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Emotions strike a lyrical note

by Craig Mclean

"EVERY finger in the room is pointing at me . . ." goes the firstline on the album. Nearly an hour later the pay-off lyric says, "it doesn't take much to rip us into pieces." Between these two poles sits Tori Amos, solitary and susceptible, radiating angst and railing against the assorted torments that colour her recently-released (and wholly-acclaimed) debut album, *Little Earthquakes*.

Mere weeks ago this 28-year-old American was unheard of and unrevealed. Yet barely had the year started than her album was perched in the topmost branches of the chart after having entered it at No 14. Tori Amos had arrived centre-stage, the full glare of the media spotlight seeking out the origins of this singer and her song, that same spotlight in turn dazzled by the density of what was revealed. Talk Tori Amos and her music and you're talking intense.

This much we should have suspected. Her background is rich with the kind of elements that regularly course through the veins of every sensitive singer/songwriter: preacher father; domineering grandmother; precocious musical talent; scholarship to and expulsion from famed conservatory; listless formative years playing bars and hotels. Finally, as her twenties beckoned, she moved from Washington D.C. to Los Angeles, disillusioned with writing and playing music.

A decade on, her childhood passion is clearly back, as *Little Earthquakes* attests. But even now Tori shies from over-analysing her work. "When I start talking about the songs, they always become less," she says. "They really say what they want to say, and they complete themselves. We could talk about them, but I don't think I explain them as well as they explain themselves."

Mostly, said explaining is of the confessional variety. *Little Earthquakes* doles out their creator's innermost brain-turnings and stomach churning, which is partly why Tori is hailed as the latest graduate of the lone female-at-the-piano-or-on-the-barstool school. So, if you believe all you read, Tori Amos is "Randy Newman singing Sylvia Plath with a Kate Bush fixation and creating a Tapestry for the nineties."

But in the main Tori Amos is Tori Amos. No-one else could be so off-kilter, this much in tune with their own cathartic muse. Tori Amos, 1992 version, may be ruminatory and driven by a tangle of hang-ups and let-downs, but the 1988 incarnation was wearing a fright-wig, carrying a sword, and fronting a MOR rawk band. Of this pit-stop on their (sensitive) artist's development, the record company are decidedly circumspect. "I've been in a band, I've experimented with other ways," is how she herself sums up her pre-solo days.

Thankfully, both record label and artist remain committed, even when the jittery American end of the company passed the buck on first hearing Little Earthquakes. "They gave it a big eye-roll, and said 'maybe the English'll take you.' Which they did."

Four years in the making, the finished article is both sweeping and serrated, melding the harrowing depiction of a rape scene in *Me and a Gun*, to the stately sheen of *Winter* and the hypnotic, orchestral magnitude of new single *China*. And as for the roller-coaster of emotions that is the lyrical bent, seatbelts are mandatory. Clunk, Click every listen.

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