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**Finally, A Prodigy Finds Her Song -  
Tori Amos, Back Home With a Haunting Album**

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NEW YORK - When Tori Amos flew to New York from London recently to showcase songs from her Little Earthquakes album for an industry and media crowd, she included an a cappella song, "Me and a Gun." Sitting cross-legged on a piano bench, staring straight into that jury, Amos expressed with nearly emotionless but harrowing detail the jumbled thoughts of a young woman being raped in the back of a Cadillac Seville.

"I sang 'Holy Holy' as he buttoned down his pants ... when there's a man on your back and you're pushed flat on your stomach it's not a classic Cadillac ... me and a gun and a man on my back but I haven't seen Barbados so I must get out of this..."

Things got so uncomfortably quiet you could have heard a pin drop. And perhaps a few jaws too, among those who might have remembered Amos from four years ago, when she served up a disastrous debut album, *Y Kant Tori Read*. Its cover featured her with teased hair, leather duds and a push-up bra, holding a sword behind her head - Tori as Heavy Metal Babe! The new, improved, real Tori Amos was a frail, henna-haired, porcelain-skin beauty who seemed to have stepped out of a Botticelli painting. After a year in England, she was coming home with a clean slate, a new record, a planeload of sterling reviews, the impassioned backing of her record company and a foot ready to jam in the career door slammed shut a few years back.

At 28, the Tori Amos coming home to America - to Potomac, where her father is pastor at the United Methodist Church on River Road - is already more than two decades into a quest that started when she was a piano prodigy (at 5, she was the youngest student ever accepted at the Peabody Conservatory) and included teen years spent playing in Georgetown piano bars.

After a number of stylistic diversions and changes of address - she lived in Los Angeles for seven years before the London move - Amos seems to have found herself. *Little Earthquakes* showcases a gifted singer, songwriter and pianist with a penchant for spare, beautifully crafted, soul-baring songs in the tradition of Kate Bush, Laura Nyro and Elton John. In songs like "Silent All These Years," "Winter" and "Me and a Gun," she exorcises lovers and other authority figures and digs into familial plots rich in spiritual and sexual conflicts.

Not surprisingly, Amos displays killer piano chops, a knack for melody that hints at both classical and pop underpinnings, and a tainted angel's voice that wouldn't be out of place in a confessional. In England, Amos's emotional nakedness has stopped people in her tracks - *Little Earthquakes* opened in the Top 20, selling 100,000

copies.

The New York showcase led to some immediate commitments: Soon she'll be in Vogue, Interview and Rolling Stone (Entertainment Weekly had already picked her as a new star for '92) and on Thursday at 9 p.m., MTV will present an hour-long special on Amos. Her "Silent All These Years" video has been given the "breakthrough" status accorded only one video each month. Pretty good results for an artist who has yet to dent the American charts.

"I'd tried to do a dance thing, I tried to do the rock thing, and at a certain point you go, 'Well, what is my thing?'" says Amos. "'Who am I? What am I all about?' And out of that searching and agony came 'Little Earthquakes.'"

"We're stretching boundaries with her," says Doug Morris, CEO of Atlantic Records. "These songs are very provocative. She's on her journey."

It was Morris who weathered Amos's disastrous, formulaic debut album and who encouraged her to be as intense and personal as she needed to be in her future songwriting. Still, Morris admits, "I was shocked when I heard 'Little Earthquakes' because it was such a departure."

Morris sensed it might be difficult to promote and market the album because it was so eclectic. How then to get people to hear what Amos had to say in a huge country with a fragmented music scene, rigid radio formats and, perhaps, memories of her ill-fated first album?

Morris decided to send Amos to England, "where there's one major radio station and where the press blankets the entire country. Since Tori could really captivate people, she could work in small clubs, people would create a buzz and she would have a better chance of being accepted."

