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THROWING MUSES

Exclusive interview + album review



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IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, MARTIN ASTON TALKS TO KRISTEN HERSH ABOUT THE NEW THROWING MUSES ALBUM "HUNKPAPA", RELEASED LATER THIS MONTH ON 4AD, AND THE CRAFTS OF SONGWRITING AND HOUSEWORK.

Three intensive months "living in" the studio, and Kristen Hersh has perfected that pale, wan look just in time for Xmas. "Hunkpapa" is Throwing Muses third album (following 1986's eponymous debut and 1987's "House Tornado", not forgetting the mini-LP "The Fat Skier inbetween"). And while the rest of us would head off to the West Indies for a well deserved rest and recreation, or fly our relatives over for a family Xmas in Geneva, Kristen begins another round of...HOUSEWORK!!!

Yes, anyone who knows Throwing Muses will know that this young-slip-of-a-singer/songwriter also answers to the name 'Mummy' (the question is, are Throwing Muses *Doing It For The Kids?*), thanks to 2 and a 1/2 year old Dylan.

"This is the month I'm supposed to have off, except business calls until noon" Kristen explains down the wire at 10 in the morning, on a "not snowy, not rainy, not sunny" day in Newport, Rhode Island. Really - after two hours or so cleaning/feeding/wiping/cooking/washing (delete where applicable), Kristen has to then answer questions peering into one of the most dynamic, turbulent, goddamnit ESSENTIAL LIFE-AFFIRMING bands we've got. Housewife superstar, Kristen?

"Well, I tried to make muffins the other day but it didn't work. That's 'housewife' for me - *trying* to do something."

Aren't you getting this stereotyped 'rock 'n'roll housewife' image? The term only ever comes up when there's a Throwing Muses interview as if you're the only housewife in rock'n'roll.

"Seeing as I'm not really a housewife, it's not a good image. I think I use 'housewife' a lot more than I act one. But it's been a big thing lately and I like the word - 'house-wife'...but I don't know if I'm good at it or do it very much."

I read an interview of yours that said "House Tornado" referred to the "dynamics of domestic bliss"

"Yeah, except I couldn't work out where the bliss was coming from! I thought, wow, there's so much violence here and so many dynamics here... that the highs were so high and the lows are low - I found such noise and such emotional calling and movement in the place where all the

housewives I know are living, that I didn't find with street drugs...I couldn't believe that other bands were living in this messy city using street drugs instead of other drugs, and that was the only dynamic available to them. That was very interesting to me, that the other part of the world hadn't really been explained that way in this alternative genre we work in. It seems like it calls for different drugs and that the bounce against the walls is the same thing. It's not that housewives are all women and that they *drudge*. It's a cyclical career and it's real primal. I guess people forget about that because there are so many dishwashers around."

Could you explain a little bit more what you mean by that?

"Well, the alternative to the housewife's job seems to be business, which is an upward movement, never repeating itself - like science and technology, it's supposed to be always moving forward, whereas housework is cyclical, always repeating itself, you know, the work is never done, and anything backward is supposed to be drudgery. I like cyclical nature, because things tend to move in spirals, which is how I always learn - you're going back to something but on a different level."

Where does the title "Hunkpapa" come from?

"We've been with native American Indian art and stories while we were in the studio. It's something that I also studied in college. The single 'Dizzy' is about a Comanche girl...I'm not sure if I have any business writing about a Comanche girl, and I've never been able to make the band say, like, an idea of, like, *'hey, we shouldn't have slaughtered the Indians, I don't know whether you thought about this or not'*...I truly believe that but I can't make the music into a kind of pamphlet. There's not a whole lot of inspiration in it - the song isn't written the way I usually write songs. This one's like research! I had to look up where the canyon and the river were! But that was the idea, drawing on a lot of native American symbols and looking at a lot of paintings, and 'Hunkpapa' is the name of Sitting Bull's Sioux tribe. We thought it was the coolest word. It sounded like 'Sugardaddy'."

I thought "Hunkpapa" was possibly referring to parenthood, you know, responsibility/expectations et al....at least that's what I tried to piece together from the lyrics.

