

NATAL ATTRACTION



Evil Kristin is dead—long live Kristin The Human Being—housewife, mother and pop star

Way out in the wilds of North West One, Kristin Hersh has spotted an extinct animal. It has the head of a giraffe, the body of a mule, the arse of a zebra and the persecuted expression of a creature built for a bet at the genetics department's Christmas party.

There are bigger, scarier, sleeker, faster, funnier and infinitely cuter animals only a few bounds away, but none that excite Kristin, her husband-cum-manager Billy O'Connell and Throwing Muses drummer David Narcizo quite so much; they think they've tracked down a quagga.

The quagga, according to Kristin, became extinct after a scientist dispatched to Africa on a sperm-finding mission was kicked

● Not too long ago, **THROWING MUSES** were in danger of following the quagga into extinction. Now, after a mind-boggling series of traumas, illness, litigation, child-custody battles and band splits, **KRISTIN HERSH's** faith has been resurrected with the born-again fervour of 'Red Heaven'. **JOHN MULVEY** goes half-banded loach-spotting with the happiest woman in rock. Kristin soldier: **DEREK RIDGERS**

to death while wanking off the only available male he could find. Everyone, so she thought, was too cowardly, or at least embarrassed, to try again. When we get close enough to read the sign on the cage, it's little wonder quaggas have discreetly changed their names to okapis. Either that, or Kristin just could've been mistaken—she hasn't been out for a while, after all.

This Sunday afternoon trip to a dying zoo is her first time away from captivity—from a succession of drab interview rooms—for days. "It's funny," she says, "the animals I like best are all the scary ones, and the most scary ones are the most cute ones."

Considering all that's been written about the Throwing Muses' blend of vicious and vulnerable, hysterical and humble, hard and soft, maybe she's living

up to all the earnest amateur psychoanalysis...

"It's the zoo dichotomy principle. Ha ha ha ha."

Or maybe she's taking the piss.

For a national institution/disgrace soon to close due to alleged lack of interest, London Zoo is weirdly rammed today; only a few empty cages, with euphemistic 'under refurbishment' signs, hint that its days are numbered. Roaming packs of cub scouts rush to the primate house for some rough-and-ready sex education classes. Indulgent divorcees chase their weekend children through vast, aerodynamically styled aviaries. Me and Kristin and David and Billy see the oryx and the big bats and the creepy cockroaches and the giant panda. And then we see the fish.

Throwing Muses visit

aquariums whenever they can. It's an obsession initiated by Billy—a vital part of the current band set-up—who swam with sharks in his teens, dreams of giant catfish and knows the name of almost every rainbow-shaded specimen in this cathedral of tropical sea-life. In one tank, a big, fat, slobbish fish opens its gills for a minuscule valet to swim in and clean them out. "It's a symbiotic relationship," observes Billy. "It's like me and Kristin; she eats food from between my toes."

Eventually, we find a slight, stripy, eel-like fish of powerful significance. Kristin and David were going to use its name—khulli loach—for their group when half of the previous Muses line-up—Tanya Donnelly and Fred Abong—left last year to form Belly. Even Billy is surprised, though, to learn the fish's spooky alternative name

from the tank sign—the half-banded loach. Fate must've had a hand in this...

EIGHTEEN MONTHS ago, the Throwing Muses were an endangered species. Tanya had long decided to leave the band once the endless promotion of 'The Real Ramona' was over. Kristin, meanwhile, was fighting against the Bipolar Disorder that gave her auditory hallucinations and utterly incapacitating seizures, and fighting for the custody of her first child, Dylan. As if that wasn't enough, there was a slew of litigation—flung at them by their ex-manager, the taxman and the Musician's Union—to tackle.

"When the band broke up and we were being sued and Dylan was being taken away, I decided to leave the music business. I said to Dave, 'I'm not gonna take it

anymore, there's no reason for me to do this. I could be as productive as a farmer's wife or something.' It was a long decision process to come back to being in a band, and to come back to being in Throwing Muses, too."

That decision process reaches its logical, life-affirming conclusion next week with the release of Kristin's fifth full-length album, 'Red Heaven'. After 'Ramona's' relatively glossy pop sheen ("I was catatonic, pretty much," Kristin says of her lack of control on that record), 'Red Heaven' is a raw, aggressive, emphatically rock record. There's a dynamic directness we've rarely heard from the Muses before, a harder, more confident edge from the newly stripped-down power trio on the likes of 'Furious' and 'Backroad'. Hell, even the patron saint of unswervingly emotional—and LOUD!—threesomes, Bob Mould, crops up to duet with Kristin on the thunderous 'Dio'. Like all Muses records, 'Red Heaven' is funny, frightening and profoundly moving, but this time there's a new urgency, a real,

resurrected sense of how brilliant it is to be in a band . . . A born-again fervour, I guess.

"I'm really attached to the sound of a trio," enthuses Kristin, away from the animals in the relative tranquility of a Camden restaurant. "I think the material started to change before the band changed, and then I was frustrated. In the beginning, we were playing with counter-rhythms to the point that it sounded to everyone else like we were all playing different songs, and I really liked that. It could be really feminine: the structures were flying off in all different directions, it sounded a little crazy — I mean, that's what women are."

Do you think you conform more now?

"Apparently. I don't know why. I like the masculine foundation that we have now, and that's conforming, but I'm really attracted to the power of it. It could be that I'm a little more balanced now as a person. As anyone gets older they get a little more androgynous. I was only playing what came naturally, and now this comes naturally too. It could be that we've been scared into doing it, but I like the way it sounds."

