

# Meet Ze Monsta

## PJ Harvey

**M**y mind's picture of Polly Jean Harvey was drawn largely by her shouted opening demands on the 4 *Track Demos* track 'Reeling': 'I wanna bathe in milk, eat grapes / Robert De Niro, sit on my face.' It was 1993, and Polly was at the peak of her glamorous "50s housewife" phase. The front of that album saw her sporting rhinestone encrusted sunglasses and black underwear. A camera hung from her neck, resting at groin level, its protruding lens giving the scene deliciously phallic overtones. The back cover showed Polly naked, wrapped in plastic, seemingly a nod to the past image which had helped propel her thus far.

It's 1995, and a whole new audience are being wowed by an even more glamorous version of PJ Harvey (once the moniker for Polly's three piece band, now the name of her solo act). The PJ Harvey of today's TV screens has a smilingly sinister, slashed red mouth. She wears a set of fluttering eyelashes and a shiny red gown, as she shimmies her way through the eerily whispered 'Down By The Water'. The track is drawn from her new album (and the reason for this interview) *To Bring You My Love*.

I expect to hear a growl, a purr, or at least a little throatiness, when the phone rings just before 10pm on a Friday night. Hence, I am surprised to be greeted by a friendly voice, which is so soft it occasionally threatens to drop below register. Polly is calling from her home in Dorset, where it is "a beautiful sunny day". She has phone interviews all morning, and then plans to "run off and sit in the sun somewhere".

What? No nectar and ice? No movie stars?

It's true, a lot of Polly's press is obsessed with turning her into the subject of her own songs (or knocking down the screen she may hide behind like the mighty Oz), but the finger pointing in the former case can also be turned on her fans.

"I often get letters from people, or people trying to visit, especially on tour, people sort of trying to find their way to the hotels and stuff," says Polly. "But I think, yeah, it's really because of people identifying with the songs, and maybe because of the nature of which I write songs. It's dealing with emotions and feelings people can't express and so, if they feel somebody's expressing that as well, and they feel kind of akin with you, and think: 'Oh god, well they're somebody else that feels like I do,' and they feel a need to get in touch."

Can that be scary?

"It can be because sometimes it does attract quite unstable people, which can be

quite frightening and very upsetting because I'm the sort of person that naturally wants to help people out. If you feel very unable to do that, or just if I tried to help out everybody that was having problems, I would just have to give up music and become a health worker. So it's very upsetting when you feel like: 'Yes, I could probably help that person, but I just don't have the time.' That's really quite horrible."

Has the fact that people relate so strongly to your music come as a surprise?

"Well, to begin with, at the very start of my career, it was a big surprise and a big shock. I found it very hard to deal with because I am quite a shy, quiet person. To suddenly be inundated with people who thought they knew me was quite frightening. Through experience, I've learnt how to deal with it now. I've just kind of accepted it as part of what I do."

Another thing Polly has come to accept, for the time being at least, is touring in support of her albums. When we spoke, she had recently finished touring with Tricky, and he was about to join her for her European and American tour. She was scheduled to support REM, but Bill Berry's illness put an end to that plan. It would have been her second taste of the stadiums, as she supported U2 in 1993.

"I really enjoyed it actually," she says of the stadium experience. "I was extremely interested in seeing and feeling what that would be like. I like setting myself kind of goals like that, to see if I can do it. I could, and I enjoyed it, but it's not a way I enjoy presenting my music particularly. I think my music is seen a lot better in a much smaller environment. But I was able to play those big shows and I didn't kind of break down or anything [laughs], so it was just fascinating really."

Can you imagine your popularity escalating to a point where you are headlining the stadium circuit?

"I find that pretty hard to imagine, but then again, I have been surprised all along the way really. I found it pretty hard to imagine that everyone would jump on *To Bring You My Love* as the accessible radio friendly album [laughs]. That's as much of a surprise to me as anything, in the way that my first album [*Dry*] was received. I'm very sort of unaware of what people will make of it, so anything's possible."

Does it give you a sense of wonderment regarding the future?

