

KRISTIN HERSH is explaining the story behind Throwing Muses' new album 'Hunkpapa' (the name of Indian Chief Sitting Bull's tribe). Meanwhile, her three-year-old son, Dylan, who must have heard the story more times than he's had wet nappies, is about to throw himself off the piano. Caught in the nick of time.

"Last week he cut his hands on some glass," says a nervous Kristin. "His body was all covered in blood. It was horrible. There was no car, my boyfriend wasn't here, and I had to get him to the hospital."

Kristin remembers a similar scare in her childhood. "My brother jumped off a wall and was taken to the emergency room. Nobody left a note or anything. I came home to this empty house and everybody had gone! It was the worst experience of my life!"

These dreaded encounters with fear and isolation have fuelled 22-year-old Kristin's imagination for two full decades now. And for the last few years, they have found a home in the songs of Throwing Muses, the group Kristin formed with step-sister guitarist Tanya Donnelly, bassist Leslie Langston and drummer David Marcizo in the American musical hotbed of Boston in 1984. Being teenagers in a city that strictly enforces the national drinking age of 21 inevitably led to problems. "The clubs were quite happy to let us *play* because they could make money," explains Kristin, "but we were known around town for being under age, so we could never get in to see other groups!"

As a result, Throwing Muses developed their own sound, a brash attack of military drums and noisy guitars, eventually softened by purer and sweeter grooves. On top of that, Kristin would exhale angst-ridden lyrics in an often undecipherable voice that left unprepared gig-goers and American record companies stunned. It was the British indie 4AD that recognised the group's unique charm. Their exuberant, eponymous debut album of 1986 and 'Chains Changed' EP of the following spring catapulted them onto music press front covers, and for most of 1987, Throwing Muses were every hipsters tip for the top.

The group used this acclaim to secure a major record deal (staying loyal to 4AD in the UK) insisting upon total artistic control as the first clause in their contract — not wanting their music to be used simply as a money-making tool. Even so, the Muses were aware of the need to sell themselves. Their second LP, 'House Tornado', though critically lauded, neither gave them the launch they had hoped for in America nor took them beyond the cult status they were now used to in Britain.

'Hunkpapa', as a result, is more direct. The single 'Dizzy' is almost mainstream.

"It does kind of stick out, doesn't it?" laughs Kristin. "My father wrote the chorus — it's not my fault!"

Fans of their early, untamed abandon might be disappointed with this new, clinical approach, but Kristin is determined to move forward. "If you stay on the same level you appear to be a failure or a trend. We can maintain our identity *and* invite more people *into* the music."

KRISTIN HAS a very devoted audience, including many teenage girls who see this strong-minded young woman as a possible spokesperson for their own anxieties. She is besieged by mail from these would-be siblings, but she doesn't answer many of them. "I find things a lot easier to say in the music," she explains.



Kristin doesn't like explaining her songs. "Every time I sing or hear them I learn something completely different about them. Having studied philosophy, psychology and religion — and all the chic things you can't do anything with! — I'm just so impressed that people are porous enough to let the song happen to them. I wouldn't claim to be right about it."

Far from being straight-faced musos, the Muses are easily amused. Even Kristin's serious encounter with the surgeon's knife last year is told with all the aplomb of a shaggy dog story.

"When I was in England on tour last spring I found I couldn't see or hear properly on one side of my head. When we got back a doctor told me, 'You've got a tumour the size of a small fruit in your head'. I said, 'Small fruit! What do you mean? Oranges? Raisins?' He showed me an X-ray of my skull and I couldn't believe my head had room for something like that."

So what fruit was it?

"A plum. I only found out about it on the eve of our American tour. Our manager wanted us to cancel the tour so I could have it removed. But we'd hired the vehicles and road crew and all the dates were confirmed, and I felt silly cancelling the tour for something like a brain tumour!" Naturally.

"I was warned that after the operation I'd look a monster, so I wouldn't let the others come and see me, but David lives opposite the hospital, and they'd all meet up in his room to try and peer across the road at me."

THROWING MUSES enjoy themselves more than ever these days, though Kristin says she's missed out on some of her youth. "Just from having a baby, I went from being 18 to feeling like I should be 35. When Dylan was very young I felt that I should be a stable mother. But now he can survive, he's running around by himself, he's talking, and he's actually bringing out more of the child in me. I figure my wild party days are still to come!"

As Boston's Throwing Muses release a new LP, Tony Fletcher talks to lead Muse, Kristin, whose recovery from a brain tumour operation has coincided with a new, poppier lease of life for the band . . .

MUSES FOR THE MASSES

