

Musing Aloud



STEVE GULLICK

Throwing Muses: David Narcizo,
Kristin Hersh and Bernard Georges

By Elaine McArdle

'Music has ruled my life since 14,' Kristin Hersh says, 'but the children seem to be the reason I'm here.'

FOURTEEN YEARS AGO, Kristin Hersh – true music original, and creative genius behind Throwing Muses, one of alt-rock's most influential bands – endured the second-worst trauma any parent can imagine. After a protracted court battle, she lost custody of her son, Dylan, then 3, an ordeal from which has not recovered.

"I would think the worst crime in the world is separating a child from his mother," says Hersh, a notoriously intense songwriter who counts motherhood as the best thing that ever happened to her – or her music. The pain of losing her son is raw, even today, and very apparent in her voice. "I missed raising one of my children. How horrible!" she says.

Currently living in Palm Springs, Calif., Hersh takes every chance to visit Dylan, now 17. This winter, she hauled her three younger sons – ages 11, 6 and six months – to Newport, R.I., where Dylan lives with his father. Hersh wanted to spend time with her eldest before launching a brief tour to support her new solo album, *The Grotto*, released March 4 simultaneously with *Throwing Muses*, the band's first album in seven years. Though the visit to her old haunts (she grew up in Rhode Island) also let her catch up with friends, the experience was painful.

"I went to a friend's house this morning. I wanted to show her the new baby," says Hersh, who named *The Grotto* after the neighborhood in Providence, R.I., where she lived while recording it. "And I wanted to walk him home in the snow. He looked so much like Dylan when he was baby. I was teenager then, and I was out with him all the time. I was always out, the two of us."

As she crunched through the snow with her new son, "I started sobbing and couldn't stop, because I'll never get used to the idea that these babies aren't going to be taken away." (Dylan's father portrayed Hersh as a neglectful mother who put her music first – a notion that she says couldn't be further from the truth. "I'm the cleanest-living person. I'm healthy, such a good mother to him." But her offbeat career worked against her. "If I'd been waitress, I'd have had a better chance," she laments.)

Because of that terrible separation from her first-born, Hersh is never far from her three younger sons, home schooling them and bringing them with her on tour. "I think that's why they don't go to school or daycare, because I don't think the world is safe for children, in my experience. We've gone the *Mosquito Coast* way. My husband drives the bus, and from the sound check on, they're part of the show. Some people act like we're abusing them, but they love it."

Dylan's friends think it's cool his mother is a musician with six critically acclaimed solo albums in addition to her work with Throwing Muses. But the younger boys don't see much evidence of her artistic side. "As far as they're concerned, I'm a fulltime mother," says Hersh. "I do most of my rehearsing in my head. I practice while I'm rocking the baby. I heard about a pianist in jail who practiced in his head. He was in jail for 10 years, and when he came out, he was as well rehearsed as when went in. So I thought, 'I can do that.'"

Hersh laughs, with a deep, fulfilled sound, as the baby in her lap coos along. She says she's blessed for a life that so tightly integrates her work and family. Still, there are sacrifices. "I miss music," she says. "I wake up every day and think it would be really fun to play guitar. On the other hand, I feel really lucky." After all, her sons have grounded this famously introspective woman, who started Throwing Muses when she was a disaffected schoolgirl of 14.

"I like what they do to my career," says Hersh. "I like what they've done to my perspective. As soon as I had the first one, I realized, I am not the story, my comfort and my happiness are not the issue, it's all for him. I learned that anew each time."

"It's so liberating," she adds. "You don't have the weight of, 'What does it mean to be human?'"

Hersh sees that kind of endless self-absorption as unhealthy. "It doesn't take you anywhere good, it doesn't do anyone any good. All those people stuck on their lousy childhoods! It's like, 'What good is a lousy childhood?' It's so you can make another child's life better. It's *not* so you can grow up to bitch and whine. That could not possibly be the plan!"

