

● Having gone 'kooky' at 14, KRISTIN HERSH now has command of the voices in her head and channels the demonic energy into making unnerving yet strangely beautiful rock music with her band **THROWING MUSES**. Guest therapist: **STEPHEN DALTON**. Mental snap: **HARRY BORDEN**

Ten, nine, eight . . . sink into the couch, Kristin. You are feeling totally secure, utterly relaxed. Peel back your layers of consciousness. Discard all of society's conditioning. Forget you are the main creative force in one of America's most consistent and respected indie-rock bands of the past five years, Throwing Muses.

There's your four-year-old son Dylan, swimming off into the distance. There's your half-sister and Muses guitarist Tanya, dreaming up songs for the second Breeders album with Kim Deal from the Pixies. Beyond them lies the accumulated mountain of verbose and often highly personal critical reactions to Throwing Muses: comparisons with folk art, giving birth, going insane, battling wild animals, taking drugs and washing the dishes.

Leave all that behind. Journey further back through years of illness and therapy, becoming a housewife, studying psychology, living in a commune, flitting between the twee tranquility of Newport, Rhode Island, and the underground creative hotbed of Boston. Beyond all this lies a cute little cabbage-patch kid called Kristin who will grow up to make some of the most savage and unnerving rock music ever.

We have arrived. You are as yet untainted by the neuroses of adulthood and the crippling self-consciousness of intellect, as free as the music whose beauty and spontaneity you have always envied and sought to emulate. Now explain to me what your new single, 'Counting Backwards', is really about.

"Hypnosis . . ."

Yes?

"Sorry, that's all I know. I'd help you out if I could."

'COUNTING BACKWARDS' is a hypnotic EP of delicate, brutally beautiful tunes written by someone who rarely touches drugs but is no stranger to trance states. For ten years Kristin has suffered from Bipolar Disorder, a mild form of schizophrenia involving "auditory hallucinations", or voices in her head. Spooky or what?

"When I was 14, just after John Lennon got shot, I just kind of snapped and went kooky. I wasn't able to control my moods, a bad mood would be an abyss of grief.

"There were times when I thought Evil Kristin was the one who wrote all the music, I was afraid to sing while I was pregnant because I thought she'd come up and hurt the baby. I remember thinking that the Evil One had taken over and was going to leave its fingerprints on everything, and I'd turn and look at the mirror and I'd just be this stupid girl again. I could not put the two together."

So Evil Kristin was battling Good Kristin? Like in *Superman III*?

"Yeah, right. But now I guess I'm just as evil as she is, I don't know why the hell I ever thought I was good."

Some people consider madness a glamorous and artistic

SERIOUS SHRINKING!



Good Kristin on the 'auditory hallucinations' that unleashed Evil Kristin: "They've had a job for a long time, I know what they are and I can control them."

quality.

"I've met a lot of college students that seem fascinated by mental illness, but I literally had no idea people would want to be involved with something so sick. It's the ugliest thing I know, and music is beautiful. That's why people court alcoholism, so they can get over it and tell everybody how clean they are. I felt so crazy I wouldn't touch drugs or alcohol—this is all I can stand! I'm not going to do anything else!

"If something made me open the door to writing songs, it could have been the stress of having snapped or whatever, but I'd kill myself if I had to wait for bad things to happen to me before I could write anything. Now the door is just this clear expanse, it's not waiting for me to release chemicals, it's stuff that's really there. If I was still as sick as I was then I'd probably be writing for teenagers . . ."

So the Muses are a serious band writing sensible thirtysomething music?

"Oh no!" cackles Kristin with an

echo of her demonic alter ego.

"They're the ones the teenagers listen to."

SIX, FIVE, four . . . counting backwards through Kristin's career, one recurring attitude forms the only landmark in otherwise storm-tossed waters. Music, she maintains, is a greater and more complicated force than any mere musician can explain, so Muses songs rarely have a clear direction or discernible viewpoint to comfort the listener. In other words, they are often bloody irritating but always without parallel.

"The closest I can find is old blues," nods Kristin earnestly. "They didn't quite know what they were talking about, Robert Johnson and stuff, it just gets me in my spine."

There are perhaps similarities in the primal voodoo ambience, the screeching banshee (dis)harmonies, but even the most cretinous and conservative rock bands claim to be gut-level and instinctive. What makes Muses music actually different?

"But not everyone is so in touch with their instincts . . . I know that apparently it's not immediate. The Pixies do that well, people can attach themselves to their connections, but we don't really have those connections so people have to trust us entirely."

