

# TWO STEPS AHEAD

## KRISTIN HERSH INTERVIEW

Throwing Muses have been chipping away at the rock face since the mid-eighties with a music revolving around the diverse and vivid doubts, fears and confusions of Kristen Hersh. From Newport, Rhode Island, the band completed the customary apprenticeship on independent labels that peaked with the impressive passions of the *House Tornado* album before moving to the little big time on Sire with *Hunkpapa* and its surprisingly successful single offspring, 'Dizzy'.

That was '89, since then the band and Kristen have been hauled over the hot coals of business and personal disintegration only to emerge this year with their best album and the sort of anticipation and attention that has the Big Break vibe about it.

This phone call to London catches Throwing Muses at the end of a sell out tour of Britain and Europe — not bad for a band renowned for attracting mainly the introverted intellectual types.

"That was the case when we first started," agrees Ms Hersh, "we got intellectuals, musicians and people with glasses. That's no longer the case and that's a relief because I don't think people should be approaching our music with their minds, least of all their glasses", she laughs with a mirth that seems highly strung, a trait that she repeats often during the interview.

"This music can hold up to analysis if you care to do that but I don't think it will hit you if you don't open up your guts to it first, that's where it really happens."

How do you feel about presenting your very personal songs on stage to a live audience?

"I find if I do them the right way they're so personal that they don't have much to do with my personality anymore, like my physical personality or name, but they have more to do with something underneath that I share with other people. So if it's affecting them the way it's affecting me then it's about both of us — it's very personal but it's not like a diary."

The music industry hasn't got a great reputation for respecting people's personal integrity, and in fact Kristen felt the cruel business end of the biz when her trusted manager up and sued the band last year:

"In the past few years the business side has been thrown in my face in a really bad way. On the other hand this is the best job I could hope for — I don't make much money but it's a wonderful way to live. If the business is about playing in the studio that's great because that's where I work the hardest. It's when it gets to label deals and not knowing what the fuck is going on that I think it's a crappy business and on our last album, *Hunkpapa*, the label was breathing down my neck which made the album sound apologetic.

"It's rare for me to allow that as opinions that are not valid don't mean anything to me, but on *Hunkpapa* I worked with the label as I felt that they would sell Throwing Muses and our albums for once would be available. But the music ended up so watered down that I really resented the company and they tried to do it again on *The Real Ramona* and that caused problems for the band inter-personally and aesthetically — and that's garbage! The labels are just throwing out so much trash, like selling junk food to people and saying this will keep you healthy and people just swallow it because it's so easy."

"The minute you approach them with something I find that's just as easy but isn't as syrupy they say nobody will eat that, and it's their

fault nobody will eat it because the business has told them not to. They insult the public . . ."

Like American TV?

"Yeah, sitcom bands", Kristen laughs.

At the end of last year she checked herself into a mental hospital. For ten years Kristen has been hearing 'voices' but the business pressures and the break-up of her home and a custody battle with her former lover for their son Dylan led her to breaking point and a diagnosis by doctors that she had a bi-polar personality disorder. Whatever that is.

"We had incredibly sour karma last year and a lot of inter-personal problems but I'm not so stunned anymore. I hate to say that I was naive but nothing had proven to me that human nature if it wasn't on your side could be that bad. Evil. Splitting up a mother and a child — I can't think of anything worse. And screwing over a band (Kristen's common law husband claimed he owned a piece of her music, whatta guy!) that is so honest and hasn't done anything to hurt you . . . There were plenty of people I didn't trust but I trusted him and my manager and there were lots of other things but I won't go into them. You've got to be sure when you're trusting someone and now I am."

Kristen gets a lot of fan mail that is obsessive and frightening from people who see her as either the

goddess or the odd-ball of American rock'n'roll.

"They seem more intent on just calling me crazy now — one short of a six-pack, one wave short of a shipwreck and I've read so many of them."

But you've been quite open about your private life:

"I guess I ask for it, so I'm not one to resent journalists doing their job and I made this my job and they're more apt to ask me about my personal life than, say, Kylie Minogue. There are two sides, music and my life, and when you're reading about your life and then being misquoted, that's tough, embarrassing but not too heavy."

"But there are obnoxious journalists who ask me about bi-polar disorders and Dylan too much and I've learned to say that I haven't anything to say about them. Other than that I meet a lot of good people who seem to care about music. If they have to ask about my life it's my fault."

*The Real Ramona* is Throwing Muses' fifth and best album. Kristen Hersh agrees:

"It's very cohesive and it's attractive. I think that *House Tornado* is very cohesive and the production is appropriate but there's still the ego me there that leads people to think that this isn't what it's supposed to be. *The Real Ramona* is an album that people will hear the right way."



Next to 'Dylan', 'Two Steps' is the most reflective, laid back song on the album and its lyrics, eg *two steps behind the rest, one fingertip too long* seem like an admission that somehow Kristen Hersh follows a different drum.

"Maybe. I'm so subjective about those songs that I can only look at them sideways. I'm not good at taking them apart. It seems to be about the band, an anthem — we all just played it one day. It's important to me that it's two steps behind the rest and not in front, but there's still something gangly about the band that still spills sugar and that's the way I see that song."

Is songwriting a way of exorcising your demons?

"I don't like to think of it that way as that implies a cathartic impulse. It seems to me that the songs are there and I give them song bodies. They don't seem like music to me, more like ghosts or stories that I draw from outside myself. My part is having developed a craft for ten or so years."

To what extent does your personal life determine the type of songs you write?

"A good question. I'd like to say I'm so good that it doesn't have anything to do with my writing. I used to think that song images would come first and they would force my life into patterns that would later become the song but that was too dangerous a way to live."

If Ms Hersh's writing was dependent on her personal well-being then Throwing Muses would be about to enter a tranquil state as in January this year she married new manager Billy O'Connell, the man largely responsible for her mental recovery. And a baby is on the way "so it's getting harder and harder to hold the guitar in front of me," she clucks. But the last word has to go to her songs:

"They've always seemed celebratory to me and happiness doesn't always seem very peaceful. For me to know what it is to love Billy has not made me calm except way down inside. Our relationship is way up and down like a huge roller-coaster and if I didn't care that much for someone I wouldn't really be there. So I don't know in the future if my songs will be overtly peaceful but there's a centredness that might make them more listenable."

GEORGE KAY

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