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Tori Amos

From rock chick to twisted mystic

Interview by Tom Hibbert, a music journalist who lives in London.

You've said that you were an awkward, hapless teenager. How bad was it?

Very. I was thirteen in 1976, so I was listening to Led Zeppelin and plotting ways to give Robert Plant my virginity. I was writing to show all those boys who called me a dog and all those girls who laughed at me because I was the friendly nerd. My dad was a minister so I bought the whole Christian thing, but all I really cared about was spaghetti or tapioca pudding. I just wanted to lay on my bed and squeeze my legs, which is what a young girl should do, though I didn't realize that at the time. I laid on my bed and squeezed my legs together and thought, "Oh, this is a curiosity!" But it's quite another thing for an Uncle Jimmy to come up and try to "educate" you. That's why it's important that I talk about sexuality with children.

Sexual guilt seems to be a theme running through your songs. Discuss.

Well, my sexual confusion wasn't just fear of my family. It was everything I was exposed to, all the messages you get in church, all the messages you get in school about what a "nice" girl is. I wanted to be a "bad" girl because they were interesting. What was a "bad" girl? Somebody who would take a walk in a meadow with a guy and make love to him. And a "good" girl was the one that denounced him and made him feel horrible about his masculinity because she wanted it so bad? This all got pretty confusing to me. I started feeling so divided around thirteen.

Were you popular in high school?

No. But I was homecoming queen. All of the ethnic groups voted for me.

How do you feel when critics damn your music as overwrought angst?

Oh, I've learned to have self-love -- and I was a child prodigy so I know what it's like getting homage paid to you. With my music I go all the way in there emotionally. A lot of people are afraid of what I'm talking about. Abusives always have a hard time hearing from the victims. What did hurt me was when a critic wrote that I was really un-attractive. That bothered me.

The image you seem to have acquired is "weird chick." Is this accurate?

You know, I open my home to these journalists and I answer their questions the way I want to and if they can't understand it, well . . . some say I'm not on the same planet as they are. Well, I don't want to be on the same planet as most of them because they're small-minded. They're unexciting. They have no visionary thinking. They don't know me, anyway. Like, nine or ten years ago, I had great fun being a "rock chick."

What is your definition of a "rock chick"?

It's your hair spray color. And it's "Can I get into the plastic snake pants, size 26?" It was interesting being a "rock chick" by day and a lounge pianist by night. I was playing piano in these ritzy bars, looking like I'd slay your children, and I'd do "Feelings" and then stuff like the Doors' "L.A. Woman" and "New Year's Day" by U2 and nobody could tell the difference. But I kept getting fired.

You started to play piano in the womb, did you not?

Not exactly. I was two and a half, so my mother says. By the time I was four, I was really, really good. I probably would have been a composer, but classical music has become something done by people to impress other people. There's no love or understanding there. I loved Jimmy Page instead. Oh, yes, I did. I had a crush on my organ teacher, too, because he was a hippie. But playing the church organ was out.

Is it difficult being a rock pianist?

I just played a show in Germany, 30,000 people, and I walked out there and most of them just wanted to have their ears bleed. Some of them were telling me to strip, calling me names, screaming at me "*schnell, schnell*," telling me to get offstage really viciously. I just sat there thinking, "These little weenies, they'd have no idea what to do if I *did* strip. They wouldn't even know what to do except cream all over themselves."

You're fond of juxtaposing quiet and loud moments in your music, but I notice that you rarely scream.

Everything is setup and payoff, and if a scream isn't set up properly, it doesn't have the effect that it would. Everything is an ingredient, a spice, and if you put hot chillies in everything, even the vanilla custard, then people think, "God, this girl is going over the top with these chillies." I don't have the ability to scream like Axl; I scream in another way. When Bette Davis says, "I think it's time for you to die now," she doesn't have to scream.

Have you had second thoughts about writing any of your lyrics, like for instance "Me and a Gun" (a vivid song about rape)?

Well, when I wrote it, I didn't know how many women would respond. . . . One out of every four women who get backstage say that they have had a similar experience, and that they haven't spoken about it. When I put it out I knew what it was. . . . I didn't know that I was gonna have to keep talking about rape. It would be nice not to have to talk about it, because I would like to move on, but it stays with me all the time.

What do you like about yourself?

There are a few qualities. One is that when everything around me is no joy, no giggles, no fun, when things are at their lowest, I can usually find an avocado hanging around in the kitchen and make a really good sandwich. And I don't have to look for the flower in all situations. I can say, "Those are weeds," but that doesn't have to destroy my day because I can go find another meadow.

You're a crackpot, aren't you?

Am I? That's good. I concede. But I want to say another thing I like about myself. Although I can see this world and a horrible situation, I also have a belief in other worlds. I just am a believer of the faeries. I just feel the fairies in my stomach.

Are you certain this isn't simply indigestion?

You're taking the piss. I don't care. I *communicate* with the fairies instinctively. I just hear things. Native Americans talked about the spirit world, and it truly exists for me. I call them fairies; some people call them elementals. I have communications with things you can't see or hear, so it's really my word against yours, isn't it?

And what do you dislike about yourself?

I wish I had more of a sense of humor. I can be so hard on people. But I'm really into weeing. If somebody is being a jerk, I like to go wee on their head and I do that, mentally. But pee is sterile, so you're not going to hurt anybody by peeing on his head. Some people really *want* to be wee'd on; they're begging you to do it so you just *have* to. And other than weeing on people's heads, I guess I'm O.K. I like myself. I was really queer as a kid but I'm all right now. I think . . . sometimes I wish I was still a rock chick.

Why would you wish such a thing?

You know, you're brought up as a Christian girl, with a nice dress on Sunday, nice shiny shoes. Then you put on thigh-high boots and snake pants, and you just feel like you want to take a ride on a bike with Jesus and *that's* your church service: no problem.