Last time you spoke to *NME*, at the end of 1991, you said that music seemed much less important to you, that, with a much more stable family environment, you'd finally got your priorities right. And yet much of 'Red Heaven' still sounds incredibly involving — harrowing, even — and not at all like the work of someone detached.

"I was kinda removed from the music when all that bullshit was happening. And the home life that I live now is full of such scary and exhilarating dynamics. It's so loud for one. All that screaming and fighting, and it's with people you love, so it tears you apart. And then there's that love that you never had any idea that you'd experience. People living in the suburbs have more sex than anybody living on the street."

"But then again, my brain is always saying, 'Here I am, a housewife and a mother, what more important female job is here? And it's good, honest, *ack-breaking* labour and I'm not leeping and I'm not eating and I love more than anybody and I have *arder sex* than anybody has!' And *li* the while I'm thinking, 'I hate —ing laundry and I've gotta make *eanut* butter sandwiches!'"

So being a pop star's a release?

"Definitely. The record was just a respite from all the housework . . .

"People have been down on housework and housewives because of a big feminist idea, which seems counter-productive to me. I can't think of a more important job. Even when I try to deal with the music business *business*, I just think Ryder (her year-old second son) is so much more important than that."

FOOD ARRIVES. Kristin has a mozzarella salad because her husband's told her it doesn't taste like cheese; "I didn't eat anything when I met Billy, so he's been gradually introducing me to food."

"I was truly crazy. I did not have access to the faculties of my mind. I was incapable of straight thinking and I was also just living in fear of having a seizure in front of anyone and being in a trance. That's really hard to live with."

"I was never sure which came first; whether I was f—ed up by the process of songwriting, or whether I was f—ed up personally so I couldn't handle songwriting. I had to get to a point where I said, 'This can't use my physical body anymore, or I'll just die, and then I'll be some pathetic wretch that thought she was a poet.' I made a decision that this part of my brain was for songwriting and this part was for being a physical person."

"Before, the songs would not stop coming, no matter what I was doing. At four o'clock in the morning I'd have to go into the

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studio and write a song — they would just jerk me around that hard. It was almost a substance in my head that had to get out. And if I didn't write a song I would have a seizure — literally. It was just like being under the gun — no wonder they came out sounding depressed or at least angry."

How do you manage to write songs now?

"Now I can make a deal with them — 'OK, you can have a big space in my brain, but you have to sit there until it's time to come out.' I say, 'Well, the baby's gonna be about another half-hour, I think you can hold out until ten in the morning.'"

Can you stand back from all the old records and treat them just as songs, forget about all the shit that went into them?

"'Ramona' is the only one that bothers me that way because everything was so lousy then. I heard 'Hate My Way' (from the eponymous first album) the other day, and I'd always thought, 'Oh God, it's gonna sound like a 13-year-old, and I remember the way I used to sing it sounded like a squashed bug.' But it was fine, it was OK, it was just singing, and just screaming."

"I think I let myself do a little bit more that sounded crazy then because I didn't think anyone would ever find out I was crazy. I thought, 'I can be universal, I can look like your next-door-neighbour' . . . And then they found out I was crazy, so I felt a little embarrassed . . ."

KRISTIN HERSH may have her own muse under control, but she's still a tornado of productivity, with most of yet another album already written. And now she has her life under control, she's not afraid to tackle it directly rather than allusively in her songs. So 'Furious' and the stark, stunning 'Carnival Wig' deal with Billy's temper — "Which was

terrifying to me at the time" — and 'Summer St' stands as perhaps the prettiest, most uncomplicated and emotionally straightforward song she's ever written.

"There's this Tracey Ullman skit," she begins to explain, bafflingly, "where she plays this rock star whose big hit was 'I Slit My Wrists For You'. She quits her job for a while, gets married, has a baby, and the next scene is her in this lacy nightie with a little bow in her hair, holding the baby, saying, 'Duane, honey, I think it's time for me to start my music again.'"

"So she gets back onstage, still with this bow on her head, and she's booed off. She gets off, saying, 'They booed 'Duane Is Cute'!' And I thought, 'That's me! That's me!' I remember tearing out of the bedroom once going, 'I did it! I wrote 'Billy's Cute'! I can't live with myself! I'm a failure!' And that's what 'Summer St' is."

Other tracks are much more evocative than explicit, like the Ry Cooder-ish slide guitar fragment, 'Stroll' (played with a screwdriver).

"During that worst year, I was really obsessed with 'Paris, Texas' and with picking up Dylan and running away. And Billy was saying, 'We'll do anything you want. We can disappear, we can quit the music business, we can go on the run, we can go anywhere you want, you can make things happen.' And I'd never had that opinion, but Billy's from New York and he thinks he can make anything happen — and he does, so I guess he's right."

"We took Dylan to New Mexico — I had his father's permission — and I was playing 'Paris, Texas' constantly, just thinking, 'Oh, the desert is so big and open, you can run away . . .'"

NOW, OF course, there's nothing to run away from. Kristin Hersh is healthy, optimistic and in love with the Throwing Muses for the first time in years. All the pain, fragility and torment has, it seems, been channelled into 'Red Heaven' and kept out of her life. Where once she talked of Good Kristin and Evil Kristin, now there's Kristin The Songwriter and Kristin The Human Being, living in pretty relaxed harmony. For once, a tale of rock 'n' roll sickness and despair has a happy ending.

Is this the happiest you've ever been?

"Definitely. A lot of stuff I didn't expect to happen has happened. I didn't expect to ever get married. I didn't know what marriage was, and now I really *know*, and it really makes me happy in a million ways. And I didn't expect to have a kid on purpose ever. And I didn't expect to be this excited about the band ever again without being sick. I'm very, very happy, yeah."



Kristin does her Tracey Ullman impersonation