

CHAPTER III

As we begin the 21st century, women in the music industry have come a long way from the typical stereotypes and conservative views of the 60's and 70's. Female musicians have shown through their work how the world of popular music is not exclusive to men only and how a woman's capability to create is just as good as theirs.

The list of female singer-song writers is huge and their musical contributions and countless efforts are such that it would take a zillion amount of books to name them all. This analysis will be focusing on Tori Amos, a female creator which represents the fragile and gentle side attributed to women, yet showing the rough, brave and monumental character offered through her work.

Myra Ellen Amos came into the world on August 22 1963 in North Carolina. At the tender age of two and a half she was already showing off her ability to play the piano. Her talent was soon embraced by her mother Mary Ellen, a native American descendant and her father Reverend Edison Amos, a Methodist minister who guided his family under the strict ways of religion; a heavy burden that would later show up in Tori's songs. By the time she was five, she was the youngest child ever to win a scholarship at the prestigious "Peabody Conservatory of Music" in Baltimore¹.

As her knowledge of Mozart, Beethoven and Barton expanded, she was also introduced to the sounds of Jim Hendrix, The Beatles and Led Zeppelin². This catapulted her thirst to create and compose. Unfortunately, there was no place for this at the Peabody. "I'd be wanting to know when we were going to make up fun songs but nobody was

¹ Dunn, Simon. *Tori Amos*. Master Tone Multimedia, United Kingdom, 1997. p. 9

² Whiteley, Sheila. *Too Much Too Young: Age, Identity and Gender*. Routledge, London/New York, 2004. ch. 2.

interested in that. It was all about developing a technique and becoming competitive”³. The Board of Directors had seen and heard enough when Tori “performed at one exam and duly pasted everything classical with a heavy coat of Beatles and Led Zeppelin style varnish... then proceeded to perform a sprinkling of her own pop compositions as well”⁴. By the age of eleven, Tory Amos was expelled from the Peabody.

Her musical career was nowhere near the end. She continued creating and composing and by the time she was 13 she was playing at local gay bars. She continued working until she was 21 and moved to Los Angeles California where she took up playing in piano bars to pay the rent. Unfortunately, after one of these gigs, she endured the hideous experience of being raped.

Fortunately for her, she still had her music. She then formed the band “Y Kant Tori Read”, which is a reference to her Peabody days when she had trouble sight-reading. The band was signed by Atlantic Records. This was Amos’ first encounter with the “music business”. The album was being produced by Joe Chiccarelli, who held some of the 80’s most popular names, like Pat Benter, under his belt.

The music hardly resembles anything Tori does now a days. “Although her Kate Bush-like vocals are recognizable, the only songs that suggest her future piano-dominated style are “Fire on the Side”, the opening seconds of “Heart Attack At 23”, and bits and pieces of the “Etienne Trilogy” that closes the album. The rest of the songs are reminiscent of several 80’s female pop-rock acts like “Heart”, “Bonnie Tyler” and “Vixen” with a few borrowed stylings from Robert Plant’s solo albums”⁵

³ Evans, Liz. *Women, Sex and Rock 'N' Roll In Her Own Words*. Pandera, 1994. p. 5.

⁴ Dunn, Simon. *Tori Amos*. MasterTone Media, United Kingdom, 1997. p. 15.

⁵ YKTR Review in “*Rarebird's Rock And Roll Rarity Reviews*” June 2000.

The music in it self did not lack a sense of “experimentation”. The mixture of synthesizers, African drum beats, jazz sounding bass, Tori’s vocals and even bagpipes, might have made the album interesting as a whole, and not necessarily a commercial success. In the music business however, the marketing of a record is as important as the music, if not the most important thing. In the case of Y Kant Tori Read, there is no exception.

The album’s art work and cover shows Amos in a vixen-like “push-up bustier”, holding a samurai sword over her shoulders, looking very sensual along with a big-haired due, thanking God for hair spray. In her own words, “It is so fiery, so filled with passion, rebellious... it’s like Peter Pan in leather”.⁶

It is interesting to note that the picture above is a reference to the “hair bands” that dominated between 1985 and 1990. These so-called rock band’s (Poison, Def Leppard, to name a few) image was based on big hair, flamboyant outfits, and in some cases, makeup (lipstick, eye shadow, mascara). These looks often suggested a hard and heavy sound, but audiences were often deceived. The music these bands made was pure pop, with lots of “loud” guitars.

Only one single came out of the album, along with a video for the song “The Big Picture”, which hardly made it on MTV. The video “is full of 80’s rock clichés: motorcycles, scantily dressed women, fog machines, flowing white curtains and sports cars”⁷. Tori is spotted “wearing several different outfits: a white skirt one moment, black

⁶ Quote taken from an article by David Schwartz in “*The Gazette*” on June 22 1988.