"I'm trying to piece it together too. I can't say, 'let's run a theme through this', but what was coming to us were these really primitive drawings and the words, which were the only things I felt good about echoing from native America. I can't just take their culture and reproduce it or say anything about it but I can echo their beautiful symbols because they aren't just pictures that

one person drew, they were archetypes all over their belongings. You can't take anything away from that."

Is "Dizzy" the only song to specifically point toward the native Red Indian culture?

"Well, it's been a theme that's been running through the *Americanness* and what that means is something that we've always been working on, and in particular white America versus native America, because the contrasts are fascinating. That's something that we just keep at bay, their cyclical culture and the way they worship everything they own, like it's a piece of God, and they put art all over it and put religion into absolutely everything they own, and they know where it all comes from, and meanwhile, like the housewives I was talking about before, they buy a blender and throw it away, they have no idea where it came from and who made it. It really means nothing except 'use' and then 'dis-use', and that's really sad. I think it's a very 'ying' thing in this 'yang' culture, which is something else that we studied."

One feeling that I had about "Hunkpapa" was that while the music was less fragmented and scattered than before, the lyrics were even more so - that it was harder to really pin down the sources.

"Well that's interesting! I had to work it out too. The stuff that I've picked up is that I seem to be writing about a lot of women and not just one piece of my brain anymore. The songs are coming out with *names* and stuff. A lot of the tracks seem to be dealing with whether sex empowers or endangers a woman, like that flirty woman in the song 'Take'. That was really scary for me because it was a really strange character to take. I had to make myself say *'drive real far'* to rhyme with *'car'*, like, really flat words! There were no extra meanings, just *'I would like to ride in your car!'* (laughs) and that was really interesting for me. I never write songs that way, and it's a really interesting kind of flirtiness too because it's scary because she says she's going to kill the guy. But she's also pathetic because she ends up saying, *'find the real me, I can't find it anymore'*, and that is very feminine. Femininity isn't always a great thing..."

Why not?

"There are a lot of things in there that scare me - that people have that flirtiness...using people."

Another quote of yours was "I've got songs The Bangles would die for but I try to stay away from the straightforward writing process as much as possible." "Hunkpapa" definitely sounds more 'straightforward' in its songwriting approach, without sacrificing the group's individuality or intensity.

"I meant 'straightforward' as in not using any



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inspiration and just using the songwriting craft, something I can just write and come back to two weeks later and still work it out, like a problem, because songwriting is just a series of problems that you have to solve. It's just that I like to base songwriting on all the inspirational crap (laughs) that comes out of your head, and then I have problems going around it, so if I leave out all the inspiration, it just comes back to the basic crap, so I did that on 'Dizzy' and 'Fall Down', which are pretty basic songwriting."

Why did you choose to be more straightforward this time around?

"Probably for a lot of reasons. It's getting difficult for people to listen to Throwing Muses and that's a very sad thing. I don't have anything against trying to make it easier for people to listen to - I can complain about it, that they only

was confusing, I would just say, 'this is not the pure element of the song', and just get rid of it. I've never done that before, I've always kept everything that had to do with the content flying in, but I'm just cutting down a few brain cells instead of a lot, so you still get a pure idea. But I agree with you, I'm not sure if it's a good thing or not."

Actually I thought "Dizzy" and "Fall Down" were two of the best songs.

"Oh good! But so much for inspiration!"

But you still sound more like Throwing Muses than ever, and less like anybody else.

"Great! That's good to hear. I'm glad it works out that way because I enjoy both songs and I enjoy

ten to it, that's bad. I don't want to be elitist but it definitely has a lot to do with the record company - if they can't push the album, then we might not have a contract. For us to say, 'well, no, we're just going to do it for ourselves and our friends and some of these white college kids will understand what we're doing!...' that's not good. But they wouldn't ever come out and say, 'hey, Kris, write a pop song', but they have difficulty pushing us to people who are used to listening to Whitney Houston, and that mainly comes down to a production style with us. They don't like the raw production that 'The Fat Skier' and 'House Tornado' called for - both records needed to be small and pared down to our instruments because they're based on strength and subtlety whereas this album is based on a more solid and spacious foundation and can take a big production, so I thought, 'it



Squatting muses.

want to listen to stuff they can play in the background...on the other hand, it's not a good thing to be seen trying to keep people out, so it kinda upsets me that I can't do what I want, which is keep letting the act of songwriting teach me, and get deeper and deeper into it, but if that alienates the average person, that's a bad scene."

