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Strange in a strange land

Mark Cooper goes into therapy with singer/songwriter Tori Amos

The light is falling in Tori Amos's Kensington flat and she is packing for a Christmas visit to her parents back in the USA. Amos has been away from home for most of the year, playing solo dates around London and slowly building up to the release of her album *Little Earthquakes*.

As her lyrics are stocked with the kind of dramatic revelations on which therapy sessions depend, Amos's American record company decided she was "too weird" for her home country and chose to launch her career via the more eclectic UK media. The strategy worked well enough for Tracy Chapman, so why not for Tori?

Even East West, Amos's British record company, has had to work hard to introduce her to the public. Key critics have been treated to private recitations in this same room, and one expensive photo session was ditched when it failed to capture an image that might truly evoke Amos's elusive character.

East West know they have a potential star on their hands, but they dread being accused of "hying" Amos. The result of what might be called "anti-marketing marketing". When Amos finally reaches the mainstream she will appear to have arrived by word of mouth, unassisted by anything as tacky as promotion.

But *Little Earthquakes* is a genuinely brilliant record that deserves to earn recognition unassisted. It is full of musical and lyrical twists that successfully combine '70s introspection with a post-therapy '90s sensibility. Just when you think Amos is too cute for her own good, she bites your little finger off.

Struggles with parents, lovers and all manner of authority figures reverberate throughout the album, as one moment she coyly flutters for approval, and the next lashes out at those who keep her dependent. Amos's dextrous piano melodies track her sudden shifts of mood, while her voice can swap registers like Kate Bush or shift between vulnerability and aggression like Sinead O'Connor.

When we meet, Amos is contemplating the return to childhood so many people make at Christmas: "It's like a friend of mine was saying," she says with a toss of her flame-red hair, "when you leave your own house you're 30. On the way to the airport you're 25; by the time you're walking up your parents' drive, you're five years old again..."

Such observations are at the heart of Amos's songwriting, which traffics in precise psychological observation as she chronicles her struggle for self-esteem.

"Nothing I do is good enough for you," she sings in the album's opening track, *Crucify*, and

Amos's argument is as much with herself as those who demand that she be "a good girl".

Like Madonna, Amos has little truck with the conventions that confine her sex, even though she prefers to present her struggles as dramas rather than celebrations. "Madonna is the backlash against the Madonna that was made by Christendom - an image that no woman could ever satisfy."

The daughter of a Methodist preacher, Amos was born 28 years ago in North Carolina and quickly discovered both a talent for the piano and a disconcerting clash between spirituality and sexuality.

When she was five, her father sent her to the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore from which she was ejected at 11 for "improvising". During her teens, Amos played bars and hotels in Washington DC and Baltimore, chaperoned by her father. As a young adult, she eventually moved out to Los Angeles and recorded an album that disappeared without trace.

That rejection helped Amos to decide that she had to stop trying to please others and please herself. It was the beginning of a recovery that clearly draws on the "codependency" therapy currently sweeping America, in which all manner of behaviour is analysed in terms of addiction and abuse.

Yet, while most therapy deals in abstracts and seeks to liberate its subjects from trauma, Amos is an observer who manages to bring conflicting emotions to life.

"Who wants some snivelling female all the time?" she asks rhetorically. "After all, just because something happened to me and it was traumatic doesn't make it interesting. I have to get my scissors out and make sure I'm telling a story that works. It may be your own experience, but you can't be too precious."

'Little Earthquakes' is released by East West on Jan 6. Tori Amos plays the Shaw Theatre, London, in February.