

## Victim in search of her true voice

Tori Amos was a musical prodigy who dropped out. **Andy Darling** charts her fightback

Caption: Tori Amos: 'You can't blame everybody, you have to change it.'

When Tori Amos was two-and-a-half, she played piano and composed music. At 11, she was kicked out of the prestigious Peabody Institute in Baltimore after several years spent training to be a concert pianist. For the authorities, her unsuitability was clear: she listened to Jimi Hendrix and played by ear.

"I failed badly in the child prodigy stakes," she says. "I didn't follow through the expectations. You're six or seven and you think 'I'm not digging this, I'm doing it because it's my job.' You're aware of the expectations and you know it's no fun anymore."

The burned-out whiz-kid is currently in London, being hailed as the next Kate Bush or Patti Smith. Proving the old adage that learning a musical instrument will always come in handy in later life, she's been making low-key club appearances playing piano and singing her songs. Eyes half-closed, she smiles conspiratorially, but as the songs soon show this is no cod-seduction routine.

Taken from her debut EP, *Me And A Gun*, and forthcoming LP, *Little Earthquakes* (on the East West label), they deal with what she calls "all the different selves" that constitute Tori Amos. Fairy tales, child abuse, rape and rites of passage are among the themes, but there are no straightforward conclusions or moral judgments. In *Leather*, she laments the lack of love in the world: "Look I'm standing naked before you/Don't you want more than my sex? Oh God, why am I here?" But every time we expect elegies and wistful valedictions, a knife suddenly flicks open. In *Silent All These Years* she says goodbye to a boyfriend who's found someone new, "a girl who thinks really deep thoughts" and then throws in the showstopper: "Boy you'd best pray that I bleed real soon, how's that thought for you?"

If Tori Amos heralds a return to the days of fans deciphering lyrics in search of leitmotifs, a couple of themes will consistently crop up. Her father is a Methodist preacher, her mother part Cherokee Indian. "I wish we could go in a time capsule to a Sunday dinner at my home. You'd think these people are so warm, but boy do you disagree with them. When I was very little I got into trouble for wondering if Jesus had a thing going with Mary Magdalene. My father was real supportive, though, and he took me round when I was starting out. The first place I played was a gay club, and I think most of the guys were more interested in him standing there in his dog collar."

School, at the Peabody and elsewhere, was no picnic. "We're taught which sides of our personalities are acceptable and which aren't. The magical side, the naive side, the side that believes in possibilities other than you grow up, take a job, form a place in society and then go to heaven, except for mean old Hitler, no one wants to talk about that."

Tori anaesthetised her magical side, moved to LA and had "not quite a clinical nervous breakdown" at 20. "Then I faced up to the fact that since the age of seven or whatever all I'd been doing was trying to please other people rather than myself. I love what I'm doing now, it's all about free expression."

Though she proclaims herself "the president of Victims Anonymous", straightforward revenge isn't part of her methodology. "You can't blame everybody, you have to change it. To work through a victim situation, it's about facing the attacker in yourself, tearing away all the layers and wondering if you could have made

other choices there. Other women who've been attacked will argue, but I have to look at all sides of it, and that's healing."