"No, I don't actually dwell on what people are going to think of what I do very much at all. I kind of am able to continue to write the way I've always done, which is just for my own pleasure, or for my own exploration really, to start

off with. I know I can't be any other way. If I start writing something that people don't like, then I really am not prepared to change. I'd rather sell just 10 records and feel like I was still remaining true to myself."

Vocal training opens more doors on Polly's journey of exploration through music.

"I actually started having vocal lessons about two or three years ago. I initially started because I wanted to have a strong enough voice for touring, 'cause it really is very draining, and I wanted to learn to be breathing properly and to be using my voice correctly so as not to damage it on tour. That kind of developed into really wanting to learn the techniques and different abilities of singing, which has just continued to really fascinate me. I suppose it's the instrument I study most now. I practise every day and am just amazed at the way you can use your voice, how that can change the meaning of music and of words."

I am imagining the wealth of performance one could catch by having a window next to that of Polly's bathroom. It seems I'm not far from wrong.

"I practise in my house. I practise in front of the mirror, because it's really good to see the shapes you're making with your face and your mouth, 'cause that's all part of the production. I practise anywhere on the road. I practise in hotel rooms, bathrooms, toilets, the bus, everywhere."

Are you finding the new vocal strengths you're uncovering are allowing a wider gamut of emotions to be explored in your music?

"Definitely, absolutely. This is why I'm so, so interested in exploring it further, because certainly having all these different voices at your disposal, which you can switch into really quickly, it just opens up your palette in a way, if you think of it in art terms."

Do your different voices surprise you each time you come across them? Is it like: 'Wow, is that me?'

"Sometimes, yeah. Like yesterday, I put on the latest album, and I haven't played it since we finished mixing it I think. I listened through to the voices and I thought: 'Fuck, you sound like a hundred year old woman!' I really like the variety you can get, switching from one song to another, a 10 year old girl to a hundred year old woman. That's really nice."

Do you have any idea where this exploration is leading to, in terms of developing your lyrical content?

"I think the more I learn, the more I appreciate how much just the way you sing a word can change it's meaning. You sing a word like: 'I

love you,' but the way you sing it can mean the complete opposite, or can be very frightening and not endearing at all. I suppose, just as I learn that more, I can then apply that to the way I'm writing lyrics more, knowing that the singing can change this or support it."

Similarly, the way Polly dresses can change or support what she is singing. She says she has always played at dressing up.

"Even down to the first album, when *not* dressing up was to me," she explains. "I mean, I was still as concerned with image then as I am now. It's just now I've chosen to explore the completely opposite side, of dressing up in a very glamorous way and how does that affect the music, and how does that affect how people receive me live if I'm so made up that it's to the point of being revolting? I'm really just feeling my way around, and trying to find images that are going to strengthen the music and allow me to deliver it in the best way."

How have your live audiences reacted to your current external appearance?

"I find people are pretty... pretty *gob smacked*. When I go out there's a lot of kind of wide eyes and open mouths. People are *very*, *very* quiet — quieter than they've *ever* been in performances before, in between songs and during songs. A lot of my live set now is very, very quiet music that you could hear a pin drop to, and I'm just so overwhelmed that people are willing to come with me on this way I've chosen to go. It's not hard hitting, bolshy music from beginning to end, like it might have used to have been. It's very, very delicate, very subtle, and people are willing to give me that time, and they're listening to every single word I sing, to every note that's played. I'm just so pleased that's what's happened really."

Polly chooses not to discuss her lyrics ("for my own health and well being, thank you," she recently told *The Face*'s Amy Raphael) and, after the promotion for this album is over, is planning on discussing even less.

"I have desires to become a Kate Bush and just write songs, record them, and do it once every three years, and not tour and not do interviews," she says. "I think it's just getting older, and I want to live in my house and spend more time there. I'd like to settle down one day, have a family, things like that. I'm just doing the normal things that happen to a woman when you hit 25."

Polly is hoping to get to New Zealand before she gives up touring, hopefully in January 1996, if not before.

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