



TOMORROW
Rosemary Mac Cabe adds some sparkle to your winter wardrobe in *Style* **SMALL PRINTS**



Then Tori Amos composed herself



TONY CLAYTON-LEA

As a child at the Peabody Conservatory, it was ingrained in Tori Amos that female composers didn't have the same opportunities as men. So when a one-in-a-billion chance came her way, she couldn't resist . . .

SHE IS, as they say, a different kettle of fish, altogether. For some, American singer/songwriter/performer Tori Amos is many things: a firebrand of individualism, a torchbearer for idiosyncrasy, a beacon of light for those wavering between independency and soul-selling.

To others, she is the oddest side of odd: the woman breast feeding a piglet on the cover of her third solo album, *Boys for Pele*; the woman who unabashedly engages with songs that explicitly reference events from her life (rape, religion, sexual awakening, marriage, miscarriage, gender issues) as well as topics not usually covered by a female pop star with a piano (misogyny, homophobia, masochism and . . . beekeeping as a source of female empowerment).

Amos is at it again, but this time her new record is another utterly different kettle of fish. Released on the classical label Deutsche Grammophon, *Night of Hunters* is a concept album comprising a 21st-century song cycle inspired by classical music themes.

Autobiographically set in a rambling Georgian house on the outskirts of Kinsale, Co Cork, any resemblance to Amos's house there is quite likely deliberate: "It's a safe house. I flee situations, experiences and people to get there; it protects me, and helps me reform myself." The record's themes touch on mythology, conflicts, tolerances and resolutions within marriage, and the dual nature of what she refers to as "the hunter" and "the hunted". It is, all told, an incredibly ambitious piece of work by a virtuosic artist at the height of her narrative and musical powers. It's also a bit mystifying, outdoing Kate Bush and leaping over Joanna Newsom in terms of theme, execution, quirk and charm.

Here, in the baroque, brothelesque basement of a London hotel, Amos is smaller than you might think, smarter than smart, a 48-year-old mixture of petite, pithy and panache.

Deutsche Grammophon approached her, she starts: "They have a doctor of musicology, and he made a point of seeing some of my live shows. Along the way, he asked me how I felt about 21st-century song cycles based on classical themes. I said: Tall order, easy to get wrong, but too tempting to say no to."

It was also a challenge that Amos, a former child prodigy, couldn't resist; by the age of five she was composing instrumental piano pieces, and a short time later she won a full scholarship to the Preparatory division of the Peabody Conservatory of Music at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore. By the age of 11, the scholarship was rescinded; her precocious interest in



pop and rock, and her dislike of reading sheet music, spelling the end of her classical training. "They said, 'What do you want to be?' and I said, 'I want to be a composer.' They said, 'A female composer? Be a concert pianist; you have a chance, maybe one in a billion. Unless, of course, you want to go to the pop world.' So I thought, one in a billion? I'll take those odds one day."

Presented with the opportunity of the song cycle, Amos agreed to forge ahead, albeit with certain conditions: she needed the tools with which to work, and they had to supply her with all the music. Deutsche Grammophon's executive producer, Dr Alexander Bühr, then provided her with extensive biographical details on some of the great composers of the past 400 years, as well as recordings. Amos then applied "a very studied devotion, and a delicate ruthlessness" to poring over the works of, among others, Schubert, Debussy, Satie, Bach, Chopin, Granados, Mussorgsky and Schumann. Was she familiar with all of the composers?

"No, but that was okay," she says. "I listened and my ears told me what I needed to know; everyone got a fair shake."

Through a typically audacious blend of fear-

lessness and melody, *Night of Hunters* works as much as a song cycle as a highly intelligent pop album (in other words, you don't have to have an in-depth knowledge of classical music to, you know, dig it). It arrives at a point where it can sit comfortably alongside pop music's more off-beat offerings; it is, in effect, a real work of intensely personal musical creativity by a bona fide artist.

"The real danger would be to have done a prog rock/classical hybrid," Amos says, "which I think would have diluted the work. I would love if people got the background, because if you are taking on board a classical form, like a song cycle, it's got to work as a piece of sonic architecture; it has to have a certain amount of plinths in order to make it work, so that it's not just an exercise in merging styles. What I'd hoped was to walk a very thin tightrope with all that's connected with the record."

But doesn't she walk a thin line most, if not all of the time? "Yes, well, I try things out, but I was trained at the Peabody Conservatory and, for all the slagging they get, the upside to it is that some things were ingrained, and one was that female composers didn't really have the same opportunities as men. So something like

this is just irresistible."

It's 20 years since *Little Earthquakes*, her debut album, was released, and from then to now, one imagines, she has been dragged through the hedgerows and back again. "There have been tumultuous times," she says, "because in creating there has been, can be, a delicious, excruciating process in composing."