"I needed a change," Amos admitted a few hours before her New York performance. "Even though I'd written the record, I was emotionally drained after living in Los Angeles for so long. I needed a new perspective on things, new sights, new sounds. And I needed to get that thing in your belly that says 'I want to play now.'"

The label arranged for a West London flat five minutes from its offices - and close enough to ferry critics there for private performances.

"The music press there has a lot of power," says Amos. "They can see something in London and in a couple of days everybody in the country knows about it."

And embrace Amos they did, painting her as "an American eccentric ... who writes confessional songs undercut with a species of shock tactics that seem reassuringly British in inspiration," according to Q magazine.

London also put some distance between the future and Amos's L.A. past, which included an album of dance tracks recorded with Narada Michael Walden (never released) and steady work in classy hotel lounges ("paying the rent, playing something for the martini drinkers to make deals over").

There also was a band - it included drummer Matt Sorum, now with Guns N'Roses - but, says Amos, "it didn't make a whole lot of appearances. We spent most of our time making demo tapes." But Amos was not focusing on her strengths. Songs were co-written and overproduced, her vocals often overwhelmed. She didn't even play the piano; instead, she would "tickle the synth."

"Billboard called me a bimbo," Amos recalls in her soft but intense voice. "They didn't mean to be mean about it. They were actually quite accurate. That's the look I was sporting in those days and I was in better shape - I was pumping then. There was a part of me that really wanted to be a rock chick ... and I failed at it.

"And that's a bit hard, to go from prodigy to bimbo ... though it saved me a lot of hair spray bills. But I had to crack before I was willing to strip. ... I could not have written Little Earthquakes without skinning my knees."

When Y Kant Tori Read stiffed, Amos went back to the lounges but stopped writing. "If I had to whore around, why did I do it with this, the thing that I have so treasured?" Amos asked herself. She didn't even keep a piano where she lived. "And then one night I went to a friend's house-she had a piano-and as she sat away in the dark, I played for hours. ... There was a feeling of 'Who am I without you? Am I anything without you?' And then it was like..." She unlooses a radiant smile.

That experience reawakened a sense of disciplined craft that was both disconcerting and liberating, as evidenced on Little Earthquakes.

"Everything is there because it wants to be," Amos says, pointing out that on her first album, "I wasn't talking about the 'Me and a Gun' experience, I wasn't talking about my religious views, I wasn't talking about how I felt about myself much at all.

"On the first album, I was trying to defend myself, trying to make myself not so vulnerable," she adds. "And what happened? I got completely ripped to bits. So then you think, 'What can happen to me? Get off on something for once in your life. You used to get off when you were four...'"

Or even 2. Tori Amos -- then Ellen Amos -- was humming melodies before she was talking. An older brother and sister took piano lessons, and she'd always be cheerfully underfoot, her mother recalls. "As soon as she could reach the keys, she'd toddle over and start picking out the melodies that they were playing," says Mary Ellen Amos. "She could play everything she could hear -- it was a complete ear gift."

## **Piano Prodigy**

Amos's parents - her father is Edison Amos, pastor of Potomac United Methodist Church - were not musical and didn't really take notice until visitors expressed amazement at the toddler's skills. Some advised the Amoses that the longer their daughter followed the musical track of memory rather than reading, the more difficult it would be to train her. And so at age five, she auditioned at the prestigious Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, where the Amos family was living at the time.

The youngest ever to audition, Amos in 1968 became Peabody's youngest-ever student, starting there at age 6, surrounded mostly by men and women in their late teens and early twenties.

"So much that I got from that place had nothing to do with what they were teaching me," Amos suggests. "I was picking up on everything then. ... It was fascinating!"

But Amos's age and temperament proved a challenge to her teachers and her parents, with Amos rebelling against mechanics when memory seemed the easier path.

"They didn't know how to teach that kid," says Amos. "To try and break a kid's ear so that they'll learn how to read-and you have to read to be a classical pianist-the way that they went about it made me hate it. ... I was a disappointment, and at 7 it became very clear to me that we had different plans."

