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Tori Amos: Long Struggle Yields an Emotional Rebirth

by Ann Kolson, Knight-Ridder Newspapers

Listen to Tori Amos. She's all raw nerves, naked emotion. She's an exposed wire: electricity crackling.

She's intense, dramatic, a sexual creature, her wild hair dyed the color of flame, her skin very white. She fixes you in the gaze of her translucent blue eyes, smiles that cat smile.

On stage, in Greenwich Village at the Bottom Line, she sings Me and a Gun, about her own rape. She sings it a capella:

"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...
there's a man on your back
and you're pushed flat on your stomach
it's not a classic Cadillac."

"It is freeing to do that song," says Amos. "I wanted to write something so that you could taste it, you are in the car, you smelled and tasted that violation and that fear and that feeling."

Her debut solo album, Little Earthquakes, reveals this fragile-looking artist with music that is personal, quirky, and provocative. Her angst, her peculiar magical reality (for this work, she credits, among others, the Faeries) are not for everyone. But there is no denying her unique voice.

Finding it was a long struggle for Amos, now 28. She was a piano prodigy, and by age 5 was studying at Baltimore's prestigious Peabody Conservatory. By age 13, she was playing cocktail piano at Holiday Inn lounges and gay nightspots in Washington, chaperoned by her father, a Methodist minister.

"My whole life is performing and has been."

In her late teens, she moved to Los Angeles and made an unfortunate attempt at dance music. In 1988, she released a disastrous hard-rock album for Atlantic, Y Kant Tori Read, appeared on the cover in leather pants and a push-up bra. "I can't tell you how many people said, 'That girl just does not have it,'" Amos says.

She was living along in a small cottage behind a church in Los Angeles when Little Earthquakes began to evolve.

"Did I ever think I'd be talking about this process? Absolutely not. I was just writing so that I didn't go crazy. I wrote for me. I wasn't thinking about making a record: I knew that one had to come eventually, that's how things work if you're not dropped by your label. They do expect another one before you die.

"But, you see, I was working on the dying part, so making another record wasn't first and foremost on my mind."

Amos fumbles for the words, then goes on. "Suicide really bores me: that's just too easy. I was working on becoming an emotional, limp custard. I was just really numb, and I didn't know how I had gotten to that state. I didn't know how I had gotten from being 5 years old and really clever and happy and imaginative and open, to this sad and needy somebody."

She remembers several days spent huddled on her kitchen floor.

She was afraid, alone. "It was like I was birthing myself. It was as if I was in a tunnel and I didn't know the end. It was the first time I really allowed myself to feel things, to really feel them as I was feeling them. Not cutting them off, not trying to censor them. Not trying to dilute anything, make excuses."

It was then, finally, that Amos confronted the memory of her rape two years earlier.

"I made a decision to stop being unconscious," Amos explains. "And how you do that is you give yourself the keys to the unconscious room and you walk in and you go, 'What's up?' and all the little monsters come out with their party hats."

TORI AMOS

When: 8p.m. Saturday

Where: Bimbo's, San Francisco

How much: \$12.50, plus service charge