Tori Amos on listening to your muses

August 21, 2017 - Tori Amos is an American singer-songwriter, pianist, and composer. She is a classically trained musician who has released 15 solo records over the past 25 years. Her most recent album, *Native Invader*, is set for release on September 8th. In describing the impetus behind it, Amos says, "We have to out-create the destructiveness that is all around us."

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2214 words.

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You've always spoken openly about your songwriting process. As someone who seems receptive to whatever energy's floating around out in the atmosphere, how has it been to write and record songs over the past year when the world feels particularly crazy?

Intention is something that has come up a lot in the last year or so. I took a road trip in June of last year and part of what I got out of that was the question, "What is your intention?" I really sat with that for many days. I said to the universe, "Well, I'm open. I need to be guided and directed. Tell me." That's a very different place to be, creatively speaking, than when you're on a cycle of putting out records, particularly when you're in the pop music hamster wheel and you're trapped in the album/touring cycle.

Not everybody chose to keep up with that cycle. Some artists I knew would release a record every four or five years, but I was every other year with a tour in between. That was just what I was doing, while writing songs that were reflecting what I was learning and what I was going through. Certain records had very clear intentions—*Scarlet's Walk*, for one—as does this new one. *Unrepentant Geraldines* was was really me trying to grapple with turning 50 and what that felt like. This new record, *Native Invader*, is much more a case of me being a collaborator with a great force and feeling like sometimes the songs were really channeled. Maybe not all of them, but a big chunk of them just came to me that way.

There are a couple of songs on this record I had to really work for. When I say work for, I mean, maybe I'd only get a couple notes at a time sometimes and I really had to work to place them. But there were many times when the song would just come down and it was sort of dictation, which is a very different feeling. I'm using that word "dictation" in a way that means that the muses were dictating—in a very loving but clear and focused way—how to deal with this movement of authoritarianism that we're dealing with now. You can be driving, you can be watching a television show with your daughter and all of a sudden it's just coming, and then you have to grab a piece of paper and get it down.

Has it always been that way for you? Has what it means to make songs changed over the course of your career?

Maybe? In the beginning it's really about learning your craft and getting your toolbox in order. If you only know a couple of chords, then your work is going to be pretty repetitive. Playing other people's music was a huge thing for me. Playing clubs, playing in gay bars, being a lounge lizard for all those years when I was younger, it was really important. I learned so much by simply taking requests, performing songs that you wouldn't normally ever think of playing.

When you start getting into those structures, songs like "My Way"— (sings) "When I was seventeen, it was a very good year…" Playing other people's songs is such an education. When you crawl into those songs and you start spending time with them because that is your job, eventually you begin to see possibilities that you wouldn't know about if you hadn't been exposed to them. I learned about writers like Hoagie Carmichael, people I might not have discovered otherwise. You play these songs for people without realizing how much you're actually learning about how songs work, without realizing you are expanding the sonic architecture in your brain.

Many of your new songs manage to address the current political and cultural climate without sounding too didactic. So many people feel the urge right now to get political in their art. What do you make of that?

I understand that impulse. You can certainly do that, but again, with songwriters and their muses there's a collaboration there and the question is how you want to approach it. There are a lot of great artists that aren't talking about specific political issues right now, but they are writing songs that are healing people or making people want to get up and dance and come out of their stupor. That's a different thing, but it's also important. They're activating something.

As long as the impulse genuine and it comes from an informed place—again, we're back to intention—but if it's coming from the right place, I think it healthy. What can happen sometimes is that we pick up our pen and write about something because we think we should, not because we're impassioned to, and that's a very different thing. The results aren't always good.

I like the idea that the creative process, no matter what your intentions are, is something you also can't always control.

If you're listening to your muses, if you're surrendering to them, then you can't always control or predict the outcome. That being said, I have a lot of respect for working songwriters, people who write for other people. That's a very different discipline. It *is* a discipline. Creating something that works for someone else, often without knowing who that someone else actually is—that's very different kind of discipline and a different kind of process. That's a different discipline than when, say, I'm hunting the song down but I don't necessarily know what it's trying to say yet. In order to get to that place you have to push yourself. You look everywhere—look to nature, look at art, look outside yourself.

You mentioned the pop music hamster wheel, which is something that traps a lot of musicians, usually just because they need to stay on that wheel to make a living. It's the cycle of "I need to make a record so I can go on tour so I can make a record so I can go on tour."

Absolutely, and don't think that I haven't done that, because I have. Especially earlier in your career, it's hard to avoid that. Sometimes you are trapped in that cycle because of the business and it forces you to write a record for the wrong reasons. I've mostly avoided that. I could totally sit down and write a song a day if I had to. I absolutely can. I don't think anybody should hear those songs because the intention would be all wrong. Why am I doing that? I guess I could churn them out, but that isn't a collaboration with the muses. I'm not the type of writer that is aligned and really locked in and my intention clear if I'm just trying to make a deadline as a writer.