The selfless love of motherhood, she says, "is a good perspective to write songs from. To realize that if I'm going to make these entities as beautiful and strong as they can be, all I have to do is shut up, and feed them and let them grow. I don't pretend for a minute to have any control over who they are. I want to see what they're really like. They're so incredible. The songs are the same way. If I use them as my bitch-and-whine sessions, sure, it might be cathartic for a minute, but it would be boring in a few months, and it wouldn't speak to anyone but me. Whereas if I shut up, and let the songs say what they want to say, they become enchanting to me. My songs become like people with potential. When an interesting person walks in the room, you never know what you're going to learn from them, and that's what I've learned from my children."

Both the acoustic *The Grotto* and the electric *Throwing Muses* were recorded quickly – because of the high cost of studio time – and therein lies their compelling rawness. *Throwing Muses*, which the band sees as perhaps the zenith of its career, was recorded in just three weekends, since drummer David Narcizo and bassist Bernard Georges resorted to day jobs when the band split up in 1997 for lack of finances. "I think we should have been making records like that all along," says Hersh. "There were very few overdubs, and no heavy-handed mixing."

Throwing Muses also marks the return on backing vocals of original band member Tanya Donnelly, Hersh's step-sister, who left in the early '90s to form Belly. Hersh wrote the songs and plays all guitars on both albums.

"All the songs on the CD ... the way they choose my experience is more like they pick among my life pictures and organize them in such a way that their point is made," says Hersh. "This may be talking in a groovy way. I know songs aren't people, but whatever they are, they're very smart about using my experience to make their own point. I honestly don't know these life experiences 'til I hear them in a song."

Like a novelist who has no control over her characters? "Right," says Hersh. "I think it's similar. I'll be playing a song live, and oohh!" She laughs again. "By that time, I should have heard the song hundreds of times, but they have a potential to teach indefinitely. I think those are the songs that can speak to other people as well. They work as a scrim for you to see your life pictures fall in place."

Hersh's authenticity and willingness to share herself are perhaps the qualities fans most appreciate. As the *New York Times* wrote: "Like the lost mountain bards she admires, Ms. Hersh recognizes terror and revelation as common human experiences. Her openness to those hazardous perceptions is the essence of her lasting gift."

"For years, people seemed to think – some did – that I was being willfully kooky because I wasn't writing songs the way they teach you in the Lionel Richie songwriting course," says Hersh. "But that's the conscious mechanism. If what you want is to strip away anything conscious, wouldn't you want to hear the songs I'd write if I'd never heard the radio? All these people imitating the Beatles – how are you going to get honesty if you're imitating?"

What about pressure to conform to a commercial sound? "I had Seymour Stein at Sire Records tell me I was sounding too much like Kristin Hersh, and could I not do that in the future?" Another laugh.

And she learned her lesson. The Muse's 1988 album, *House Tornado*, was "this gnarly mass of unconscious," she says, so in the next album, *Hunkpapa*, they went the whole music-video, big-

production route. "We tried to produce it so people didn't think we were weird. The single ['Dizzy'] was really inane. We were trying to sell out and remain us at the same time, and we didn't succeed at either. Ever since then, I've taken it as life lesson, that's why you don't play this game."

And still don't. "We were just invited by *Jane* magazine to do a fashion thing," Hersh says. "They promised to promote the shit out of our record. I thought, 'Uhhh, here we go again.' My husband said, 'This is not what you're about. Why should we tell women to pay attention to our music, but only if we can paint your face?' This is where we can walk our walk. It'd be great to have hundreds of young women buy our record and maybe pay for our kids

to go to college, but in my experience, it doesn't work. I wasn't made for it. You can't convince people who only listen to Top 40 to listen to this.

"If I got a stylist and wrote a stupid song and had millions of promotional dollars put behind me to work the radio and Spin and MTV, I still think I wouldn't sell millions of records, because they're not *that* stupid! They know they don't like it when they hear it."

Plus, Hersh knows that her fans rely on her refusal to budge from her convictions. "Right now, I owe my career to the fans only. I don't think it's to the record companies or even the press, although I get good press. Wouldn't they trust us a little bit less if we tried those tactics? We're not going to be rich people, but we're not going to starve either, which probably accounts for my longevity in the business. I've never been in, so I'm never out." She lets out a charming laugh. And she comes back to her favorite topic: the kids.

"Music has ruled my life since 14, but the children seem to be the reason I'm here," she says. "It seems as overwhelming as music is, I'm continually amazed at these people. I'm honored to be with them." ■

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