

Amy Rigby

YOU'RE SEVERAL MAJOR MILESTONES (marriage? divorce?) past your 20s. You have a serious job that impresses your parents (maybe you like it, maybe not). You have kids, so evenings are homework and baths and packing lunches for tomorrow. Weekends are basketball practice and getting the car washed and making sure your pumps for Monday's office meeting aren't too badly scuffed. It's all so ... grownup.

But, you know, every time you're planted in the kitchen doing the dishes and happen to catch the first strains of "Precious," or something off *Chronic Town*, or anything by the Sex Pistols, then boom – you're back at Cantrell's or CBGB or the Ratt, and the music's so loud you can feel it pounding in your chest and you're soaked in beer and your friends are smashing each other in the pit, and it all feels like it'll never end. Was it all that long ago? Because, you know, you can just reach back and touch it ...

You're a mod housewife. And Amy Rigby knows your world because she lives it, too.

A mod housewife. "A woman being dragged kicking and screaming into adulthood ... Stuck in the netherworld between bohemia and suburbia, between set lists and shopping lists You've probably seen her at the supermarket with her kid in a grocery cart, headphones blasting *Elastica* while she debates the merits of low fat granola bars versus *Snackwells* ..." That's how Rigby describes us – and herself.

Rigby is a revelation for a generation starved for something that speaks to the life we're living now. Is there any other songwriter for the enormous contingent of women – and men – who lived in their youth for music and nothing else (because nothing else competed for their attention), and who now find themselves balancing family and work with the neglected but integral part of themselves that never abandoned the heady romance of playing it LOUD?

There are millions of us out there, and Amy is our voice.

Witty Voice for Middle-Aged Misfits

By Elaine McArdle

In her three solo albums – *Diary of a Mod Housewife* (1996), *Middlence* (1998) and last year's *The Sugar Tree* – Rigby paints a witty, smart tableaux of life as it continues to evolve for those middle-aged (that's what they call us), single parents who are groping their way through love and commitment and sexuality while trying to ensure the kids make the school bus on time.

Critics are wild about Rigby. They lavish praise on her witty lyrics, piercing and poignant insights, and eclectic musical style that ranges from pop to punk to country. And anyone who's heard her play live – whether in a solo acoustic set or when she rocks out with her band, which includes her boyfriend, drummer Paul Griffith – is an instant convert. She's just so ... real. She's wry and self-effacing and vulnerable and a bit distracted by competing interests. She's just like us.

Misfits. That's what she calls her fans.

"I do think they're misfits," she says, with a twinkling laugh that peppers her conversation. "The misfits that might not appear to be misfits. On the surface they look normal. I guess I kind of feel like that's me, too. I can kind of blend in just about anywhere. That's how I feel about my fans. You might not be able to pick them all out in a crowd. I think there's a lot of those people out there."



Pittsburgh native Rigby moved to New York in 1976 to attend art school and quickly fell under the spell of the nascent punk world, witnessing live the energy of the Ramones and Patti Smith and the English wave of the Buzzcocks and the Jam, and then the great female bands, of which her favorites include the Slits and the Raincoats. She and her brother and some friends started a cowboy punk band called the Last Roundup that landed a recording contract with Rounder Records. And Rigby became a songwriter.

"I found I'd been listening to a lot of early country music. It inspired me to write songs. Punk music never inspired me to write. With country songs, it was the little stories they tell. I was really into Flannery O'Connor and Raymond Carver stories. I liked all that, and somehow the country song form really seemed like something I could work with."

Then Rigby, married to dB's founding member Will Rigby, got pregnant with her daughter Hazel, now 12. The Last Roundup fell apart, she formed the Shams with two friends, and they began recording and touring with her baby daughter in tow.

"Music was always the secondary focus for us. I think having fun was the main objective," she says. The band opened for the Indigo Girls and Urge Overkill, among

others. "Omigosh, we had fun. We had a lot of great opportunities handed to us, a lot of great opening slots, a lot of nice things said about us and good will toward us. I think it was always obvious when we played that our friendship and our fun was kind of primary. We didn't take any of it very seriously."

It sounds ideal. "In a way, it wasn't," she says. "Because I had a child. I felt really self-indulgent going out on this joyride with my friends. It got to the point where it wasn't practical to bring my daughter along. It started to be really hard. It started to feel like I was too old to be doing this, that something had to pay off at that point or I couldn't justify it."

Rigby kept writing, though, and recorded her solo albums for Koch Records. She also went through a divorce, and two years ago she moved to Nashville, where she hopes that through a recent publishing contract she landed that a major star will record one of her songs and she'll get the mainstream recognition she deserves. She's also writing more songs, although she admits it's a new challenge trying to describe the current life phase she's experiencing: a happy relationship. Bad breakups lend themselves so much easier to words, she says.

In the meantime, she's writing a book, updating her Web site (amyrigby.com) and touring a lot; mainly small clubs, usually as the opening act. A recent show in Peterborough, N.H., was a typical Rigby hoot – she bantered back and forth with the folk-music aficionados there to see the main act, Richard Shindell, and who seemed taken aback by this cheery woman in pigtails, tight jeans and halter top, especially when she launched into an explanation of the difference between penis envy (from which she does not suffer) versus coveting "that other part of male genitalia, well, you know, oh, I'll just say it in song."

My friends and I were delighted as four people in front of us stood up and marched out in a huff as Rigby launched into "Balls," a song off her newest album that states:

*You've gotta lot of nerve to be calling here
but I love your nerve
You've got a lot of gall, you don't even care
about me at all
You've got a lot of balls, you don't even care,
Wish I could grow a pair*

Pissing grownups off. It was great. For a brief, glorious moment, we were all back at Cantrell's. ☺