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Tori's Story

Tori Amos has rocketed to international prominence with her album *Little Earthquakes*, but behind the public success story lies the private trauma of a young woman who was raped at the age of 22. In an uncompromisingly honest interview with Joe Jackson, Tori talks about that terrible experience, its lasting scars and how her music has helped to set her free again...

For many people the process of self-denial becomes most apparent when they speak about sex. This is particularly true of Tori Amos. At the outset of this interview, asked about the tension between the seemingly celebratory approach to sex which defines her public persona and the layers of sexual guilt and revenge that fire songs like "Precious Things" from her album *Little Earthquakes* she responds with a strained, metaphysical explanation that lasts at least ten minutes and has more to do with evasion than with truth.

She wouldn't deny it. The interview done, we sit talking for an hour during which I recount the story of the 14 year-old rape victim, originally denied the freedom to have an abortion, by the Irish state. That grim saga strikes a chord. "Can we take a second shot at the early part of the interview?" she asks. "I don't think we got it right. I really do want to address that subject."

Seven hours later, after a midnight performance at Dublin's Olympia Theatre during which she dedicated "Me and a Gun"—a song about rape—to 'one particular fourteen year old Irish girl', Tori Amos spoke for a further two hours, touching in the process at times on the same kind of raw, unadorned truths that pulse at the heart of her best songs.

"I do believe that we all are, fundamentally, divided creatures," she says picking up the thread. "Emotions split from intellect, spirit from flesh and far too often sexuality is disconnected from what we feel, and are, as total human beings. But how, for example, can anyone have an understanding of the virgin if they don't also have an understanding of the prostitute, the saint and sinner in one body? Attempting to reconcile these opposing forces in my own nature is my goal and what I write about in songs like "Precious Things", and all the songs on the album."

So how true to Tori Amos' early life in Washington, DC is "Precious Things", which tells of a young girl described as "ugly", who longs to "smash the faces of those beautiful boys/those Christian boys"?

"I was always the girl that had friends but did boys like me? **Not** the boys I liked!" she says. "They'd say 'she's really nice and she plays really good piano but she's also Sandy Luman's friend, can we get **her** phone number?'" (Laughs) "I hadn't blossomed so I was seen as a rather nondescript nice girl, I guess."

Tori Amos' father was a Protestant minister, her grandmother a particularly single-minded puritan. "I hated my grandmother," she says. "She'd pound into me the idea

that only evil women give away their virginity before marriage. If you even thought about doing that you were 'out of the kingdom of god,' she'd say.

"And so I waited a long time before giving up my virginity, because of this feeling: 'how can I be a nice, respectable girl and want to do this?'. And more than anything I wanted respect from men, my father in particular. And even at that age I felt that Jesus was a real, living presence in my life. That can be a bit of a disadvantage. It's weird when you're giving a guy head at 15 and you're thinking 'Jesus is looking at me!'"

Did Tori ever turn that experience around and think of Jesus as a man whom she might have seduced?

"Doing it with a priest never got me off, they wash it so often!" she responds, laughing almost maliciously. "But doing it with Jesus, now that is something else! Most Christian women would be trained to think that even this thought is blasphemous. But I say that's a load of bollix! That's how women are paralyzed, disconnected from the source of their own power, by religion.

"I've nearly always believed that Jesus Christ really liked Mary Magdalene and and that if he was, as he claimed to be, a whole man, he had to have sexual relations with her. So in my deepest, most private moments I've wanted Christ to be the boyfriend I've been waiting for. And a lot of Christian girls have a crush on Jesus. I may have felt guilty at the thought of wanting to do it with Jesus but then I say why not? He **was** a man."

How much is Tori Amos the slave of a patriarchal system, which begins with the image of god the father, travels down through the image of the father on earth and is extended through the social pressure to take a male companion?

"You are made to believe in patriarchal systems from the start of your life," she reflects "and then you wake up one morning and, in a rage say 'how could you use that to withhold from me, woman, this incomparable power?' I think the need I had, and have, for males to respect and accept me originally came from an overwhelming need for my father to respond to me on that level. But he didn't respond to the 'bad girl' in me, the prostitute. So I cut her out, chopped her up and that too adds to my being disconnected from this." She presses clenched fists against her pelvis.

"I meet so many people who are into their heart energy yet disconnected from their kundalini. When you're not connected to **this** you are not whole."

On a similar theme, Tori Amos answers critics who claim that the way in which she straddles a stool on stage, legs spread a la Jerry Lee Lewis, may be too strong an assertion of her sexuality after a period of denial.

