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TORI AMOS

Conservatory Parties

Jon Wilde discovers how a 13-year-old American girl playing gay bars in Washington DC ended up living in London and Producing a debut single that looks set to rank her up there with great elliptical singer like Laura Nyro and Joni Mitchell.

“**THERE'S** ALWAYS A LOT OF cupboards to pull from,” says Tori Amos, “and there’s always so many ways of looking at a situation. You look at a crowded dinner table and you can see what’s going on from what people are eating, the way they hold their forks, what they’re saying and what they’re not saying. Then you can look under the table and see what they’re doing with their feet. It’s the same thing with a song. It’s creating an experience for somebody to step into.”

A sheer joy to behold, Tori Amos’ songs draw out the meaning from the mess of things with a halfcocked, impressionistic slant - her voice like a love moon concealed within a scream, Her lovely new EP is led in commanding fashion by “Silent All These Years”, a gorgeous, elliptical ballad evoking lost innocence and moistened loins, with a slight nod towards both Mitchell and Nyro. Nothing has quite glowed like this all year.

Perhaps the most surprising thing is that it has taken Tori so long to deliver this masterpiece. Born in North Carolina 28 years ago, this daughter of a Methodist minister was playing piano before she could talk. Before her third birthday, she was writing her own songs. A four, she was devouring her mother’s record collection, which offered everything between Fats Waller and Bartok. At the age of five, she was sent to the prestigious Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore.

“I was working with musicians who were 17 or 18,” she explains, “which was very exciting because, through them, I’d be exposed to all the new music. So I’d spend half my time listening to gospel and the other half listening to Jimi Hendrix and The Doors. Then all of a sudden, it stopped being fun. The whole idea was for me to be a concert pianist. Something got lost and it became deadly serious. It wasn’t free expression anymore. It was going to be channeled into a career. I found I couldn’t live with the piano in that regimented way. It was obvious that I couldn’t work within those parameters. I just didn’t want to do what was expected of me.”

AT the age of 11, the matter was resolved, in the most unwelcome manner, when she found herself unceremoniously elbowed out. “So much happened to me when I was a kid and, to some extent, all my songs come from there. It’s as though there’s a string attached between my childhood and the present. Things that happen to me now seem to be connected to what went before. It’s the some pain with different names and places attached. Getting kicked out of the conservatory was so traumatic for me. It was like a bad relationship ending.”

“At the end of that, my spirit was broken because I had been warring with myself for so long. That’s what ‘Silent All These Years’ is all about. This idea of giving up the things you love for the sake of somebody else, whether it’s teacher, parent, lover, whatever. We’re taught that it’s a good thing to have approval from our peers. That can get addictive to the point where you always put them first. That’s what happened to me. I was 11 years old and it seemed like my life was all over.”

Finding herself back in elementary school, she discovered Bowie and Bolan and continued to write her own songs. After an unsuccessful attempt to return to the conservatory at the age of 13, she was on the point of throwing in her hand.

“It reached a point where I couldn’t play piano anymore. There was a deep sense a of failure and frustration that I repressed for years. Finally, my father suggested I take my songs and play someplace. So I got a job at a local gay bar in Washington DC, playing for free. Here, I could lose myself in my own world. They were possibly one of the most appreciative audiences I’ve ever had. I was 13. They had no make on me. They were more interested in my dad who would stand of the back in his clerical collar.”

FROM this point, she would regularly send tapes out to record companies, accumulating a mountain of rejection notes. Meanwhile, she would be performing five nights a week at local clubs.

“That’s when it really started to be fun again. When I was 15, my father stopped acting as chaperon and I found myself working with women who were in their late twenties, and chatting to gay men all night, interrogating them about their sex lives. I got to see a different side of things. Then I’d go to junior high the next morning and it was a totally different experience. I learned to create these different sides to me to deal with it all.”

“Someone said about my songs that they sound as though there is more than one voice in there. That’s because there’s more than one girl. These different sides started coming out after I left home. I created them to deal with it all. I did lust after guys and then I had to deal with the guilt of that. I was brought up to believe that love and lust just aren’t meant to go together. When you’re lusting off, you just wanna go slam with some fabulous guy.”

“At the same time, you have these strong feelings. How can they go together? This is not the bogus God vibration you’ve been taught. It took me years to figure out how I felt about all that. I created different women to deal with it. So I’d go off and have this relationship, and there’d be another part of me who wanted to be accepted and approved of.” At 21, she moved to Los Angeles. A long forgotten rock album eventually slipped out - and quickly slipped back - into obscurity. She then moved to London, found her natural voice, and everything fell into place. An album, “Little Earthquakes” is due for release in the New Year and looks set to establish her as the most resourceful of the current crop of female singer-songwriters. “I feel I have so much in my closet to clean. For all these years, I felt like all these different people at a dinner party. When you’ve got the virgin and the whore sitting next to each other at dinner, they’re likely to judge each other harshly. But it’s never about good girl and bad girl, right and wrong, good and evil. You can’t have your body without your shadow. I’ve stopped judging myself harshly. Now I can wear these different hats but, essentially, it’s the same girl singing.”

"I'm just trying to be open because I've been so closed in the past. The self is an endless vat of soup. That minestrone does not stop. You can change soups and the kettle keeps on boiling. You can write about falling in love or out of love. Then you can write a song about doing the washing-up, which has its own thing happening. Washing up is where so much of that stuff that never gets said is channeled into those soap suds. It's just another study. I guess that's what life is. An interesting study."

"Me And A Gun" is available on eastwest records.