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MUSIC

VAMPIRES AND NIGHTINGALES

AN INTERVIEW WITH TORI AMOS

Tori Amos' performance Thursday night at Popejoy Hall will not be just another anonymous stop on her extensive one woman/one piano tour of the U.S. It will be a homecoming, spiritual reunion, rendezvous with an old friend, cause celebre, and second coming (although Amos, hopefully, has enjoyed a few more "Little Earthquakes" than that). The date will mark Amos' first return to northern New Mexico since last year when the region inspired her to create her best work yet.

by Joseph Mitchell

When Amos and her co-producer and confidant Eric Rosse got off the plane in Albuquerque in December 1992, they were ready for an eight month sabbatical. After all, Amos deserved a little rest. She'd just been through more than a year of hell. She'd recorded her first LP, *Little Earthquakes*, then went on tour to promote it. But most grueling of all, before the LP was even released, she endured a series of skirmishes with a handful of bureaucrats at Atlantic Records who were certain the album was too "quirky" for mass consumption. Amos fought tooth and nail to save the LP from certain death. She came within a hair of being dropped from the Atlantic roster. But when all was said and done, she'd proven that record execs wouldn't know what the public wanted if it crawled into their lower intestines. *Little Earthquakes* went gold (500,000 copies sold) in a matter of months and humble pie à la Tori wound up on the dessert menu at 9229 Sunset Boulevard.

But she became restless once ensconced in a little hacienda outside Santa Fe dubbed "The Fishhouse." Ideas were coming to her. The same air that had inspired D.H. Lawrence, Georgia O'Keefe and countless other artists known and unknown was now conspiring with Amos' muses.

So the vacation was over before it had started. Amos began writing down the slew of songs popping up in her brain. As soon as they were finished, she and Rosse immediately laid down the two primary tracks—voice and piano—and then wrote the arrangements for strings and other instrumentation. All Amos and Rosse have to show for their hiatus is a gold record, *Under the Pink*.

Under the Pink is a triumph of the spirit. Like the mountain ranges of this state rising from the desert, Amos' new LP ascends



TORI AMOS

majestically out of the desolation of a music industry hell-bent on milking discordant cynicism for every last drop of fuzztone. Amos has again taken the abject pain of self-exploration that fueled *Little Earthquakes* and transformed it into something accessible and exquisite.

Once more, Amos shoots out the gate with Christian iconography as symbolism for her inner struggles. "God" picks up where "Crucify" left off, and "Icicles" is her ultimate statement on the subject.

Despite the similarities to the first LP, Amos comes off sounding smarter and more confident this time. What's even more impressive is that in addition to ripping open her soul, she's managed time for fun. "Cornflake Girl," hands down, has the coolest piano riff since Elton John's "Honky Cat." It's even sweeter after being layered with a spaghetti western-like whistle Amos borrowed from a Macintosh computer. It has an eerie "ride in the desert at a purple sunset" feel that raises goosebumps.

Though I spent more than a week copiously scribbling notes about every word and every musical note ever written by or about Tori Amos, I was totally unprepared for the sheer force with which I would be called to reckon. I'd heard stories about how she could talk for hours about giants, talking frogs and vampires and how she'd confessed to hav-

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ing frequent conversations with fairies and long-dead historical figures. *New Music Express* even called her a "24-karat fruit loop."

When I hook up with Amos, she's having breakfast in a New Orleans hotel room.

I ask her if she's had her coffee, and she responds in a rather superior tone, "I don't drink coffee."

I'm taken aback. The hair raises on the back of my neck and I sense impending doom. I wonder if I've met the vampire.

"But I do have blueberries," she confides, her tone softening.

I breathe a bit easier and ask how she has cultivated such a devoted following.

"I'm willing to expose stuff that they want to expose also," she responds. "I think my songs unveil a few layers in myself that all people have. I'm showing a place that I hide from myself. I am like a mirror for those people who are hiding that part of themselves too."

She takes on an astute tone, not unlike that of a psychiatrist picking apart a situation and exposing the motivations of a patient.

"A conversation is never about what you think it's about," she says as though she's just been possessed by Dr. Freud himself. "Let's say I'm having dinner with you. If two people are out on a date, a lot of the time they're protecting themselves. There are few people who can sit across a table from you and really have a conversation. Most people bring their whole militia with them. They've got body guards. Real conversation doesn't happen because people are too busy protecting themselves."

Amos admits she has her guards. (Amos has a literal body guard, too. He's this big scary blonde guy who looks like an ex-Marine. When Amos greets people backstage, he watches over her like a hawk, giving ev-

erybody within 20 feet the Dirty Harry eye.) But her explanations aren't the most conventional. She reveals a penchant for internal dichotomy into which she will soon delve even further.

"I've got this internal war going on. There is so much judgment between my good girl and bad girl sides that it's very hard to hold any semblance of conversation without one of these attacking the other."

I want to tell her that I think her guard is down. I want to ask about her old glam rock band, Y Kant Tori Read, that she formed with Guns and Roses drummer Matt Soren. I want to hear how she and Soren used to have contests to see who could get their hair to poof up highest. I want to hear the juicy irony of how that band's one and only LP was a total disaster, but commands a hefty sum among collectors now that Amos and Soren are household names. I want to tell her I think she's still a "rock chick" because she still wears spandex, grabs her crotch onstage and talks to her audience about doing it with Christ. I can't. I want to keep this runaway train on track.

I thought about the bunch of religious fanatics who sent Amos death threats over "God" and "Crucify" because they were too dense to understand that the references are not literal.

So I ask the woman born Myra Ellen Amos on August 22, 1963 in Newton, North Carolina how having a father, grandfather and grandmother who were all Methodist ministers has affected her life.

"I know theology very well. I understand what this culture is based on. The only way you can go into the darkness is to understand the mythology behind it. This way you can understand how patterns are formed and why people are stabbing themselves in their own hearts and not taking responsibility for it."

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ity for it. They're running around like little children, going 'Look what they did to me. Look what they did to me.' People in this society act like they have no power over what happens to them. But you call forth what comes to you."

I keep seeing the image of the young girl from "Icicles" masturbating upstairs while poppa is downstairs leading the prayer group. She sings, "I think the good book is missing some pages," and "When they say take of his body, I'll take of my own instead."

I want to hear about its autobiographical context, but Amos takes off in another direction, cranking up the promised diatribe on her internal dichotomies. She talks about what most people would call "light and dark" or "good and evil" in terms of "Vampires and Nightingales." The conventional terms aren't specific enough for her. She speaks of internal balance between these two dichotomies as the most important thing in her life.

"If you cannot have your Vampire (the bloodsucker) and your Nightingale (as in

Florence, the nurturer) switching veins with each other, you're not in balance. You're missing half of yourself. This is what being your own savior is about. Being whole."

I ask her if she has found balance.

"Of course not," she scolds me gently like a first grade teacher reproaching a slow student. "This is what I've been talking about. Don't you see? I have that division. I'm in absolute chaos right now. I don't know if I'll ever achieve balance. I just know that there's going to be lots of bloodletting on the next record."

A buzzer rings. I'm thrown from my chair. My time's up, says the publicity guy from Atlantic. "Wrap it up, please."

I ask Amos to succinctly sum up her life. The simplicity of the answer, vis a vis what I've just heard Amos tell, knocks me for a loop.

"I'm really just here, hanging out, having a milkshake."

But the question unasked is: "Are you having that with the Vampire or the Nightingale?"