

Keyboards (Germany)

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Tori Amos

SCREAMS AND WHISPERS

by Albrecht Piltz

“So you found a girl who thinks really deep thoughts. What’s so amazing about really deep thoughts?”

-Tori Amos, *Silent All These Years*

Yes, what’s so amazing about a girl with really deep thoughts? At first nothing, except if she’s called Tori Amos. The place: the lobby of the Old Opera House in Frankfurt. The time: March 7, 1992, a sunny Saturday afternoon which would actually hail the harbingers of Spring under a blue sky in an airy street cafe, instead of inside with a plush background of gold stucco and thick velvet curtains. At the dozen bistro tables grouped in a semicircle around a jet-black Steinway perches a crowd of winter-paled media types and stressed-out record company people, all putting away pieces of strawberry cake with the same disciplined tact. In the background is the clink and jingle of forks and glasses, polished clean by bored waiters in penguin suits.

At precisely four the door flies open, and in a group of retainers a delicate lady in rubbed-smooth flares (they flap up to her thighs!) with a carrot-red mane of hair and the transparent complexion of a Botticelli angel marches through the noble ambience, purposefully makes for the foot-high piano platform and takes her place on the bench. Takes her place? No, she clamps herself on the very outside edge, right leg sprawled out - a position as unorthodox as it is uncomfortable, whose deeper meaning only comes out in concert (clack, the free-swinging foot cracks the rhythm out on the platform!) - and inspects the munching circle:

“Hello everybody, I’m Tori Amos.”

The second look is meant for the man who has posted himself at the other end of the piano and prepares to operate the sliders of the mixer.

“Ready?” A nod, and ten fingers rush over the black and white keys - an assault à la Rachmaninoff and the beginning of a mini-set that makes the cake-eaters completely forget their shoveling and chewing and after each of the four songs moves them to stupefied applause. Even the snapper’s guild, which doesn’t pass up the opportunity to immortalize the photogenic object of their visual desire in action, is so perplexed,

considering it's a free indoor concert advertised as a "sound check, that some of its members are on the verge of letting their objective slip through their sweaty fingers. So it is with the Keyboards photographer, who - even before the halfway mark has been reached - sways to the reporter who came for the interview and shows him his bare arms: "Excuse me, I'll continue later."

What happened? "Here, look!" Yes sir, a clear case of the goosebumps. The reason for the abruptly-arising sense of physical well-being, which with wonderful regularity also assails the audiences of Amos appearances is not built alone by the technical proficiency which the whirlwind at the piano demonstrates; the breathtaking voice of the lady weaves a spell still more than the flying fingers, a voice which, when the song requires it, suddenly tumbles from a dramatic scream to an intimate whisper and from the highest soprano to the deepest depths - an organ of power that no witness would have guessed of this slender musical body.

Added to this is the nowadays rare originality of Amos' songs, which has incited even the hard-boiled critics straight through the journals to hymns of praise: "Whoever thinks after 25 years experience with popular music there can't be anything new should listen to Tori Amos," recommended the reviewer from a newspaper who had followed the call of the American from Bonn on the Rhine to Frankfurt on the Main. And the pop culture publication *Tempo*, roused from its normally meticulous coolness, noted:

"Tori Amos gives pop music back the good complicated song."

We should have been warned. Before his fall tour '91, during which Tori Amos brought the headliner utter embarrassment with her opening act, Grammy-winner Marc Cohn indicated to the editor in an off-the-record question about undiscovered talent, "Listen to Tori Amos, she's unbelievable!" Tori who? "Don't worry about it," reassures Ian Thorpe, the man from London who today sits at the mixer during these completely packed concerts, "I didn't know what to expect either. I've worked with Tori now since December, and I wouldn't have believed how much fun it is to be on the road with her. She really knocks the people out, everybody loves her. It probably has something to do with the fact that everyone notices how much she loves what she does herself, especially when she plays in Europe. In America they mostly put a Yamaha CP-80 out on stage, but here they have real grand pianos, Steinways and that sort of thing. She blossoms when she has one of those classical instruments in front of her, and you can see how she makes love to them."