"It's a very lonely experience – it isn't like jamming with people – and you push yourself sometimes to feel things, in a way as a writer, that perhaps other people would want to deny or conclude too quickly. Instead I say, this happened, so let's go back into it and investigate. You need to go back in because you really need to find out how you feel about it. No sentiment, either – get out of that frame of mind."

Where does she see herself, in terms of pop music? Does she view what she does as being in competition with the likes of Lady Gaga or Katy Perry, for example? "Oh, no! They're great at what they do. I could be Gaga's mom, I suppose, but being where they're at, commercially, is not a good place to be. As for where I dwell in pop culture, well, I don't think about it, to be honest. I reckon it's more fun to keep creating, to be a creative force."

'I'd like to see myself known as a composer': Tori Amos on carving out a niche for herself

Tori Amos by year

- **Born** in Newton, North Carolina, August 22nd, 1963
- **Age five** Started to compose instrumental pieces on piano, winning a full scholarship to the Preparatory division of the Peabody Conservatory of Music
- **Age 11** Peabody scholarship discontinued because of reluctance to read from sheet music and an increasing interest in rock and pop music
- **Age 14** Began playing in piano bars, chaperoned by her father, Reverend Edison Amos
- **Age 21** Following several years doing the rounds of the piano-bar circuit in the DC area, moved to Los Angeles to pursue her music career
- **Age 25** Releases the debut album *Y Kant Tori Read* from her band of the same name; it has long been out of circulation, with no sign of it being reissued
- **Age 27** Releases *Little Earthquakes*; sets out her stall with songs about sexual assault, identity crises, religion and sexual awakening
- **Age 33** Causes something of a fuss with the album cover of *Boys for Pete*, which depicts her breast feeding a piglet
- **Age 38**: One year after her daughter, Natasha, is born, releases the concept covers album *Strange Little Girls*, which features songs about women written by men (including 10CC's *I'm Not in Love*, Eminem's *97 Bonnie and Clyde*, and Slayer's *Raining Blood*) yet sung from a female perspective
- **Age 39** Concept album *Scarlet's Walk* explores topics such as pornography, misogyny, homophobia, masochism and Native American history
- **Age 45** *Comic Book Tattoo: Narrative Art Inspired by the Lyrics and Music of Tori Amos*, edited by Rantz Hoseley, wins the 2009 Eisner Award
- **Age 48** Releases *Night of Hunters*, a song cycle featuring variations on a theme, paying tribute to classical music composers such as Schubert, Bach, Satie, Debussy and Chopin

"I'd like to see myself known as a composer, and I think my work will move more into that. I'm not sure where it's all going, but I'd like to think I'm carving my own niche for what feels right at the time."

Does she agree that she has one of the most distinctive back catalogues of the past 20 years? "There's a lot there, for sure," she says, "but I own my own publishing and copyright, and I've had that for over 20 years now. I remember all kinds of people would approach my father, who has looked after that side of things for me for a long time, and they wanted me to sign away my publishing and copyright for very little and for a long time. But my father said, 'If so many people want my copyright why shouldn't we want it, too?' I have to thank him, every day, for the business nous to question that. So it's all about the catalogue: to do good work with it, build on it, find different perspectives with it."

Continually altering perspectives have maintained Amos's enriching creative output over the past two decades. We'll see her and her string quartet embrace her ever-changing moods and music when she arrives in Dublin next week. "If you start repeating yourself," she says, amid the burgundy chintz and ornate curlicues of the hotel's dungeon, "then it's the beginning of the end." Which is, she muses, a different realm altogether, a place where what she terms "important work" isn't undertaken anymore.

"It becomes a kind of clinging on to a career maintenance, instead of carving out new territory. But I'm Tori Amos, so I'm drawn to carving out new territory pretty much all the time."

Night of Hunters is on Deutsche Grammophon. Tori Amos performs in the Waterfront, Belfast, tonight, and in the Grand Canal Theatre, Dublin, tomorrow

“If you start repeating yourself then it's the beginning of the end. But I'm Tori Amos, so I'm drawn to carving out new territory pretty much all the time

'What are you on about, gloopy? It was deadly. That's what it was'

In the final week of our Tiny Plays competition, we'll print a new play every day by leading writers. Today, comedian **Ardal O'Hanlon** presents 'White Food'

The scene is the lounge of a well-run hotel in a border town on a Sunday morning. Off-stage, a Sunday morning crooner sings Ode to Billie Joe, while playing his plinky keyboard.

