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tori amos: What's So Amazing About Really Deep Thoughts

by Gene Sandbloom

Her album is Little Earthquakes and the title fits, with songs and the way she sings them bouncing around like a fierce Wimbledon volley to the point where lyrics do away with punctuation. But trying to figure out where commas and periods should go would be impossible anyway. Her opinions have no leash – and as long as you don't name names – she'll put parents, teachers, lovers, bosses, politicians, and preachers all in their places. She is Tori Amos, and if soul, spirit, and originality were the only requirements, she'd already be #1 on the charts.

Doing things the easy way are just plain contrary to her nature, which explains her current world tour. Most showcase-type artists would be content with New York, LA, perhaps London if the budget called for it. We caught up with her in Montreaux, a few hours before she'd take the stage at the prestigious Jazz festival there; she'd just come from Taipei and Tel Aviv, and would head to Iceland before going on to the US. As we speak, she stares out at the beautiful alpine Lake Lemman from her hotel room, and says by 8:30pm she's usually in bed. For someone with thoughts that never seem to stop, we wondered if she was ever able to sleep at all. No problem, her ideas go into the tape recorder which is herself, and she just turns them on and off. "The songs kind of haunt me, which is good," she says.

"Vincent Price is always around, I don't even need to pay tv. It comes back, and then I have to take it to another level which is like a bunch of clay that gets thrown in your lap for molding."

Unduly candid for an artist, Amos loves to speak her mind – or minds – and is even a bit proud of her multiple personalities who do all the talking. It's easy to be a big mouth with nothing to say. She equates it to someone blabbing in the back seat of a car while someone else does the driving. "There are a lot of different personalities in everybody, I just happen to be having meals with mine," says Tori. "I buy clothes for each one of them, so they become very communicative. It doesn't mean I'm lucky to have different sides; it's not about luck. It's allowing them to come and hang out with you. We keep these different parts of ourselves in prison cells because we're taught very young which ones are good to come out at work and which ones are good to come out when you have the leather ties in the bedroom. We have it pretty well down to a science now.

"How do they know what makes God smile? Maybe Sandra Bernhard makes God smile. Let's be fair here, this is men and women manipulating things so they don't have to look at themselves. Advertisers run the world, more or less, so everybody in advertising decides what gets done."

The box you see Amos comfortably at home in, both in her first video and album art, was actually a throwaway idea at first. Reflecting now, she agrees it's right on target when you take into account the interpretation of shelter and safety on one hand, and isolation and

withdrawal on the other. She even sees it as a world within another, and when she leaves the box, well, there's meaning in that as well. Growing up in the Bible Belt of North Carolina, the daughter of a Methodist minister and a strict mother of Cherokee Indian heritage, you can imagine her contrasting worlds. Whether unconscious revenge or years of suppressed will jumping out of the box, Amos' opinions hit hardest when she speaks of the church. "God and religion are two different things," she draw the boundary.

"I've always said Jesus would be at a Jane's Addiction or Nirvana concert. He wouldn't be at church. Why would he be doing that? I love this 'American Morality'; you realize it's the biggest joke all over the world. If you want to get a laugh in any country or any language, they'll laugh at that one. They rape the Third World, yet in the 'Land Of The Free' there's all this sexual guilt. The problem is, we haven't allowed ourselves to examine our violent side, our coward side, our sexually kinky side. If you look at it, you'll see that monsters don't get created. It's when you suppress it that you have to start judging everybody else. You start pointing the finger and inflicting laws on other people. I'm waiting for congress to put out a rulebook on what you can and cannot do in the bedroom. All it does is tell you how afraid they are of their sexuality. I know, because I've been afraid of mine."

Little Earthquakes speaks of many childhood experiences, mostly nervous and frustrating, but she tells of them with so much longing you get the idea she'd like to do it all over again. No way, she corrects, be it fear of the past or the new-found adult freedom she's enjoying, she'll stay grown up. "I wouldn't go back, but I do hang out with my child now. It doesn't go away just because we grow up. The little girl is the one who plays the piano. She gets help, but she's the one who learned how to do it and taught all of us."

"We don't know how to parent ourselves, so we're always looking for someone to parent us. Maybe a lover, maybe a mentor, maybe a boss – just somebody in some weird way. And we all have different ideas of what parenting means: some think it means reprimanding, some think it means approval, and some think it means just to balance and draw boundaries. I try to parent myself, but that doesn't mean I don't look outside sometimes. At least I'm not the serious addict I was. A lot of people are love addicts."

Despite her strict upbringing, Amos was playing piano in Baltimore/Washington clubs alongside her father when barely a teen. Classically trained, she went to a prestigious conservatory of music by was thrown out for playing by ear. The piano was her life, though, and she began making a living with it to the point where it became a symbol being part of the establishment. "I vowed never to write on the piano again," she remembers a contract she made with herself before moving to LA in her early 20s. "I paid my rent playing 'Misty' and 'Feelings' and all those songs in a lounge. Sometimes I'd forget to put on my polyester dress and I'd get fired. My hair was always pumped at eight in the morning and I'd have to de-pump it by happy hour so I could do these lounge gigs. It was very important to have height in your hair at the time, and sometimes I got fired because I couldn't get my hair down."

Things are much better with Amos' parent these days. The battle is over, a treaty was struck, and the guidelines are all based on respecting people to live their lives the way they want. "Some things get talked about and some things don't," she explains. "They're my parents, after all. They respect privacy. There's no need to get digs in over the dinner table. I have free reign to put things in songs and people pretty much back off. No names and numbers

because I believe in anonymity. I don't discuss these songs with anybody – even with whoever inspired them. I have my level of privacy while I'm spilling the beans.”

Offered as a break between her first single “Silent All These Years” and the current “Crucify” was the odd choice cover of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” Either sincere or opening the door on her sense of humor, when you dig into other songs on the album you don’t have to go far to find bits of ironic comedy. As in “Tear In Your Hand”: “I don’t believe you’re leaving ‘cause me and Charles Manson like the same ice cream. I think it’s that girl.” Or in “Happy Phantom”: “They say Confucius does his crossword with a pen.” The humorist is just one more personality. “I see this person quite a bit, or I’d be at the bottom of a river,” she relates. “If you don’t get a sense of humor about yourself and the world, it can get really depressing. The world is an unhealthy place. I’ve always said, you can’t have healthy people on a shitty planet. Well, guess what? We have a shit planet. That’s not my opinion, it is. Runny jelly is runny jelly. That doesn’t mean that there isn’t hope. We can do something about it. Where does it start? That’s why I sing about the self. It’s got to start with me dealing with me or I’m just a walking compost heap. I’m working on try to be honest with myself... but I’m such a good little liar.”