⁷ YKTR Frequent Asked Questions by Jason Bilsky.

leather the next. In addition to singing, Tori swung a sword and danced”⁸. Adding to this the made-up sound of the music, Y Kant Tori Read’s album was doomed from the start.

The album came out to crushing reviews. Billboard Magazine printed: “Classically trained pianist pounds the ivories on her pop-rock debut, belting out self-written material with a forceful, appealing voice. Unfortunately, provocative packaging send the message that this is just so much more bimbo music”. Even in recent years some people call it “a badly aged relic of the hair-band era; the cover art, in which the now-famous redhead is made up like a metal chick, is particularly embarrassing. The album was a commercial disaster even in its day, where it deserves to stay”⁹. Though now a copy of the album is worth up to \$500 dollars, Tori refuses to talk about it in interviews.

After months of refusing to play the piano, Tory visited an old friend, Cindy Marble, where she sat in front of the piano and played for hours. Her friend later said “Tori, this instrument is crying without you, and you’re a mess without it. This is what you are it’s not about nobody thinks it’s cool. You’ve done everything else and look what they think of that”¹⁰. This was all the inspiration that she needed and was the basis for her break-through solo album “Little Earthquakes”.

In this album, Tori revealed and came to terms with ghosts from her past. This certainly began an on-going process of healing. In her own words, “It was like sitting round a table at a party where everyone feels better for getting stuff off their chests. Soon the party’s over and you have to go home and wake up and ask yourself ‘How am I not going to be a victim anymore? How am I going to wake up and not feel guilty that I want passion

⁸ from an article by David Schwartz in “*The Gazette*” on June 22 1988.

⁹ YKTR Review in “*Rarebird’s Rock And Roll Rarity Reviews*” June 2000.

¹⁰ Evans, Liz. *Women, Sex and Rock ‘N’ Roll In Her Own Words*. Pandera, 1994. p. 8.

in my life?”¹¹. The album came out to great reviews in 1991¹² and was both a critical and commercial success. But there were still some speculations about a girl behind a piano and the “openness” of her songs. This was also a departure from her Y Kant Tori Read’s image, taking a much more artistic approach, which is visible in the album’s cover.

While she was bearing her soul with songs like “Silent all These Years”, “Crucify” and the infamous “Me and a Gun”, which is an account of her experience of rape, she was dealing with the burden of being a women in the “music industry” and the continuous comparisons with artists such as Kate Bush and Patti Smith. Some critics went so far as to call her “insane”. As Liz Evans pints out, “Rock has always celebrated the more romantic side of insanity, encouraging its quirky eccentrics in their agonizing struggles to create. Outcasts who find solace in the delirium of their art are more than welcomed in the world of popular entertainment, but usually only if they’re male. Female artists who function left of center are often treated with scorn, ridicule and ignorance. Amos was no Exception”¹³.

Still, Tori was proud of her record, and while the creative process helped her overcome painful memories and face things she hadn’t “for the last 15 years of her life”¹⁴, her music started to transcend as she gathered up a following that identified itself with the raw and painful emotions expressed through her music. She also noticed how young girls and women connected with her on a deeper level. Her song “Me and a Gun”, as Sheila

¹¹ Evans, Liz. *Women, Sex and Rock ‘N’ Roll In Her Own Words*. Pandera, 1994. p. 10.

¹² Tori Amos “Little Earthquakes” Atlantic Records 1991.

¹³ Evans *Op. Cit.* p. 11

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 12

Whitely observes, “was recognized as embodying the feminine voice of courage and power as it communicated in slow and measured tones, her personal experience of rape”¹⁵.

The song itself is very simple. It’s sang a capella, meaning there is no accompaniment of any sort. The narration starts out by presenting the “immediacy of the moment”¹⁶, ‘5 am, Friday morning, Thursday night...’. The melodic line, starting at the tonic, slowly moves upward by step, backed up by a suggested harmony of i - III – iv – v.

Once reaching the dominant, the melody moves down again by step, restricting the vocal range to that of a fifth throughout most of the song. The limited range of the melody is used as a tool to make it seem obvious how she is remembering a painful experience in her life. At the same time, she gives a preamble to that horrific episode which she is about to share with the world (‘And I want to live, got a full tank and some chips’)

The line throughout the chorus (it was me and a gun...) resembles that of the verse in it’s movement toward the dominant (only the harmony changes to iv – I - iv – III) and coming back to the tonic (iv – i – V – i). It is interesting to note that there is a special emphasis on the interval of the fourth in the beginning of each phrase in the chorus. As Sheila Whiteley points out, “Amos’s classical training as a pianist and her Methodist

¹⁵ Whiteley, Sheila. *Too Much Too Young: Age, Identity and Gender*. Routledge, London/New York, 2004. Ch. 2.