This love has in 28 years not only ascended clear summits, but crossed shadowy valleys. At the tender age of two and a half the daughter of a Methodist minister from North Carolina sits at the household piano bench for the first time. At five the parents send the highly gifted child to conservatory at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, a famous brag-establishment for America's musical elite. But nothing comes of this sought-after career. "They threw me out at eleven, I wasn't disciplined enough." Two years later Tori hangs around hotel lobbies and gay bars, where she beats out standards like Erroll Garner's "Misty" and the Casablanca hit "As Time Goes By", while father Amos makes sure that the soul of his rebellious teenager doesn't get caught in Beelzebub's fangs. Ten years later- in the meantime Tori has been stranded in L.A.- the Time-Warner conglomerate lures her with a record contract.

Tori seizes the opportunity and experiences a debacle, since as front-woman for the mediocre metal group Y Kant Tori Read she must wipe away all the sheen that she had achieved so far: the fine art of playing the piano solo, the pride in her own unmistakable voice, and not least “my self-esteem, and that was the worst.” Y Kant Tori Read, the 1987 album over which today even the record company would rather lay a cloak of merciful silence, is a document of depression, a product as artless as it is without character.

The pains of artistic rebirth last almost four years. During this time songs are created like “China”, “Crucify”, “Silent All These Years”, “Little Earthquakes” (the title song of the “official” debut) and “Me And A Gun”, a description of a rape from the point of view of the victim, which Tori Amos sings facing forward and a cappella into the face of her live audience; during the Frankfurt appearance the siren wail of an ambulance sounds outside as if custom-ordered. Not that her concerts would degenerate into a public exorcism of old demons; with independent piano versions of Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin classics (“Angie”, “Whole Lotta Love”) and lively standards (“Sentimental Journey”) Tori Amos intermittently strikes easy tones. However, her repertoire isn’t exactly the stuff from which the streamlined pop radio makes easily consumable hits. “She is certainly not the radio thing, her stuff is too unwieldy for that,” states Elfi Kuester, press chief for the East West record label, and brings the truth about Tori Amos to the point: “She has to come and play. Whoever sees her play is convinced.” The dates of the June tour are at the end of this interview.

INTERVIEW:

Keyboards: Tori, when one looks at your schedule one gets dizzy. You’ve been on tour for months, in America, England, Japan, Australia, Germany, and there’s no end in sight. How do you keep this up?

Tori: (laughs) Yeah, they’re really sending me all over the place. On the one hand it’s fun, but on the other I wish I had more time to play.

Keyboards: But you’re playing constantly, every night on a different stage.

Tori: No, I mean, I want more time to compose and to further develop my piano playing. I can only speak for myself of course, but I think that you can only expand your vocabulary as a pianist when you spend a lot of time at the piano without an audience. On stage you’re playing the finished songs, and you play them maybe better and better, because you’re always getting to know them better. But new things only come up when you can try out new things. You can’t do something like that in concert, and definitely not when you’re always sitting around on airplanes and in hotels like I am. So I don’t have the time for it, and because of that at the moment I’m forgetting many ideas from which many new things could have come.

Keyboards: You don’t make note of your ideas, so you can work them out later?

Tori: Only when it has to do with lyrics- I make notes for that everywhere all the time. But I never write music down, the melodies come from improvising at the piano. I put my boombox next to me and record them.

Keyboards: Then after a while you must have a lot of tapes from which you can work.

Tori: Yes, but there's a big difference if you try to put a song together from little bits like that, or if you let it develop itself out of many hours at the piano.

Keyboards: Does that mean that you compose totally from the soul?

Tori: Oh, I think when I compose too. (Laughs) But a good song speaks first to your soul, your heart, and when your heart isn't in the composing and you only work with your brain, then what comes out of it is dead and cold. To compose from the heart you have to give it the chance to open up and react. When you do that, then the piano answers back. That's a dialogue you can't force. You need time, and at the moment I wish I had a few months I could use for that.

