



The Nine O'Clock Muse

An Interview with Throwing Muse Kristin Hersh

Kristin Hersh was using this as her wake-up call. It was 9am Glasgow time, 12 hours after my initial call had been mistakenly connected to the empty room of her nanny, Christie, who's looking after the three year old Ryder James O'Connell (Kristin's son). It didn't help that mum was registered under her real name, Martha O'Connell. But hold it right there, party animals. This is rock 'n' roll, a man's world, so how come we're talkin' kids, nannies, mothers, and they're on the road?

"It's tough," Hersh explains, not bothering to suppress a yawn. "Look at any working parent, and being on the road is the toughest part, as I have to leave eight year old Dylan behind, and the baby comes along, but he doesn't eat or sleep very well. When I'm home, I'm home, so I don't get to practice much, but when I'm on the road I don't get to mother a whole lot."

The last time I spoke to Hersh was on the eve of *The Real Ramona*'s release, when she was undergoing law suits, custody battles and managerial problems.

"I don't remember that album very fondly. I like the songs on it, but I think the production was a little trendy for us — and the band broke up making the record. We didn't let the songs determine how they should sound. People were watching a lot of MTV, and the record label was involved, and we had our first bully producer — not in a bad way, but just, like, we had less and less to do with the album. And there were a lot

of law suits. But things are better, as we're not so poor anymore and the lawsuits are done with."

Just for the record, Kristin married manager Billy O'Connell and their three year old, Ryder, is with the nanny in the next room. Eight year old Dylan, her son from a previous relationship and the subject of bitter custody battles, is back home in the States. Yet it seems, if the new album *University* is anything to go by, that Hersh's currently settled personal life is conducive to her best music.

"I have a good personal life," she explains, stifling another yawn. "It's not settled because it never stops. Bad things like law suits and custody battles are gonna make you stronger in that they give you a perspective for what hard means. But they make me weaker because they're on the pile of things that happen that I can't really take. Now I can afford to live hard again, things don't have to be nice around me because I'm healthy."

Since their first album, released around 1986, Throwing Muses have been aligned with the traumatic, intellectual bed-sit society. Is Kristin Hersh a sensitive, vulnerable person?

"No, I'm really strong," she counters, almost laughing. "I've just had some really bad shit happen to me. And songwriting is a weird process. But, other than that, I'm a housewife and I have a strong, normal life. There is nothing calm about that. That could be what confuses people. If you're living hard, it's gonna be

scary all the time."

Last year Hersh had her most commercially successful year with the release of her delightful, easily digested, solo album, *Hips and Makers*. Most people regard it as the best thing she's done.

"I think it's easier to take. There are plenty of people who don't understand rock band sound in recent years. *Hips and Makers* is a really good album, but they're all like children to me, so it's hard for me to say if one album is better than the others."

"I did my solo record kinda by accident, and I didn't expect to have to promote or tour it, but that became a priority and, in America, we've never been a priority before, which is cool. They still pay us to make records, but they don't think they'll be records that will sell, so *Hips and Makers* was the first time I've ever seen the record company really work a record."

When you toured the album, how did you feel without the band for live moral support?

"At first, it was weird. I'm not really shy, but I'm private, and it seemed presumptuous of me to sit there all by myself and make people pay money to look at that and wonder where's the show. But I appreciated how well they were all listening, and the only reason they were there was for the music. I just had to put a guitar in my lap and I knew exactly what was going to happen. It was just like playing in my bedroom."

Hersh's surprisingly successful solo phase

meant the Throwing Muses' new album, *University*, was put on hold for a few months. Now it's here, with justified acclaim that this could be the best music she's made with the band.

"Yeah, it's very realised, cohesive, and we were incredibly focussed. We began with a collection of about 30 songs and whittled them down. These were very delicate songs, so they took a very detailed production, probably the most produced record we've done, and yet there's nothing real slick on it."

The opening track and new single, 'Bright Yellow Gun', has the irresistible buoyancy to clean up the alternative charts.

"All I know about that song is that it's an attractive weapon, which is like the poison that happens in you when you love someone. The most dangerous thing that can happen to you is to be attracted to someone else's weapon."

Are your songs a form of release?

"I hear them, but I don't feel like I'm expressing myself. So, I get as much cathartic release from listening to other people's songs as I do from writing my own. The one thing that does figure in my songs from my life is my family. I had a song called 'Dylan' on *The Real Ramona*, and on 'Flood', on *University*, there's a line about Ryder. Every now and then my real kids or real husband pop up, and it becomes a less universal song for that."

GEORGE KAY

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