Are you really thinking about the 'average person' nowadays? Isn't there that danger of watering down the original vision?

"Yup, there's definitely that danger, and that gives me a fright. But I'm trying to get a balance so that I can draw people into the integrity instead of just watering it down. What I was doing was taking elements out - if something

doing them. Songwriting as a craft is a great thing, and these are not really like dreamlike songs."

Did Sire (Throwing Muses' major record label in America) put any pressure on the group to be more accessible?

"Yeah, pretty much. They know what they're saying when they say that, so the whole time they're going, 'don't take this as anything to do with your creativity'...they think I'm totally out of my head for one. They don't think I could ever listen to that, but they can't help it. They can't make asinine DJ's play anything but late seventies stuff, y'know. When it comes down to the average person again, not being able to lis-

sounds good, I can make it sound good to me, and I can make it sound good to them...' I didn't shy away from reverb and I brought in a horn section and a violinist and it sounds OK, it holds up. We cut our parts down, cut them in half and half again and half again so that you weren't listening to a lot of confusing counter-melodies. We made a lot of creative and production decisions that said, 'I'll do this if it'll draw people in - even if it's not my personal choice', because that didn't mean it's not the best one."

Sire didn't even put out "The Fat Skier" in Europe, did they?

"Europe is real bad with this label. Warners (Sire's parent company) can put out anything, so they put out Madonna and Prince rather than



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Throwing Muses. When we came over to tour last year, 'House Tornado' wasn't out either. It was insane. Sire had to make them put it out. It was really silly, They didn't know what was going on as far as the underground scene is concerned because they don't have to. I wish 4AD could work in Europe. They know what's going on there, and I think we're important enough to them that they would get it done. I don't deal with any of the European Sire/WEA people, I deal with the people here in the USA who are good and try to get their job done and they do care about good music, but their job won't let them care about good music, and that's my only limitation, except for the life of me, I can't figure out what a damn corporation is...just a million people and they don't seem to know what's going on. They're all in these little offices with their own memos. It's really confusing to me. Warner Brothers own half the world and I'm trying to get my little memos in there. Everyone says something different. At 4AD, you talk to one person and they lean over the desk and ask the other person if it's true."

When Throwing Muses toured here last, it must have been tough to play alongside The Pixies - it was their first time in the UK on the back of great critical reaction, plus they are a more instant, full-frontal sensation.

"That was true, but we love The Pixies so much that touring with them becomes this 'music high'. It's true that having this crash of The Pixies, it's hard to get down and listen to subtleties - people want things to crash more and more and more, and that was a problem. But they're our best friends and we love that band. It's such a great high to be able to see the band that you love before you play. You don't have to remind yourself what music is when you're on stage."

You couldn't call on the 'shock-of-the-new' anymore though, which in media terms, elevates a band...

"I knew that was going to happen. I want great music to save the world, and it's fine with me if it's The Pixies. I love it that people can grab onto it. When we first saw The Pixies, they opened for us in Boston which was one of their very first shows, and since then we've been listening to them almost daily. It's a high that's nice and fast and I hope it lasts a long time for them. Their new stuff is real great too. It is frustrating because that's another very young thing, to crash, real fast, and it's hard to go, 'OK, now, we'll work a little harder with a little more carefulness'. People start to think, 'well, that's not fair'...it is fun for us but it's hard work too."

Although you must find so much pop music offensive, do you have a weakness for pop?

"Yes, pop music can still be so great. It's a simple format and you aren't going to pop too many surprises on people when they're listening - if it works on people, if you can get something that's truly good that works, maybe that's what we should, all of us musicians, be looking for."

Maybe I shouldn't be cutting them down - maybe they are using the right format. It's just that they don't have the right substance."

Do you want to be instantly appealing? To be understood?

"I would like it to be instantly accepted. I hate it that people go, 'OUCH!' when they hear us and think it's not worth it. That's my greatest fear, that if you don't grab them in that instant, you're not going to hold them for the next 20 years, even if your music lasts for that time. I don't want to give up the fact that it will last more than an instant high, but it's too bad that we're alienating some people."