Keyboards: It sounds like a successful album and sold-out concerts aren't enough for you to be satisfied with yourself.

Tori: Well, what you just mentioned are the criteria for success. I don't want to say that success means nothing to me, but there are things that are more important to me, for example developing myself further. Success for success' sake isn't the reason I'm here.

Keyboards: Four years ago you made an album [Y Kant Tori Read] that was obviously out to be successful.

Tori: All I can say is that that was an album where I noticed too late that I wanted to satisfy everyone but myself. If you look at the cover, I look like a warrior.

Keyboards: A metal queen.

Tori: Yeah, but that's not me, and thus it's not convincing, but rather a bit ridiculous. What you want to embody has to be inside yourself, and this Amazon... (shakes her head) Although the body was fine, wasn't it? (Laughs) But it had nothing to do with me, it was more of a kind of cry for help: "Please love me!" Because, you know, when I was young I was always the good buddy, boys never asked me out, as opposed to my friends. The boys only called me to get their phone numbers. Maybe I wanted to get even with them with this picture. (Laughs)

Keyboards: Did people at that time push you to make a metal album?

Tori: Let's just say nobody stopped me! But I'm not placing the blame on anyone but myself. Later I swore to myself that I would never make an album again that didn't represent me. Y Kant Tori Read was a band that already existed before I came to it. They had huge problems, the lineup changed constantly, and I thus recorded the album with different band members. I said to myself then, "They've rejected me so many times, now I'll show them!" I wanted to prove something, but wanting to prove something to the world is no good motivation to make music.

Keyboards: Did you listen to the album later, perhaps to learn something from it?

Tori: No, I don't need to listen to it, I know how awful it is. The only thing it had to do with me was, back then something in me thought Tori should wear leather. (Laughs and rolls her eyes)

Keyboards: Today you occasionally come out in jeans and Birkenstocks.

Tori: It depends on how I feel. There are also days when I wear a black dress- and pumps! You should see my pumps collection! (laughs)

Keyboards: To get back to your music: people who have thought for a long time that the concept of a singer alone at the piano was worn out and nothing new would be possible are surprised, for example by the original structure of your songs.

Tori: Something new is always possible. It's like if you go into the mountains for the hundredth time. When you take the lift up, you always see the same worn-out paths, but when you go up very slowly on foot, it suddenly seems like unexplored territory, and you're discovering every rock and flower. You have to take the time to look at them and discover their beauty. The piano is such a territory. When you don't have the patience to explore it, then it's the most boring instrument in the world, but if you spend a lot of time with it, you'll always be discovering something new. I think it's like that with every instrument. I mean, I sometimes listen to music by people who come out with one album after the other, and I already know how the next one is going to sound - predictable! But when music becomes predictable, it can't convey any more emotion.

Keyboards: Your music isn't predictable.

Tori: Not yet.

Keyboards: Do you see the danger of that in yourself?

Tori: Of course, nobody is safe from it. Up until now what has kept me from writing predictable music is that I only compose when I feel the need to. (Long pause) It's strange, I'm noticing that I'm really having problems talking about the songwriting process, maybe because I'm not used to it. The people from the press always want to talk only about my father and my upbringing, but nobody asks me about my music. I'm really grateful to you for doing that.

Keyboards: So nothing more about your father?

Tori: Oh, stop it! (Laughs) I mean, I love my father, I owe him so much, he always supported me.

Keyboards: He accompanied you through the Clubs.

Tori: And looked after me, when I needed someone to look after me. I was so young.

Keyboards: It says in your official biography that you played in gay bars at thirteen.

No one would have allowed that in Germany.

Tori: They wouldn't have allowed it anywhere but in (Washington) D.C. They had really liberal laws back then, and since my father accompanied me and held his hand over me, luckily it was possible.

Keyboards: Were you already thinking of making an album back then?

Tori: I thought about it all the time! From the time I was thirteen I sent tapes around with the songs I had written. I did that for five years, and then at eighteen I stopped.

Keyboards: Why?

