as biscuits every morning and church bells at noon.

Plus, "there's much more of a kindness in the South than anywhere in the world," she said. "There's more liberal thinking in the North, but they're afraid to be friendly."

"Living in America I felt like a walking Civil War. You have the closed mentality of Southern thinking, but there's an emotional door-close in the North."

Seeking a receptive environment for her moody music, Amos moved to London a few years ago (which helped launch her career), and she found the general open-mindedness of the British refreshing.

However, she still reminisces about the South, drawing upon her experiences in her songs on Little Earthquakes. The multi-layered music on the album defies conventional pop formula as the keyboard-driven songs flow in and out of divergent breaks and bridges.

Top 40 radio hasn't given either of the first singles - "Silent All These Years" and "Crucify" - a warm reception, but the imaginative videos for both songs have landed on MTV in heavy rotation, which in turn drove Little Earthquakes up the album charts.

That's ironic considering her music is so untraditional, undefinable and un-MTV.

Also ironic was Amos' decision to cover the grunge rock song "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by MTV darlings Nirvana. The tune is hardly recognizable in the hands of Amos, who turns it into a smoldering piano lament.

"If you're going to do a cover, it has to be a complete challenge," she said, adding that her next remake - of Anita Ward's 1979 disco smash "Ring My Bell" - will be her last.