

SONGS ABOUT HAIR AND SWEAT AND LAMPS AND FALLING

THROWING MUSES, a *nearly all-woman band*, are the progeny of parents who lived the '60's hippy ideals. Their interests range from Indian symbolism to human psychology and their music is often seen as weird, arty, elitist. But this, says JACK BARRON, is their amazing grace. Throwing shapes: STEVE PYKE

There is no secret to this. Outside, a giddy 26 stories down, Kristin Hersh and David Narcizo of Throwing Muses are in the process of discovering a man who lives in a cave in New York's Central Park.

They already know that, with its green lights flashing, on a foggy day the observation platform of The Empire State Building can look like the Death Star. Imagination is all it takes.

Inside, on a table in my hotel room lies a cassette of 'Hunkpapa', the Boston/Newport quartet's third album; a work that finds them deliberately trying, with a fair measure of success, to universalise their peculiar musical and lyrical language. Next to the cassette nestles a fist-thick collection of cuttings on the Muses.

A lot of words, massive amounts of journalistic huffing and puffing by some of the best writers of this generation, have served to blow an obfuscatory dust around Throwing Muses. Perhaps the saddest thing ever to be scribbled about them is "Their music refuses to communicate".

"That's real scary," is their reply.

In 20 minutes time Kristin will explain how, while the Muses were in the recording studio, they were reading something on painter Paul Klee, a man whose abstract approach was initially so against the grain of accepted reality that he was only appreciated by professional critics. A man who nonetheless persevered in refining, honing down and purifying his visual language to the point where it became universal.

The Muses, now riding up the elevator to the 26th floor of Le Parker Meridian Hotel, are in an analogous position to the one Klee was once in. "We're looking for songs that will strike at every level, from the most banal to the deepest level." And in a literal — hovering in the elevator — and metaphorical sense they are in mid-air in their quest.

A lot of the songs on 'Hunkpapa' are ironically enough about falling or being suspended between places, nirvana and nadir, and not being sure where you will land or how much it will hurt, if at all. Flux, movement, has always been the sub-text speed of the Muses. And that, far from refusing to communicate, is infinitely understandable.

In the same way that there is no such thing as a purely happy or sad emotion — the two don't just go hand in hand but are defined by and perceived on the basis of each other — Throwing Muses, both melodically and lyrically, oscillate in the stretch of a single song. This is the element that makes people see them as weird/arty/elitist etc, but it's also their amazing grace.

Right this second as Kristin and Dave walk along the hotel corridor to room 2611, in the wider commercial world Throwing Muses are signed in America to Sire. And big cheeses have big bellies that need to be fed. This, in part, has forced the band into a corner of their own choice: how to retain their idiosyncratic eye and ear for cultural complexity yet relay this in a consumable manner. 'Hunkpapa' is the result.

There is no secret to this interview, no skeletons to pull out of Throwing Muses' closet and set dancing, merely a knock on the hotel bedroom door and the entry of two naturally inquisitive people. I like Kristin and Dave immediately, you would too.

I can't vouchsafe for bassist Leslie and guitarist/occasional songwriter Tanya, since they are elsewhere. I can, however, tell you that composer and through-hoops-of-fire vocalist, Kristin, and drummer Dave, are as normal as can be. She, sensual in demurely chic clothes, has a laugh that punctuates like a drill operated by a clown, and speaks with the wisdom of a grandmother through the enthusiastic tongue of a child. He has the assured demeanour and casual dress of some scuffed Ivy League college kid but with none of the crass stresses of a born overachiever.

Kristin and Dave are very un-rock and roll yet they play some of the most perceptually psychotic, harmonically schizophrenic and lyrically pathological music to come out of America in the past few years. Their albums, spanning their 1986 eponymous debut and 'House Tornado' to their current affair, spell this confusion in ever more acute and sophisticated profusion.

From blow-jobs and eating skin, through murder and sweat-soaked sheets, to hallucinations and being with those that eat drugs, the Muses have tossed images and questions in the air like so many severed limbs bobbing on a blood-fountain of words.