Tori: Because of the replies I got.

Keyboards: How did they go?

Tori: "You may perhaps have potential. Call us back in a few years." Very encouraging! But that's the problem with the music industry, they invest hardly any money in developing talent. They don't say, He or she has potential we can develop. You know, if I wasn't doing what I'm doing now I'd gladly be on the other side, in Artist Development. I'd go out and listen to people, to find out who I could help - like what they used to do with people like Judy Garland. Because there are so many talents who have been playing only in clubs or in their living rooms, and people from the industry should care about them. They shouldn't wait until someone has the idea to look for a producer, somebody who knows how to make records and how to bring music from one medium, the piano or guitar in some living room or a club, to another, a tape or a record. I mean, you don't have to be a genius to know that the musicians are the backbone of the entire thing; without them there would be no music industry at all.

The producers used to care a lot more, for example in the forties, about all the actors and actresses and screenwriters. They went out and looked around in places where they hung out, in the clubs and theaters, and then they brought them to Hollywood. Not that that would have been a perfect world, since some of these talents in the course of this process killed themselves and jumped off (the Hollywood sign). What I want to say is, they shouldn't feed these young talents with uppers and downers so they can make it for another ten years, but with support instead.

Keyboards: Have you met such talents yourself since you've been playing live?

Tori: Oh, in these fifteen years I've met so many who deserve to be promoted! One doesn't feel comfortable on the stage and needs someone to maybe give him a bit of confidence, another... you know, there are so many reasons someone can fail! If I hadn't had my father, who always pushed me... (Laughs) No, that's not true, what I just said; he didn't need to push me, I did everything of my own free will. But when I was thrown out of the Peabody (Institute of Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore) at eleven and told him I was going to only do my own thing from that point on - which in the beginning brought a lot of turbulence between him and me, but that's the way it is with fathers and daughters! (laughs) - then he insisted I do it right. He said, "You

have to start from the very bottom and learn your craft.” He probably imagined someone like Ginger Rogers - a girl who can play and dance and sing and who has a mind of her own. (Laughs) But from that point on he supported me totally. He went with me to all the hotels and clubs and made sure I was allowed to play.

Keyboards: What did these years in the clubs do for you?

Tori: Those were priceless years for me. I mean, the performances themselves didn't necessarily help my composing, that I taught myself - trial and error, you know? But during that time I was associated with a few people, without whom I wouldn't be here today. One of them was a teacher at the college I went to when I was seventeen. He was a composer and worked for the National Symphony (Orchestra) and I had private lessons with him. I think if you were to ask him today, he probably wouldn't believe that he had influenced me in any way- back then I had this typical “fuck off” attitude about it! (Laughs) But in reality he influenced me a lot, although I was only with him for a semester. We analyzed compositions together, and I could pick out which ones.

Keyboards: Which compositions were those?

Tori: Things like “Eleanor Rigby”, but also classical stuff. He taught me to pay attention to the basic pattern and structure, and not just to rely on spontaneous ideas when composing. Sure there's something magical when you suddenly feel totally inspired and you think, Now is the right time to compose. But when you don't just rely on this magic it can happen that you have to wait three years until you feel yourself struck by that flash again. This teacher showed me how I could make something out of one tiny motif, from two measures for example, also when I think I have just these two measures and nothing else.

Keyboards: When one knows your lyrics, which are very personal, sometimes very intimate and almost sound like modern poems, one must think that you write the lyrics first and then set them to music.

Tori: No, I always start with the sounds, also in the words. Mostly it's just a line or a word or also just a syllable that sounds musical, and then lyrics come from that. It's like a sculptor who has an unsculpted block of stone and knocks off a piece here and a piece there, and in the end the block has become a sculpture. When I think about it ... [long pause] ... No, the words actually always come last and are always part of the music.

Keyboards: That amazes me, because your lyrics revolve around specific themes - sex, violence, love, religion. They awaken the impression that there may be a message you want to convey.