¹⁶ Ibid p. 197.

background would have familiarized her with the effect on the listener of such common musical devices and their associations with protection ‘Be near me, Lord Jesus...’¹⁷.

This is certainly true if we were to compare some of these hymns that are an intricate part of religious practice. There are basically two types of hymns; those to praise God and those to seek God’s redemption. The harmony found in most of the cases is simple, (I – IV – V – I). This is largely due to an attempt in creating recognizable melodies for common people to remember. In mass, they might be sang with an organ accompaniment, or a capella. This explains the unaccompanied melody of the song, whether Tori was aware of it or not at the time it was written.

The idea of praying and the impact of her religious background is clear once again when she sings ‘And I sang “Holy Holy”’ as she tries to find protection in a higher power.

The irony of the song is reflected in lyrical lines such as ‘I haven’t seen BARBADOS...’ and ‘You can laugh, it’s kind of funny...’ pointing out how in ‘times like these’ the mind is able to block our own feelings of giving up and death, replacing them with the will to survive. The rhythmic pattern and final rest on the tonic in the word “Barbados”

¹⁷ Whiteley, Sheila. *Women In Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*. Routledge, London/New York, 2000. p. 198.

emphasizes the movement to the dominant chord in the word ‘must’, stating that, no matter what happens, she has to ‘get out of this’ dreadful ordeal. To make this point clear, the melody resolves to the tonic on the word ‘this’.

In rape, guilt is a constant threat to the well being of the victim. In this song, the evidence of feeling guilty is present. Though in lyrics like ‘Yes I wore a slinky red thing...’ she states her right as a woman to express herself or dress anyway she wants. Anger becomes evident while she asks ‘Does that mean I should spread for you, your friends, your father...’.

Though guilt, in this case, can be attributed to her regret on wearing sexy clothing and inciting her attacker to perform such brutal attack, once again, there is a reference to her strict religious upbringing. This is the first time in the song where she breaks from the limited use of the interval of the fifth and goes all the way to the octave as a clear sign of despair, regretting the fact that, if she had been a good “religious” girl, she wouldn’t be punished this way. Sort of how a little girl would roll up her eyes when she is being summoned by a parent (‘And I know what this means...’).

In Tori’s own words “I used to get really pissed off that my life was so dictated by when this Jesus guy was born and when he was dying every year”¹⁸ makes it easier to understand her reasons to include him in the song. As a religious person, it is obvious that

¹⁸ Evans, Liz. *Women, Sex and Rock ‘N’ Roll In Her Own Words*. Pandora, 1994. p. 14.

he represents or is the symbol of a higher power to whom she is seeking protection. This is probably the hardest part to analyze in the lyrical sense.

She then mentions how she used to live under the guidance of God, in this case represented by Jesus, and how they got along ('Me and Jesus a few years back, used to hang...'). But then she realizes she was not a good girl. She used to question His authority. Jesus starts talking to her ('And he said "It's your choice babe just remember...'). Here, He threatens and asks her to choose between the road of religion or the road to perdition and reminds her of the power He possesses to make her suffer if she were to choose the wrong way (... I don't think you'll be back in 3 days time so you choose well").

Her voice then breaks as she asks for an explanation to such punishment ('Tell me what's right...'). The melody reaches the submediant but goes back to the dominant as she tries to find out why this is happening to her while she asks 'Is it my right...'. The melodic phrase finishes on the fifth note of the dominant triad and not the tonic as though waiting for the answers to come ('... to be on my stomach of Fred's Seville) before she heads back to the chorus.

Her last effort to get over her situation comes with the memories of her home town in North Carolina; a sign of nostalgia, remembering the happy moments in her life. She finally reaches the octave in this phrase (and coincidentally is the only place where the harmony reaches the VI chord) as her last attempt at surviving and returns to the tonic by

step motion ('And do you know CAROLINA...') stepping through the dominant chord once again before returning to the chorus.

Finally, the song ends with Tori restating the second phrase of the chorus and how she WILL 'get out of this'.