"To hell with them," she says slowly unclenching her fist. "Passion. The kundalini. Sexual energy is where I sing from. And being reconnected to that source of energy after so long is what liberated me on a creative level.

"I have the right to open the door, to explore and to report on what I find, in whatever way I see fit. And I do have a real commitment to the female, the feminine, the goddess side of my own nature. I am Mary, the mother of god **and** the Mary Magdalene figure now."

Tori Amos pauses, glances at a copy of the last issue of Hot Press which is spread across her bed then says "Let's get down to truth here, if that's what you want. I had been denying the prostitute side, which we all have in us. But there is a part of me that understands Marilyn Monroe and what you wrote about her in that Hot Press

article. I understand her giving it to the Mob, hot guys in Hollywood, the cigar-smoking fat asses. **And** giving it to JFK and Bobby Kennedy.

“And I understand Sam Giancana who wants to taste her after she’s been with Bobby and JFK because that’s how those guys had relationships with each other - through Marilyn Monroe’s pussy. It makes me angry but it also turns me on because I’ve done that, I know it so well. It was the same when I saw Blue Velvet and saw that energy, a woman being used yet having power—false power—in believing that she is **wanted**, that’s what asserting one’s sexuality is all about. This is how it feels to be a woman.”

But how deeply liberated is Tori Amos? In “Crucify” from Little Earthquakes she still sings that she’s “got enough guilt to start my own religion”?

“I have that guilt still. I’m still working through this idea of giving myself completely to this man I’m with because he is my best friend and someone I respect. Yet he is also someone I need to slam me against a wall and fuck me. And love me as well. The concept of both being part of the one relationship is still hard for me to accept. Because I’ve been taught that being fucked against a wall, or anywhere, is not love.

“Who the fuck thought up **that** idea? That notion has kept marriages from working, people from giving to each other and both sexes under control for centuries.”

Tori Amos reveals that a large measure of the sexual guilt which enslaved her in her mid-20’s had its roots in a rape that took place when she was 22, and which she writes about in the song “Me and a Gun”.

“I sang ‘holy holy’ as he buttoned down his pants/Me and a gun and a man on my back/But I haven’t seen Barbados so I must get out of this/Yes I wore a slinky red thing/Does that mean I should spread for you, your friends, your father, Mr. Ed?”

“I wrote that song after I saw the movie ‘Thelma and Louise’ which brought back an experience I hadn’t talked about for about five years,” she says. “But as I was writing the song other voices rose, other voices that had opinions on what had happened. It was then I realized that the biggest mistake I made was not seeking help from people who understood.

“But then nobody was there for me on the night it happened. I had to call the East Coast and wake people up to talk. I called 20 people. I talked about it for roughly seven days and then just cut off the experience, not knowing that in doing that, I was letting it take control of me inside.”

How does a woman re-connect with her own body after rape and **not** associate sex with violence?

“That’s the core problem,” she says. “If I’d sought help that would have been different, I’m sure. That’s what a woman should do. But sexually what happened to me was that I couldn’t respond to a guy at all. I broke off the relationship I was having with a man, the next day. I’d been with him for two and a half years yet I started ranting and raving and telling him I didn’t want him in my life. I then turned to a male friend and though he wanted me to go to the police I said ‘But I’m never going to find that person again’.

“I also didn’t think I had a case. I don’t want to go into the details but you’ve read my lyrics, you know I look at things from as many angles as possible. So, even then I could see it from the other side. Nothing would have happened to the guy! And he would have known more about me than he did. Yes that means he’s out there

somewhere and yes he may do it with another woman. But he'd have done it anyway.

"It wasn't a cut and dried case. With American law as it is and the fact that I'm an entertainer and the kind of performer I was—like Michelle Pfeiffer in *The Fabulous Baker Boys*—I knew I was going to be set up. And I was not going to be a victim of another experience. But what happened then was that I became a victim of myself." Did *Thelma and Louise* make Tori Amos feel she would have killed the rapist given the chance?

"You **know** I would have killed him if I could have, yes. But I was busier trying not to get killed," she says. "But sure, when she killed him in *Thelma and Louise* do you think I had remorse? Absolutely none. And if he walked into this room now, would I kill him? No. Because I wouldn't want to make it that easy for him. But any man who gets killed raping someone has crossed the line."

Tori pauses, sits in silence for a while then smiles. "But I didn't kill him. I finally wrote a song about it instead and **that** has given me the freedom. 'Me and a Gun' is **not** about him. It's more about me forgiving myself. That's why my music now is so therapeutic, so cathartic for me. I made a commitment not to be a victim again, by writing and by singing as often as I can 'Me and a Gun'.