Frank, a 30-year-old native with metropolitan flourishes, sits hungover on a banquette. There is an overnight bag on the floor beside him and an unfinished pint on the table. He is joined by his 33-year-old brother, Seamus, dressed as a referee, two fresh pints in his hands.

Seamus That was some night. (Drinks)
Frank Oh.
Seamus Ha?
Frank Oh-hoh.
Seamus Wasn't it though?
Frank Yeah.
Seamus A deadly night. Am I right?
Frank I should be off, Seamus.
Seamus Did you see mammy's face?
Frank I did.
Seamus Ha?
Frank Oh now.
Seamus Do you know what your problem is?
Frank No.
Seamus You're aloof. (Drinks) Did you know that?
Frank (Drinks)
Seamus No offence, Frank. You don't join in. (He suddenly bursts into song along with the off-stage crooner) "... From Choctaw ridge, today Billie Joe McAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge." (Abruptly) You have no sense of . . . community. (Beat) Some spread!
Frank Yeah...
Seamus A credit to all concerned. Ha? (Drinks)

Frank Well...
Seamus Well what?
Frank It was a bit . . .
Seamus A bit what?
Frank A bit . . . you know . . .
Seamus Ha?
Frank Gloopy! The food. A bit on the gloopy side.
Seamus What are you on about, Frank? Gloopy? Ha? What the fuck are you on about? It was deadly. That's what it was.
Frank Sorry.
Seamus Make no mistake about that, whatsoever. A deadly spread. Is what it was. (Drinks)
Frank It's just.
Seamus Ha? (Looks at his watch)
Frank It was all . . . white.
Seamus It was a buffet, Frank.
Frank The potato salad was white.
Seamus So what?
Frank The coleslaw? What colour was that?
Seamus White. Of course. Fair play to it.
Frank The apple and celery? The coronation chicken?
Seamus Stop. Stop.
Frank All white.
Seamus You're whetting me appetite. I'm salivating.
Frank Why? (Drinks)



Seamus It went down well. That's the main thing.
Frank Even the ham was white.
Seamus (Stands up, angry) That was turkey. In fairness, Frank. That was fucking turkey (slams table), so it was. No need to be so contrary. So up your own hole. So aloof. Your whole fucking life. (Sits down again)

Frank I'm sorry.
Seamus It was mammy's birthday.
Frank Exactly.
Seamus Her 80th fucking birthday. Did you see her fucking face? Did you? It wouldn't matter if the food was blue. The important thing is everyone was there. Including, as we all know,

you. The apple, and celery, of her fucking eye. (Drinks)
Frank I'm not saying.
Seamus (Sits) Some crowd all the same. Ha?
Frank It was.
Seamus Wasn't it? Were you talking to Hawkeye?
Frank I was.
Seamus And Bullets?
Frank Yeah.
Seamus And Travis?
Frank Just to say hello.
Seamus Well boys. What's cooking? Travis! Ha? What's cooking? (beat) And the Flynn girl? (Looks at him meaningfully)
Frank (Drinks)
Seamus Yeah. Ha? I never seen you so animated. The pair of you.
Frank Well.
Seamus You missed the cutting of the cake anyway.
Frank Did I?
Seamus Mammy's cake.
Frank My fucking white cake.
Frank We went out for a smoke. (Drinks)
Seamus All I'm saying is.
Frank Sure.
Seamus Right? That's all I'm saying. (He stands up, drains pint)

Think you can write a Tiny Play?
■ You have until Friday, November 11th to enter the Tiny Plays for Ireland competition and have your play staged by Fishamble The New Play Company. E-mail a play of no more than 600 words to fishambletinyplays@irishtimes.com. Fishamble will choose the winners and pay each selected writer a fee of €250. They will work with the writer on the development of the commissioned plays and produce them from March 15th to 21st, Project Arts Centre, Dublin.

Great to see you, Frank. (Frank stands. They hug)
Frank You too, Seamus.
Seamus Last time I refed a match in Tydavnet, I sent five men off, the match was abandoned, and I was locked in the boot of a car for over two hours.
Frank (Laughs)
Seamus (Serious) No laughing matter, Frank. The Clontibret centre-half-back is in a coma ever since.
Frank Jesus.
Seamus Above in Drogheda. So he is. Drooling. Surrounded by friends and family.

Frank Ha?
Seamus And a fiddler from Dromiskin who comes of a Sunday to play a few jigs and reels by the bed. She's a married woman.
Frank For fuck's sake, Seamus.
Seamus With two children.
Frank Jesus Christ.
Seamus That's all I'm saying. (Suddenly bursts into song again) "... and she and Billie Joe were throwing something off the Tallahatchie Bridge. . ."
Seamus goes off singing Ode to Billie Joe. Frank stays put. Takes a very long drink. Lights out.