Tori: No, I don't have a message as such, I simply sing about myself and my experiences. My lyrics naturally have meaning, but I'm no journalist, I'm always trying to find words that sound good.

Keyboards: Have you ever tried it the other way around?

Tori: To write lyrics and then find the right music?

Keyboards: Yes.

Tori: I've tried it, but I just can't do it. The music that comes to me then is pure crap, the melodies aren't alive. Melodies develop out of themselves, they don't let themselves be nailed to lyrics. When someone tries to separate words and notes from one another, and does first the one and then the other, everything falls apart. No song results, just a lifeless something without a center and without soul.

Keyboards: Doesn't your method of working mean that you must work very long on one song?

Tori: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. I change a lot during this process. I work until the song has its own sound, a structure, a body. Sometimes when I sit at the piano I have three or four little things I work with, fragments which could become a song, but I always have an idea for that song. And then I decide step by step in which direction I want to go, since each of these fragments goes in a different direction. To come to these decisions is the real challenge of songwriting, and I believe it is important to take them on, if you don't want to write the same song over and over. Otherwise you tend to fall back on the same old pattern. The themes of the songs may be different, but musically they all sound the same. At this point the teacher I told you about before opened my ears. He showed me that every song has to have its own character and that songs are just as different from one another as people.

Keyboards: But there are doubtless patterns and structures that one can use over and over- verse, chorus, bridge, particular chord progressions, major-minor change and so on.

Tori: Of course, and everyone who composes should know them. But at the same time he should be aware that at each moment he has the free choice between very different possibilities. Because there's no formula for writing songs.

Keyboards: Don't you also have the impression that in pop music just this kind of composing- by successful formulas- has gotten the upper hand?

Tori: Yes, that's true, but who wants to hear that stuff? Not me, and certainly not you. I think even if we just write songs we can learn a lot from classical music. Something I learned in my study of classical music is that a composition can consist of movements.

Keyboards: Allegro, andante, presto.

Tori: For example. And I think the possibilities of expression within the medium of song in the late sixties and early seventies were bigger than today. Many musicians then composed in movements, even if they didn't realize it.

Keyboards: A few of your songs have a kind of movement-like structure, "Flying Dutchman" for example.

Tori: Yeah, it's not the structure of your typical pop song. (Laughs)

Keyboards: The song sounds almost like a little symphony. Can you think of anyone else besides yourself who composes in movements today?

Tori: R.E.M. does it sometimes. But most of the songs I hear are woven from the same pattern and don't go anywhere.

Keyboards: In your concerts you play songs from other composers as well - "Whole Lotta Love" by Led Zeppelin, "Angie" by the Stones. By which criteria do you pick these songs?

Tori: It has to be a song that doesn't sound like other songs, a song with personality. Whoever wrote that song has to have come to a decision, consciously or unconsciously.

Keyboards: Those many little decisions you talked about?

Tori: Yes, you hear immediately whether someone has composed in that way or if they've just used another song as a model and tried to write it again. Prince, for example, is somebody who constantly comes out with completely new songs. Even when he uses no chord progression at all, but just one single chord that seems to not move from the spot, he brings so much out of it! It doesn't matter how many chords you can bring into a song, but rather it depends on what you make out of every single chord. One of the best songs of this kind that I've heard in the past few years and that has absolutely no predecessor is "Running Up That Hill" [by Kate Bush].

Keyboards: Many critics have compared you to Kate Bush.

Tori: Yes, but I think that has nothing to do with my songs, just my voice. They hear these high sounds (sings) and immediately think of Kate Bush.

Keyboards: But your song concepts are completely different.

Tori: Yes, she works with other structures. But her songs are very original, and that's what matters.

Keyboards: Don't you make it very hard on yourself when you expect originality from every new song as you're composing?

Tori: I didn't say it was easy to write songs- I mean good songs. So much has been done within this medium- take a song by Van Morrison and compare it to something by Ice Cube! But it's exciting for me to see what all you can do within five minutes and what different personalities can express themselves in that short period of time. Because that's the deciding factor: that you express something! There has already been much too much music that doesn't express anything at all and is only good for dulling your senses like a bad drug. Music should do the opposite, it should open your senses. When you compose you're dependent on these channels being open, and you have to learn to keep them open and let the energy that's flowing through and filter it into something that's your own.