As the tape-recorder is switched on you know as much as I do about Throwing Muses: namely, they are three-quarters female, and in their early 20s. They are the progeny of parents who lived the '60's hippy ideals, several were raised in communes. Kristin, who studied psychology in college and whose father is a Professor of Philosophy, has called herself a "Savage housewife" in the past. She has a child named Dylan.

There is no secret to The Throwing Muses. As with all interviews all that is left to do is talk.

AND THEN HIS MOTHER'S PENIS GREW AND GREW

Hunkpapa' is a native American Indian word denoting Sitting Bull's tribe, a part of the almost extinct Sioux Nation. Curiously, there is only one other reference to an Indian on the album.

Dave: "We wanted to use an Indian word and it just ended up being a tribe name. We ended up trying to find a word that nobody would know the meaning of, a word that sounded good."

Kristin: "Because that seemed like the only fair way to use anything from Indian culture. We're white, middle-class kids, it was the only approach to Indian culture that I felt we had any right to take. While we were recording the album we were all absorbed in Native American symbolism and mythology but I didn't feel we had the right to make a record whose message was, 'Hey come on guys it wasn't right that we slaughtered all the Indians', or, 'Hey they got beat up'. Everybody knows that anyway."

So what's special about Indian mythology and symbolism?

Kristin: "It's fascinating. They

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combine really tasteless jokes with archetypal imagery and stories where anything can happen. Their stories are like Eskimo stories, just wild, hahahahah."

Dave: "Yeah, nothing is too grotesque and nothing's too bizarre. It's all real matter of fact like: 'Well her husband turned into a pile of shit and married a skunk'."

Kristin: "'And then his mother's penis grew and grew', hahahah."

Such an element of the fantastical, the comically absurd, bats through the ball-park of Throwing Muses' music. In the same manner that Indian culture invests spiritual properties into inanimate objects, from cooking utensils to weapons, Kristin can sing that she is an alarm clock without getting her poetic licence rescinded. For in a sense she is.

EAR-SAY

In the final scheme of the Muses' musical dreams, Kristin says that her songs are not motivated by unresolved anger. Yet there is a very violent lyrical side to the band's excitable minstrelsy. A lot of claustrophobia, agoraphobia, domestic trauma, cut flesh, and sexual duplicity. So strong is this undercurrent that an interviewer from *Spin* magazine was convinced that the band were all into Satanism.

Do you think that Throwing Muses project some sort of musical neurosis?

Kristin: "Yeah, definitely. We deal with that but the music itself seems so healthy, like the most celebratory thing we can offer."

The lyrical content of 'Hunkpapa' seems really depressed though.

Kristin: "Yeah, mmmmm. Maybe that's because if you have anything sitting malevolently in you, you have to get rid of it before you can talk about it, like a cancer of something. On the other hand, if I'm in that position myself it seems like the truth to me. I'm more enlightened and aware when in that state. I know I can't see the world very clearly but it seems more honest to me. It cuts clear all the way inside."

So do you think pain can make you feel equally as human as pleasure?

Kristin: "Yeah. I've often wondered how to express pleasure so that people can feel it as much as pain. People seem to respond more strongly to negative emotions though. Or if you try to express positive emotions you come across sounding all dippy. And I think that's a real shame because there's as much complexity and intensity in



positive emotions . . ."

Are the things that you are attracted to in the arts in general metaphorical and vague or concrete in their intent?

Kristin: "I like concrete images, and people tend to think that's vague because I can't make a sentence out of it. But I like real physical things. We don't often talk about the names of feelings or the names of emotions and thoughts. Instead we talk about the stuff that bangs you around to get you in those states. There's a lot of hair and sweat and lamps and falling in our songs. A lot of physical stuff. So I'm very attracted to that, but I don't like it when somebody writes a sentence through it so you can't see what it began with anymore. It's odd that people should think that approach is more concrete. One sentence that defines all of it is impossible after all, hahahah."

Until just now Throwing Muses' music has been very much like that: an unfolding conversational sentence where at any one point you don't know where it's taking you. A tumble of discovery where you can't see the oncoming wreck around the next bend. 'Hunkpapa' by contrast is more shorn down. But that's no problem.

Van Gogh comes up in an oblique way on 'Mania' on your current album. Do you like his work or was he just a useful character to use so you could write about missing ears?