But surely music like Throwing Muses that derives part of its inspiration and potency on the alienation that exists in our culture must surely pass on part of that alienation?

"But I feel like I wasn't doing my job, I guess."

But your job isn't to sift through the problems and smooth them out - to take off the jagged edges...

"But it's to present them in a way that people can then dip them into their heads, and if they're just saying, 'no, I'm not going to take that into my head', then I'm not getting anywhere."

But that's like saying that music is for other people first and foremost, and not for yourselves.

"I think that if I wrote a song and nobody heard it...I can't write songs just for me, they just don't happen that way. They might come from a piece of my brain but it's a piece that's closest to my humanity, and for some reason, I feel like I'm setting out something that somebody else has put in my head, and if I played it in a forest, (laughs), and there was nobody there, I guess I'd feel like it didn't happen."

On "Mania", you sing, "move your hips". Are you asking people to dance?

"Pretty much! It's funny - the song kind of stops and I say, 'put your hands up, put them on your head', and at the Town & Country Club show in London last year, the audience kinda looked around and slowly the first three rows put their hands on their heads. It was really cute! I never thought that anybody would do that. When 'Mania' gets so heavy that you can't keep it inside your head, you make it into a dance. That's the best thing I could tell anyone."

What about Tanya? (Kristen's half-sister, who contributes "Angel" and the extraordinary "Dragonhead" to "Hunkpapa"). "Dragonhead" reminds me of your own "Soul Soldier" (from the debut album).

"I'm not sure she's changed all that much, when I think about her other stuff like 'Green' and 'Reel'. She hasn't really written things that bounce around or are as schizoid as mine, and she was convinced by just about everyone that 'Dragonhead' is the wierdest thing ever to hit the face of records, like, 'is it two songs or one - are we recording "Dragonhead One" or "Dragonhead Two"? (laughs)...so she thinks she's real wild and wacky right now, but I love what she's done. She's brought a lot of intensity

to the band in the past year, plus her playing has got real good, and she's better at simplifying than I am. I'm like, 'play it all, real fast, get as many notes in as you can in there', and she's good at saying, 'this is the one that should be steady' and 'this is the one we should strip away', and her songwriting is getting that way too."

Are the songs still pouring out?

"Yes, I do have that feeling....that I wonder how far you can go without using scary emotions, or really forceful ones. It frightens me because I don't want to get stuck in that, but I also don't want to write little dippy songs."

If your songs are less jagged and turbulent, could it also mean things in your life reflect that?

"(laughs) I no longer think that I'm going stop being crazy...I think I have to face that."

Maybe Throwing Muses can call their 'Greatest Hits' album "Still Crazy After All These Years."

"Wouldn't that be great! 'Still MANIC After All These Years!'"

How much time do you get to listen to new music, or even old music, what with all the housework and recording and songcrafting...

"I listen to music in the car on the way to swimming, and when I go for walks at night. But most of my time at the moment is taken up talking business on the phone, and then cramming in writing and practising."

What are you listening to at the moment?

"The Pixies' new stuff...Volcano Suns, Patsy Cline, Patti Smith, X, the new Dinosaur Jnr and the new Sonic Youth...I'm listening to a lot of jazz and blues on the radio...personal jazz, Billie Holliday...also Roy Orbison, the little bizarre twists in his songs are so amazing."

OK, just to finish with - what did you get for Xmas?

"A lot of toys via Dylan - a firetruck, some Playdough and some fingerpaint. Parents tend to fade away into the background."

Are you saying that you didn't get anything?

"I can't remember. Ummmmmm...I got a wok."

The housewife's choice, obviously. One last question - did you have a Xmas tree and if so, what decorations did you put on it?

"We couldn't get a Xmas tree, so we got a diseased mountain laurel instead. We put some flashing lights round it that make me nauseous every time I look at it. We also put a little panda on the top with an arm ripped off that someone had found in the street, and eyes that look at you everywhere you go. A real sad piece that needed to be at the top of something."

A happy ending then, just like "Hunkpapa".

"Yeah, I'm very happy with the album. I think we're still trying to achieve a balance, and this is as close as we've come."