Peabody's curriculum at the time was strictly classical, and though Amos studied there for five years - "she resisted but she stayed with it," her mother notes - things came to a head at 11 when she auditioned again and swung her Beethoven with a Beatles beat. Amos's scholarship was not renewed, though she continued private instruction when her father moved his ministry, first to Silver Spring, then Rockville, and eight years ago, to Potomac.

At Eastern Junior High and Richard Montgomery High, Amos was involved in chorales and madrigal groups, and led the children's choir at her father's church. By her mid-teens, she was also a veteran of the Washington piano bar circuit thanks to her father's intervention.

"At 14, I felt Tori was losing interest," says Ed Amos. "Music was her entire life and we wanted to help her however we could. She wanted a job and so I chose to direct her into a profession at a young age, which was not an easy decision for me to make."

"My father wanted me to get a craft," says Tori Amos. Indeed, she was soon developing it in a series of Georgetown cabarets, first at Mr. Henry's and later at Mr. Smith's Tiffany Room. Both clubs were supported by a largely gay clientele, and Pastor Amos-clerical collar and all-would chaperone his daughter on weekend nights until the early hours.

"You play to people, you don't judge them," he says. "You share your gift and talent."

By now, Tori Amos's repertoire had grown to embrace the popular standards not only of her day, but of her parents'. She was learning the sturdy craftsmanship that allows songs to stand the test of time.

"I wouldn't give up those years for anything," Amos says, while conceding that high school was a challenge. Still, she managed to be elected homecoming queen at Richard Montgomery ("just remember Laura Palmer was also a homecoming queen").

Often she'd return from work after midnight, unwinding by writing songs at the basement piano. "I used to love going to sleep listening to her down there," says her mother Mary Ellen. There are cabinets full of songs and tapes in the basement.

## **Seismic Change**

Little Earthquakes is very much a coming-of-age album. The first American single is "Silent All These Years," where longtime passivity in a relationship comes to an end in a cascade of sly and supple lyrics ("so you found a girl who thinks really deep thoughts/ what's so amazing about really deep thoughts/ boy you best pray that I bleed real soon/ how's that thought for you ...").

Ed Amos, who seems to be his daughter's biggest fan - he'll be biting his tongue in the pulpit today, wanting to let his parishioners know about Thursday's MTV special - says "Silent All These Years" is "about the structure of a culture that has encrusted your soul to where you are not who you should be. ... There's no ephemeral writing from Tori, it's all out of experience or meaning. As a philosopher and theologian, I think there's a lot of great wisdom about life in her songs."

There is also an undercurrent of spiritual confusion and conflict coursing through the album, including the struggle with authority of "Crucify" ("I've been looking for a savior in these dirty streets/ looking for a savior beneath these dirty sheets"). The spiritual and the physical circle each other throughout Little Earthquakes. "They have to get equal time," says Amos. "Once I wouldn't talk about these things, but now ... I'm giving no quarter. But I'm not into blame. I had Victorian parents, but loving and supportive; they have their beliefs and they happen to be a bit different from mine and it's okay."

Then there's "Me and a Gun," the truly harrowing song about rape based on a Los Angeles experience that Amos had blocked out for many years. After a show at a hotel lounge, she agreed to drop off someone who'd been a regular customer and he attacked her - though Amos was able to escape before a rape occurred. She discussed the incident with her mother - who flew out to comfort her - but never talked about it again.

Then, while playing a London suburb, Amos killed some time by going to see Thelma & Louise, and the film triggered the memory. Riding the underground to the show, Amos wrote "Me and Gun" in her head, performing it that night a cappella. It has stayed that way.

"I don't talk about the details because I can't, but it's freeing to sing that song," says Amos. "I have to go in a trance to sing it. ... It gets exhausting singing it. But there's so much going on that nobody talks about, and I just found that out with myself after so many years of not talking."