Keyboards: How can one open these channels and keep them open?

Tori: By not pushing yourself and doing things only for others, not for yourself. Maybe pressure isn't the right word, maybe I should say angst. When you're afraid - afraid of yourself, afraid of being rejected - you can't express yourself in what you're doing. That awful album I made back then opened my eyes, that there are lots of people in the music business who either only reject you or fawn over you, that it's personally embarrassing to me. I've gotten to know both extremes, and both of them are just as damaging. They prevent you from finding yourself and create something that comes from here (lays her hand on her heart). Today I see it very clearly: What the music industry thinks is what it thinks, and what I think is what I think. When we're lucky we're thinking the same thing, but it's only important what I think. I needed a long time to come to this understanding. Because, you know, when you're coddled for many years as a so called prodigy, sometime you become addicted to "You really did that well!" Not necessarily from your parents, they're only a small part of the system, but also from friends and teachers and producers.

When you figure out for the first time at eleven that everybody around you isn't as impressed by you as they used to be, then you start to fight for that appreciation and finally you only do what others expect of you. You have to free yourself from that, and I hope no kid needs as long to do it as I did. (Laugh) I can already hear the voices saying Hey, what is she blabbing about, it can't have hurt her, she got what she wanted! But I'm surprised at it myself, that I came out of it and today do my own thing.

At eighteen I was almost ready to give up songwriting, because I thought Maybe they're right, maybe I need a band, maybe I should make dance music. Which was of course absolute shit! But I did it! I made piles of demos with dance music that were so bad, you'd lose your lunch if you had to hear them. Somehow I survived that crap, but I don't know myself where the tenacity that I seem to have comes from.

Keyboards: Don't you feel you learned something from these ill-fated attempts?

Tori: Oh, sure I did. Even if the dance music I wrote was crap, I learned something, namely to work with my left hand. My left hand is much better today, more rhythmic.

Keyboards: One notices it when you play a rhythm opposite to your vocal melody - that gives many keyboardists problems.

Tori: But if you listen carefully you'll discover that the melody isn't always in the vocals.

Keyboards: You don't make a strict separation between your singing and your piano playing. Sometimes you accompany your vocal melody on the piano, and sometimes you accompany the melody you play on the piano with your voice.

Tori: Yes, and the melody also wanders back and forth between my right and left hand.

Keyboards: It was a giant step from your first album to Little Earthquakes. How did your record company react when you played these totally different new songs for them?

Tori: They were a bit shocked! (Laughs) Mostly because I'd never played the songs for anyone before. I mean, my boyfriend Eric [Rosse, co-producer of Little Earthquakes], who met me five years ago, when I was working on you-know-which album, thus under false pretenses - he was one of the first to encourage me. One time I sat at the piano and started to play, and he listened and then said, "I can't believe it! Why haven't you ever played this stuff? When will you show it to somebody?"

But that I came back to the piano at all is due to one of my best friends; today she lives in a log cabin in Montana, but at that time she played in a band in L.A. It was during the time when I still earned my money in the hotel lobbies. One night I was at her house, and she had an old piano sitting in the corner, and I sat down and played for five or six hours, nothing but improvisation. When I was stopped she came in and said, "Tori, you have to make an album, but with this stuff!"

I said, "Impossible! Nobody wants to hear it."

And she said, "What are you waiting for? Do you want go on wasting your talent?" I almost howled when she said that, I was so discouraged. ... [long pause] ... I owe her a lot.

Keyboards: When one sees you play live, one notices immediately how "physical" you act, beginning with your singing. Your breathing technique is astounding, you last through very extreme curves of melody, and one sometimes asks oneself, where you get the breath. Have you taken singing lessons?