Now, turning a record in—recording and finishing a record—that's another different discipline. That's about playing and that's about performance. By the time I get to that point the songs and the structures are sound and they know who they are, they're not just rambling, which I know I've been known to do over the last 30 years [*laughs*].

I always wonder about the performance aspect vs. the making aspect. The performance in its own way is a kind of making. You're making the songs every night when you go onstage. They aren't these static objects.

And you're *remaking* them. It's variations on a theme, at least for me. There are some people who have a very set show that they do every night and it involves dance, it involves many different disciplines together, and I respect that…but it's not me. From my perspective, all of these different aspects of my job each kind of represent a different version. Today I put on a beautiful new pair of shoes and turn up to be the songwriter. She's here today. Next week we walk into rehearsals and I have to start bringing out the performer again.

Live performance is different from being in the studio. Live performance is about energy and being able to plug into a certain voltage. It's also about physicality and chops and you need the time to practice and be ready for that. Can you imagine running a marathon without training for one at all? Touring and performing is like that. You need to be prepared. It's a different thing. I understand now why some people just love playing live and some people prefer being in the studio. They can feel like two very different things. I get that.

Whatever I'm doing, when I'm in it, I'm fully *in* it, but the two experiences are very, very different. When we are recording, I sometimes don't leave the studio for weeks. I become a real introvert and a recluse when I'm working that way. I'm generally more of a recluse anyway. I'm talking your ear off right now, but most of the time I'm not talking. Instead, you're observing, you're reading, you're researching…and then you go to the piano.

I wanted to circle back to what you were saying about intention. Maybe the best advice for young songwriters is to not worry so much about the kind of song you're trying to make, but

rather what your intention is. What do you want the song to do? What is it for?

You know, when somebody talks about meter, or how they're going to do it *this* way, you're going to do it *that* way—okay, fine, but that might just be an exercise, you know? Maybe it's really good to allow yourself to have these exercises, to say, "I'm going to write something in this form" and then just experiment with the forms. Then, after you know and understand those forms, songwriting can become transcendent. Then you can throw the forms out and say, "Look, I'm just going to open myself up to whatever might come" and see what happens.

You never know when the ideas will come or where they might come from. There are songs on this record that came from things I was reading—about the reunion between Demeter and Persophone, for example. Having a mother and being a mother, I was thinking about what that moment would feel like. Sometimes you are surrendering to the feeling of what something would be like and suddenly there's a song there. Another song came from a story we were telling around putting up the Christmas tree. Sometimes these real life happenings blur and that's where the feeling comes from. It's mostly about being receptive to those things when they happen. *That* is the skill.

I often tell my poetry students that maybe the best way to learn how to write poetry is to read as many poems as you can. Then it's about putting yourself in the position, however you can do it, where the thing that should most naturally come out of you can be released. It's not always necessarily going to be the thing that you want to come out of you, or the thing that you expect to come out of you.

Agreed. Sometimes I have no idea where these things are coming from. I'll admit, I have no idea what another writer feels when they're writing. I don't know if, like me, they're walking down the street thinking they've got all these yummy treats for dinner—a bag full of delicious antipasto and stuff—and just as you're ready to eat you suddenly get this *thing*, this idea, and instead of eating you grab your iPad or your pencil and run away to another room while everyone else fills their plates. It is what is is. You recognize the message when you start to receive it and you drop what you're doing.

ESSENTIAL TORI AMOS:

Little Earthquakes (1992)
Under the Pink (1994)
Boys for Pele (1996)
From the Choirgirl Hotel (1998)
To Venus and Back (1999)
Strange Little Girls (2001) Scarlet's Walk (2002)
The Beekeeper (2005)
American Doll Posse (2007)
Abnormally Attracted to Sin (2009)
Midwinter Graces (2009)
Night of Hunters (2011)
Gold Dust (2012)
Unrepentant Geraldines (2014)
Native Invader (2017)

ESSENTIAL TORI AMOS COVERS:

For an artist who learned the ins and outs of songwriting by playing random requests in bars throughout her youth, it makes sense that Tori Amos would would eventually become a master of the cover song. Here is but a tiny sampling of her most wily interpretations of other people's tunes…

Smells like Teen Spirit (Nirvana)
Thank You (Led Zeppelin)
Creep (Radiohead)
Somewhere Over the Rainbow (Judy Garland)
Silver Springs (Fleetwood Mac)
Live to Tell (Madonna)
I'm on Fire (Bruce Springsteen)
Hyperballad (Bjork)
Only Women Bleed (Alice Cooper)
Philedelphia (Neil Young)
Running up That Hill (Kate Bush)
Goodbye Yellow Brick Road (Elton John)
Lovesong (The Cure)
Nothing Else Matters (Metallica)
Angie (The Rolling Stones)
Time After Time (Cyndi Lauper)
Dream On (Aerosmith)
Superstar/Superstar/Halo (The Carpenters, RuPaul, Beyonce)

Name
Tori Amos

Vocation
Songwriter, Musician

Fact

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