Unfortunately passengers are discouraged from ever joining the Muses' mystery tour by the simplistic attitude that pop music which doesn't wear a huge, cheesy grin is somehow dark and difficult.

"There are so many negative emotions. A song can be sad, angry, moody, nervous, or else it's (happy voice) HAPPY! and if it doesn't sound (happy voice) HAPPY! then it's any one of those in the mire of negative emotions."

So you don't actually write your songs from a heaving swamp of desolation and depression then?

"No, but if it's not (goofy voice) GOOFY! they don't see anything positive in it."

Surely there is room for HAPPY! in rock? A few tracks on the dazzling new Muses album

'The Real Ramona' even stray into GOOFY! territory without losing their dignity.

"I don't mean music has to be serious—pop music is a great medium—I'm just saying they're not being honest. I think Bruce Springsteen tells the truth, and there's plenty of underground music that is just lies. They think they have something to say, and I don't think anyone has more to say than music itself." (Kristin is back on her favourite subject . . .)

"I don't believe any performer's interpretation is valid. I assume that if a truth is really valid it's not going to come out of a person's mind, it might come out of a ferocious experience in the gut or something. If you let music go, if you write for five years you'll eventually see some things happen you're not responsible for."

Throwing Muses have been making records for five years.

'THE REAL Ramona' is typical Muses, only more so. The angry rock songs are unbearably bitter,

the sweet pop songs impossibly cute, the songs about family and friends are touching and disturbing and soothing and horrifying. There is even a sublime, wordless dolphin-song interlude called 'Dylan' (that's Dylan her son, not the former top love interest of Dame Joan Baez).

"It just was him. That's the only literal track on the album even though it's an instrumental, it's just his picture as much as his body is his picture."

Kristin denies being obsessed by intense family situations, claiming she just likes the sound of words like "mother" and "sister". Presumably her oft-repeated description of herself as a housewife was ironic?

"Perhaps it should have been. Those were the biggest stories I was dealing with at the time, now I listen back to 'House Tornado' I understand a lot more what the songs are about. I had no sense of domesticity within me at all, but I had to take care of the baby and everything. I was kind of fascinated that women had their world in their home."

"It was so extreme. People live in cities for all their dirt and beauty and ugliness, the rollercoaster ride you're supposed to be on, then I got into this house and it was so violent, the emotions in the city could never take me on the same ride my family could. The ugliness in the family, that's real ugliness."

In 1990 Kristin had to confront a new set of domestic demons. She split with Dylan's father and lost custody of the child, attempted to extricate the Muses from their old manager and found herself being sued by just about everybody.

"It was a bad year, I had five lawsuits going at once. Dylan's father sued me for divorce, and we weren't even married! He said he contributed to my career, my future earnings—like, what could you possibly earn from Throwing Muses?—and I had a restraining order out against me to keep me away from Dylan. Just a lot of angry stuff."

Then things took a turn for the worse. Returning from a year of touring to promote 1989's 'Hunkpapa' album, Kristin discovered a bunch of letters from "cities in Iowa I'd never heard of" suing her for unpaid contributions to local Musicians Union chapters. Proceedings began against their former manager and the archetypal "bad contract we signed when we were 18 . . . we had U2's lawyer but he didn't do us any good because we signed the f—ing thing."

THREE, TWO, one . . . time to wake up, Kristin. It's 1991 and Throwing Muses have made their best album yet, proving once again that sanity and maturity are the midwives of creativity. After the departure of bassist Leslie Langston, who married the group's sound man and returned to her native San Francisco, newcomer Fred Abong arrived to make the Muses equally male and female for the first time. Which should bring an end to those lazy "girl band" labels.

Ding dong, the witch is dead.

Kristin Hersh has exorcised her demons and taken command of the voices in her head: "They've had a job for a long time, I know what they are and I can control them."

Now the weird kid from Newport, Rhode Island, can concentrate on creating the sort of scary powerful sounds that make her feel truly beautiful.

"If you are selfish enough to let yourself disappear and you can turn into music for a little while, that is very close to beauty . . . think how important physical beauty is to people, it's a really big deal, it kills people. Especially, I hate to talk just about women, but they don't talk about it as much as they are always thinking about it."

Isn't that just the conditioning of a sexist, male-dominated society?

"I guess you're supposed to say that, aren't you?"

Yes, it's in my contract. And you're supposed to reply . . .

"That's right, damn you!" laughs Kristin Hersh, sanest pop star on the planet.