Tori: Yes, when I was twelve, with three different teachers from whom I learned different things. But I only looked for what I needed, I didn't want to be an opera singer. Because whether you're dealing with piano playing or singing or writing songs, technique alone isn't enough, you have to develop your own style and discover your own personality. It's easy to sing perfectly and to play perfectly and to write perfect songs. The real challenge is expressing your personality. I'm afraid teachers aren't aware of that themselves.

Keyboards: Your piano playing is also emphasized by your body, you don't sit on the bench but perch on the edge and climb on with your entire body. Bernhard, who took the photos during the soundcheck before, finally said, "Sometimes I thought she was about to crawl into her piano!"

Tori: (Laughs) Well, I'm not ashamed of my body, for me it's a medium for talking to my instrument. Because a grand piano is a very special instrument. But, I mean, who am I telling this to? We're talking for Keyboards here, right? I'm not in some Woody Allen film where people discuss their problems. (Laughs) When I sit at the piano my instincts rule.

[The press spokeswoman for the record company appears in the door and signals

that the interview time is over.]

Tori: Hey, we're just talking about music. Ten minutes more, it's important, okay? Okay, where were we? Well, some people have pets, I have a piano. (Laughs) Because for me, the piano is a living thing. This thing they call the piano has an energy that... how should I say it? It's more than just three-dimensional matter, it's something four-dimensional. It has a body that surrounds it and at the same time it has its own life that transcends the material plane. Sometimes it's male, sometimes it's female, sometimes it's both. Sometimes when I play it has something sexual, sometimes not, and sometimes the relationship between us is so close, that... [long pause] ... Well, sometimes I think it's courting me and wants me in bed. And then there are moments when I really have the feeling it fucks with me in bed. But we respect each other. It's like that with the fairies.

Keyboards: Fairies?

Tori: (Laughs) Yeah, I believe in fairies and that they exist. I mean, they talk to me.

Keyboards: But not in this world.

Tori: (Smiles) Our world is just as real as theirs, do you know what I mean?

Keyboards: I'm trying. Many of your lyrics have a kind of dreamy quality, they seem to touch associations similar to that which they call in literature "stream of consciousness". It's another level of awareness. Is that what you mean?

Tori: (Laughs) Yeah, some lyrics have to do with dreams. I see the dream and I see the nightmare, and I believe you can't have the dream without the nightmare. I'm talking in riddles for you, aren't I? (Laughs)

Keyboards: Maybe you can explain it to me in the context of your songs.

Tori: Well, in most of my songs there are moments you have to get through like in a nightmare. It's like an initiation you have to pass before you can find the key.

Keyboards: There's a song by you that is like a nightmare from beginning to end.

Tori: "Me And A Gun."

Keyboards: Yes. A rape from the perspective of the victim. But in this song the nightmare isn't just a moment, it's the whole story.

Tori: A moment in my life. (Pause) People react very differently to it.

Keyboards: I played it for a (male) friend who thought rape too serious a subject to make into a song.

Tori: Could it be that your friend simply felt uncomfortable? In my experience, women react very differently to this song. But it's interesting what you're saying, because my father loves this song - although my parents are very Victorian and very

religious. My father found it was simply necessary to say what rape means. It's a frontal assault - not only on your body, but on your soul.

Keyboards: Can you imagine a subject where you would say, "That's too serious or difficult for me to write a song about it?"

Tori: No, I think you can write about everything. It depends on the perspective you write it from.

Keyboards: You sing "Me And A Gun" a cappella. Was there ever an instrumental arrangement?

Tori: No, I composed it a cappella and it's stayed that way.

Keyboards: You only rarely work with electronics. "Sugar" (on the CD-single "China", see discography) has an electronic arrangement.

Tori: Yes, but it's centered around the electric piano.

Keyboards: Why are you so hesitant toward electronic instruments?

Tori: Because they don't have the soul a piano has. Now I don't want to say that electronic instruments are anything bad. For example: the electronic arrangement for "Girl" (on Little Earthquakes) is mine. Eric made the sounds on the Kurzweil and programmed everything, since I don't have a clue.