"It's like I refuse now to be a victim of my own guilt. I refuse to be a victim of not having a wonderful sexual experience again. And you are a victim when you can't allow yourself to have sexual pleasure again. I refuse to put all men in the same category, as I was doing. When something like that happens you do want to punish men, punish the ones that crushed the flower. But no one should choose to hold onto that hatred. It choked me.

"Sexually, I feel I won't be able to give completely and love to the extent, say, that I will want to have kids with him, for quite some time yet. I couldn't even consider that for a few years. I'm only beginning to fulfill myself now because I'm beginning to accept, and love, the parts of me, of woman, that I was trained to hate all my life. Particularly the bad girl I still can be."

In the meantime attempting to re-connect with the child in herself is a primary concern for Tori Amos. It's also a motif running through the album and a metaphor used in the video for "Silent All These Years". Not surprisingly, in this context, she empathises with the recent plight of Ireland's fourteen-year-old rape victim.

"The greater rape is what the State did to that girl. She is defiled by a man sexually and then, having suffered the original experience, she is defiled again by the State. And you know why? Because the Church and the State are so afraid that if they acknowledge the truth a hundred doors will burst open and they will lose control. But they are choking themselves to death. Because Divine Law is being broken here. "First that girl's choice was taken away in rape and then it was taken away, to begin with, by the State. That is the sickness that cripples women, male energy at its worst. And if we, as women, don't rebel against the way in which the Church and State have conspired to control our sexuality we'll never reach a point of self-evolvement.

And evolution, in any sense, has nothing to do with enforcing guilt, with this horrific cross they have stuck between that girl's legs.

“Jesus Christ has nothing to do with that and it has nothing to do with Jesus Christ and don't let anyone tell me that it has. The cross has been used as a weapon, as it has been used against all women throughout the ages. And that's the greatest evil of all.”

But wouldn't the so-called Pro-Life groups suggest that the State's original decision to block an abortion has everything to do with Jesus Christ?

“It has nothing to do with a core concept of Christianity,” argues Tori Amos. “And it has nothing at all to do with the children, in the broadest sense. If it does why don't those people go down to the back-streets of Dublin where children really need their help. Or go down to Colombia where children live in sewers? There are millions of children who **need** help. So this is the greatest abuse of the words 'pro-life', they are **not** for life. This is about control of a woman's sexuality because they can't stand the idea that we are saying we are **not** just incubators anymore. And we're not even going to pretend that we are. We're **not** breeding farms.”

“Many men, even some women, might like to think we are. But their misguided, misdirected energy is probably based more on their own guilt. Yet when somebody tries to have that kind of control over another person's conscience, we're talking about concentration camps here. There's no greater enslavement. So anyone who looks at that position closely must see it's not about the children at all, and it's more often anti-life than pro-life.”

One can tell from the cheers Tori Amos receives during her concerts that she is undoubtedly articulating what many women are feeling on this subject right now. “I hope so,” she says, smiling, “although a lot of the rage I perceive, say, in some women writers often seems to stem from self-loathing. I write from that point of view at times. It angers us all that we were all victims for so long. But the point is that only ourselves can claim back the power. Let's forget all this talk about men giving it back to us. We have to give it to ourselves. And the men that respect this will be in our lives, those that don't will be **out**.”

Tori Amos laughs. “Your first question was, in part, about my 'celebratory' approach to sexuality,” she says. “Well Little Earthquakes is all about celebration. Celebrating the ability to laugh, weep, and scream, particularly if you have been silent for years. And so it's about celebrating sexuality in the widest sense, including the elements of revenge. As in 'Precious Things' where I say to the guy 'So you can make me cum/that doesn't make you Jesus'.

“Just because I'm with a man and because I'm creaming for a man doesn't make him a master, doesn't even necessarily make him worthy of love, of **my** love. And I now realize, maybe for the first time in my life, that my capacity for love is incredibly deep and that for me to give this to a man he has to fully understand, and respect what that means.

“Too few do. They’re into pillaging, rummaging around, doing a little Viking stuff! But most women these days realize that’s not enough, boys! And if some women don’t then I hope songs like ‘Precious Things’ will help open their eyes. And, just as importantly, help open the eyes of some men.

“I’d be quite happy, as an artist, if I knew that a verse, even a line in one of my songs could do for people what ‘Thelma and Louise’ did for me, liberate them in some way, particularly from a fear of the darker side of their own nature. What is any art form worth if it doesn’t do that? Isn’t that what all great art is all about?”