The impact this song has had has been tremendous. It has obviously touched many people, both male and female. But not only have women benefited from the song's subject matter and the in-your-face content, but men have had the chance to reflect on it as well. Males that have seen Tori in live performances have in fact heard and felt the message the song displays. Crayton Harris¹⁹ reviewed one of Tori's first tours. He observes: "On the last tour, it was virtually (Me and a Gun) in every show, and it was the most personal and terrifying moment I've ever spent in a concert, watching a woman look directly at me and tell me what went through her mind as she was sexually attacked... It was probably one of the most important contributions to the movement against violence against women, and it deserves to be heard".²⁰

But the song's greatest contribution is probably the creation of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN). Founded by Tori with grants from the Atlantic Group and Warner Music Group, RAINN is a non-profit organization that operates a national toll-

¹⁹ Harrison has a journalism major from Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

²⁰ Harrison cited in *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* by Shelia Whiteley.

free hotline for victims of sexual assault²¹. While the song has helped over 350,000 survivors since it began operating on July 26 1994, the creative and writing process helped Amos overcome this terrible trauma, which affects thousands of people each year. As she points out in a letter posted on RAINN's website, "For the past two years I've sung 'Me and a Gun' at every concert as a way of healing the place inside myself that has been hurt, enraged and numbed by violence. For many years I shut down that place inside myself that needed to rage, cry, ask questions and basically just express myself. I made a conscious choice when I put 'Me and a Gun' on the record not to stay a victim anymore... Passion, joy and love were not things I felt I could have or deserved anymore. I've been encouraged by wise ones who taught me how to develop inner tools where I can understand these sacred places in my being. It took me many years to make the decision to deal with this... Healing takes courage and we all have courage, even if we have to dig a little to find it"²².

If "Little Earthquakes" was about Tori's revelations, religion turned out to be the most important theme in her second album "Under The Pink". Here, Amos deliberately expresses her thoughts and feelings against her imposed upbringing by her Methodist father. Songs like "God", "Past The Mission" and her hit "Cornflake Girl" are a perfect example when showing her frustrations of being a girl and living under such ecclesiastical ideals. This is obvious when exploring the taboos surrounding female masturbation in her song "Icicle".

²¹ www.rain.org

²² Letter in www.rain.org

The song shows a more complex harmonic setting than “Me and a Gun”. The format of the song is based on an intro, A, A', B, C, A and a coda. This set up gives the idea of sexual activity which will be analyzed as follows.

The song starts with a note in the lower range of the piano continued by sounds in the upper range “reminiscent of a child’s musical box”²³. As the melody continues, the mental picture of the sexual act is drawn by the aggressiveness and increase on the volume of dissonant chords being played. The music suddenly reaches its climatic point once the chords are left in the air without any kind of resolution and with the help of the pedal of the piano, giving the listener a sensation of relaxation, in the music as well as it would happen once reaching the climax during intercourse.

After the introduction, we enter section A, where the left hand of the piano plays a rhythmic pattern that shows up constantly throughout much of the song.

The written tonality is that of Cb, but it seems like the music revolves around Ab and Dbm (vi, ii). The word icicle (“Icicle, icicle where are you going”...) is a symbol used to represent the male reproductive organ, which in this case is replaced with her hand (masturbation). The lyrics may come from a feminist point of view, “I don’t need a man to please me, I can do it myself”, though she uses a much poetic way to make this statement (“I have a hiding place when spring marches in, will you keep watch for me I hear them calling”...). Sexual tension begins to surface as she sings “Gonna lay down...”. This

²³ ²³ Whiteley, Sheila. *Women In Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*. Routledge, London/New York, 2000. p. 203.

tension is harmonically represented with the use of and augmented G triad (V+6/5 / vi) resolving to Ab (vi).

In religion, reproduction is the only valid purpose of sexual intercourse. Masturbation is a way of satisfying a sexual urge. In other words, it is satisfying temptation, and it is considered a sin. Amos is lyrically specific, “Greeting the monster (temptation) in our Easter dresses (religious ideas)”. She comments on her religious background “Father says bow your head like the good book (the Bible) says”, she is expected to follow these beliefs which she has been born into. But she questions and makes fun of it, “I think the good book is missing some pages”.

Section B is announced by a modulation to Ab. “And when my hand touches myself I can finally rest my head”. The vocal line reaches c5 while the harmony leads to the tonic(Ab) triad (IV-V-V2-I).

This is the preamble to the actual act of masturbation in the song. Her attitude against “Holy Communion is clear “And when they say ‘take of his body’ I think I’ll take from mine instead”. The lyric line is followed by a slow change in the tempo, as the voice places itself on f4 while the accompaniment rests on the tonic triad of Ab.

This brief pause leads to section C and the change to Cb. The harmony progression I – V – vi – I follows the lyrics “Getting off, getting off...”, while the change from 3/4 to 4/4 portrays how she is now masturbating.

Amos is particularly aware of the choice she has between what she has been taught (“lay your book and my chest... feel the word, feel it...”) and her right to do as she pleases (“I could have, I should have, I didn’t so) the increase in dynamics and the vocal line reaching a climatic level in e5 imitates the momentum of orgasm reaching it and finally returning to section A as though coming back to a state of relaxation.

The song ends with a coda, where Amos restates “I’m gonna lay down” finishing in Ab.