Keyboards: Did you arrange other songs yourself? I'm thinking of "Precious Things".

Tori: Yes. "Precious Things" is mine. And "Leather".

Keyboards: When you compose, do you already have the arrangement in your head, or do you only orchestrate a song once it's done?

Tori: When a song is done, that also means that I know what it's going to sound like. The arrangement is part of the composition. But it's great to work with sampled strings, you hear the orchestra right away.

Keyboards: You occasionally also use real strings, for instance in "Silent All These Years" (arranged by Nick DeCaro).

Tori: Yeah, that's a great arrangement. But still...

Keyboards: Your love still belongs to the acoustic piano.

Tori: (Laughs) Yes, for different reasons. It's made from wood by human hands, and it doesn't need a plug. I mean, if the entire world was left without electricity tomorrow - I could still play my piano. Besides that, the forte pedal is very important for what I do; it's how you let the piano breathe. (Long pause) My dream is to bring the piano up to the next level. I would love to equip it with contact mikes and send the sound through the Marshalls and maybe attach a second piano to it and then compose with

the effects.

Keyboards: That's no problem with MIDI.

Tori: But it still has to sound like a real piano. Because I think you have to stay true to your medium and try to develop it further. I'm only just beginning, and I don't think I'm really a good pianist. Maybe I'm a clever pianist, but my technique isn't that amazing. When I listen to some guys from the jazz and blues world, I sit there with an open mouth. Maybe that way of playing would seep into me if I had more to do with people from that area. I think you have to have the music you make in your blood. So far there are other things in my blood. When I sit at the piano and the fifths start coming images from the highlands and the moors go through my head, and I feel like I've gone back a thousand years. Because I understand the message that lies in these sounds.

You know, all music contains a code, in every sound and in every sequence of notes there's a DNA, genes, specific memories of our own lifetime. That's why music talks to people on the subconscious level. Things resonate there that come from early cultures, from the original music of the North American Indians or from the folklore of the Celts. A lot of what I play goes back to these traditions. I mean, even if the musicians from these cultures played it on different instruments, say on drums, I can still take it over for my piano. It's another medium, but the DNA is the same.

Keyboards: In some of your songs you play really like it was percussion, in the intro to "Precious Things" and in "Little Earthquakes".

Tori: Yeah, some of my stuff has Celtic roots. But it all comes from my heart, not from my head. When I play something like this for example... (jumps up and sits at the piano) - you see? That's the music that talks to me more than any other- the low notes are static, and the movement is in the higher notes. They're ancient structures that speak to something in me, that are connected to those old cultures. When you're aware that you're creating from such a source, then you can also write music that has a soul and a balance and that isn't just functional. Whoever doesn't just write functional music has to realize that source in himself, and there are people in all areas, whether it be Rap or Heavy Metal or Folk or Dance, that do that.

Keyboards: So what you want most out of music is the spiritual quality?

Tori: Yes, music without spirituality doesn't deserve its name. That is, I'm not talking about the people who just write their songs to help sell some product in a commercial. What do those people know about music? They tore out their hearts a long time ago. I'm talking about music that isn't written out of Angst or on a "What are they thinking?" basis. I know what I'm talking about, I worked that way once. What I want to say is, it's the intention behind the music that counts. When you compose just for the people out there, for people who have only sales figures on their minds and theories about what people want to hear, then you're lost. These people have no respect for music, and also no respect for themselves. They don't know the power music can have.

The greater part of the music that's coming out today is made for the wrong reasons.

But you can win back the right reasons, not only in my genre, but in all of them! Punk had it in the beginning and also Rap, and Jane's Addiction and Nirvana and Soundgarden and Metallica have their moments. I don't want to preach, but I would like to say one thing to those who make music: Don't try to please the idiots in the record companies who decide what's worthy to be put out and what isn't. Those people live in fear- will it sell? We musicians shouldn't be afraid, we should remember why we're on this earth, and make it clear to ourselves what responsibility we have, toward music, toward the people who listen, and toward ourselves. No one is going to take that responsibility away from us.