Kristin: "Hahahaha! Yeah, we all really like his work. I love the idea that you can make blue violent, that's really wild. Somebody had this theory that Van Gogh and some of the Expressionists had this disease which meant they actually saw like that, as if they weren't actually artists at all. As if most artists actually lie about seeing stuff like that! And the Impressionists were all near-sighted because everything they painted was blurred and fuzzy . . . It's like people saying, 'Well, since you cut your tumour out are you any calmer?'"

Though he died virtually penniless and ignored, Van Gogh prints now hang on thousands of walls next to flying ducks and cuckoo clocks up and down the land. What a difference a century or so can make. Throwing Muses, once they find the right balance, could end up

filed in record collections next to Phil Collins and Springsteen. And why not?

DENTISTS KILL THEMSELVES

Neither comfortable nor damned, devotional nor completely demented, there is a logic to the delirium that runs like a playful child through the songs of Throwing Muses. Sometimes their work is akin to psychological word, image and sound association games. Sometimes it rapidly see-saws with venom. Either way it's always texturally rich rather than smart-Alec.

Kristin, as mentioned, did psychology at college.

"I find psychology fascinating," she says, "still do. It seems like the one thing that feels like it needs to be done. What attracted me to it? I dunno. I found out that people who kill themselves more than anybody else are female psychologists, dentists are second. Isn't that crazy? Depressed dentists, what a sad thought! The thing about female psychologists is that they didn't kill themselves because they were depressed, it was mainly because they went into psychology to figure themselves out."

Is that why you went into it?

Kristin: "I sometimes wonder about that. But really I just find it fascinating. It's like an ocean to me. We're getting to the point now where we've isolated so many chemicals and dislodged so many lobes that it has become almost an artistic venture . . ."

"I guess the stuff I'm particularly interested in is dream symbolism, Jung and James Hillman. That's another thing: we've spent so much time listening to other people's dreams that I can't imagine people thinking that what Throwing Muses do is art. I mean, every dolt who goes to bed has a dream that's far stranger than anything we could think up, hahahahah. I think if we trusted in that capacity in each other we'd know so much more about what we're doing here. Personally I find it harder to remember whether I dreamt something or whether it actually happened."

WHO BUILDS THE DEVIL'S ROOF?

Though they play what Dave calls "Genderless music", one can't escape from the fact that the Muses are nearly an all-woman band. Many of the songs as well address issues of womanhood. I told Kristin and Dave that I thought men came off pretty badly on 'Hunkpapa'. She was disappointed.

"Really? Oh that's too bad," Kristin grimaced. "I don't think they do. Mostly the stuff I sing about I put as being my fault. I'm not actually sure that I say anything as such concerning sexuality. I think if I'm dealing with sexuality what I do is pose questions. Like: Should sexuality and relationships be embittering to women? Is it empowering? Is it something that flirting comes out of? Like something that you

hold and then give away? Is it something that somebody took from you? Is sexuality something that you use over and over again and that makes you stronger or does it make you weaker? Mainly it's a lot of questions.

"I don't think there's anything I've written that riles against men as a race. Maybe yin-yang, but hopefully we don't come out with that attitude."

Is that how you navigate your life — with confusion — in general?

Kristin: "It's hard for me to say and I don't know how much of life in particular should shed any light on it. I think woman herself is sick and that gives rise to a lot of questions which you have to explore until you can live with them. And a lot of questions I ask seem to come from hurt. There's guilt in there too.

"You know the song 'Devil's Roof'? Well we were interviewed by this guy from *Billboard*. And he kept saying

about it, 'What did the guy do to you to make you write such a song?'. And I kept telling him he was off-beam. You see it's a guilt song mostly. The reason I even came to it is I'd be sitting at home in bed at night watching the baby and I'd be thinking about this structure that we build around ourselves.

"We take passion and we make it our family. Where's that come from? You build these walls around yourself and you can't get out. And I'd just get more angry thinking, how do I get out of here? Meanwhile I'd look at my watch and think, 'Where's my husband? Why isn't he here to look after me?' So it's like women are bouncing back and forth all the time now. Which is really woman? Are we trying to be men in leaving (men)? Or are we trying to finish being women in leaving?"

Throwing Muses cast questions like no other band extant.



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