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LiveDaily Interview: Tori Amos

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By [Maya Marin](#) / LiveDaily Contributor

Tori Amos's reputation as the enigmatic, otherworldly, feminist crusader certainly precedes her by a mile. So, when she walked into LiveDaily's West Hollywood studio to talk about her latest album, "Abnormally Attracted to Sin," I was prepared for nothing less than an intense discourse rife with socio-political critique and philosophical musings on her art and life.

Tori delivered in that respect, but before diving into the interview proper, we engaged in a casual conversation regarding raising her daughter Natasha in England, the difference between the US and UK school systems, and her concerns regarding Natasha's desire to pursue acting. I was struck by the freedom with which she shared her feelings of maternal pride and vulnerability; in doing so, she appeared less of an enigma, and something much more familiar: a strong, self-aware and open woman with the ability to feel things honestly and deeply.

It just so happens that she also has an extraordinarily consistent ability to communicate these feelings via finely crafted songs--a talent that "Abnormally Attracted to Sin," her 10th studio album, proves.

LiveDaily: Let's start things out with a little semantics. What's your definition of sin? I have an idea that it might be an unorthodox one.

Tori Amos: Well, I think the greatest sin is trying to tell another person how to view their body and what is sacred behind closed doors. Women have had to carry this shame about what was imprinted by the early church fathers hundreds of years ago and so, to me, that's one of the greatest sins.

I think that most people would agree that there's a normal attraction to sin. What is an abnormal attraction to sin?

Making sure you begin to redefine these concepts. If you start going into the inner sanctum of how the church fathers were able to manipulate what we feel about ourselves, then you have to go in after them. You chase these ideas and concepts and imprints and you rewire them for yourself. That's a bit abnormal--it's an obsession. But I'm driven to do this as a minister's daughter ... I understand how they manipulate and it burns in me to go in and try to rewire.

So redefining the term gives you power over it.

And redefining "eroticism," because if I didn't know any better, I'd think the church fathers absorbed that idea too because when you think about it, it's the other extreme. They've made eroticism top shelf porno so that the spirituality is taken out of eroticism, and for me this record is about erotic spirituality.

So of the classic seven deadly sins, which have you been attracted to the most?

I don't know. I think I'm fascinated with ones that aren't classic, like intolerance. Intolerance is one of the great ones that we deal with every day ... As I travel, the one thing I see so much of is how intolerant people are of each other's cultures, desires ... I just don't understand why we have to tell another person how to live their life.

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Do you think that it's important for people who are in the public eye a lot--celebrities--to raise awareness about intolerance?

No. I don't think celebrities should be doing that if that's not what they're driven to do. Because then I'm trying to tell them what to do ... If they want to lap-dance on top of a bar and strip, then maybe that's what they're supposed to be doing. But for me, I can only answer to when I wake up in the morning and these ideas shake me awake and say, "You have to look at this in your own life." Not about necessarily judging other people, but judging yourself and how you have to live your life. A lot of the Native Americans have taught me that "you are what you believe." Not you are what you eat, but you are what you believe ... Because if I am what I eat then I'm a lot of ice cream.

Wouldn't we all be! So speaking about the album, it's very stylistically diverse and I believe you mentioned that it's something of a retrospective, sonically, of your entire career. Did this happen on its own, or was it your intention to do that?

I guess, the more I think about it, it's kind of like Paris Fashion Week, the album. There are many different styles ... I had the wonderful experience of working with Victor & Rolf in Paris for one of their shows--I played music for one of their shows. What I was able to see was how diverse each show was by the designers. Maybe in my mind I was thinking, as a composer, I've been drawn to very different sonic architectural styles and I didn't want to have a record that just focused on one. I was building, maybe, a cathedral with many different offshoots and rooms--not building a small cottage by the sea. I've done that in "The Beekeeper." I was building little keeps by the seaside and that was the structure for that. It was very organic, sort of my Birkenstock period. But I'm in high heels now.

And the songs are accompanied by what you call "visualettes," which are short films directed by Christian Lamb. I understand that there was a bit of a symbiotic relationship between you two--that his visuals affected your music and vice versa.

Yeah, he was a great collaborator. I think when I began to see the montages he was creating on the road, it was the first time the whole silent-movie idea hit me--that we could create a new form of a silent movie with the story being the song and the visuals that the director was creating himself. So when I saw it in the beginning, it was this moment of "turn the volume down" of the live music he had put to it. Once we turned it off, then I could really see what he was creating, and it just naturally married the music I'd been writing on the road.

On the road for "American Doll Posse"?

Right.

Do you consider the visuals as an integral part of the album itself, or do you consider them art forms in their own right?

Well, they're interconnected, that's for sure ... The visualettes work with the music. I think without the music, it's not the same. The music, however, has to live on its own. It always has to. That's because, as a composer, I have to make it work that way.

What also struck me about the album is that it's not very piano heavy. How did you come to that decision?

I think maybe being known as a singer/songwriter for many years, if you don't expand, then the composer side of you sometimes gets stuck in a genre. That I can't accept, because when I was a little girl, and when I was at the Peabody conservatory, I wanted to be in the composition program and I was told that women really aren't known to be the great composers. So I thought, "Well why is that then?" Joni Mitchell aside and all the great women that we know--I'm talking about before their time. And I started

thinking to myself, "Well, there are reasons for that." And it's not because there haven't been great female composers, but there hasn't been a platform for them to develop. Where are the funds to go get an orchestra to play your work? So maybe there's been this burning passion to write music for instruments that aren't just confined to the piano. I mean, I know that I can do that and I love doing that, but I needed to grow as a composer so that when I do go back to the piano, I can bring something ... multidimensional to it.

So, composing on other instruments--has that changed your piano playing?

Well, composing for other instruments ... I create a composition that can hold the other instruments. The musicians themselves are very much collaborators. The string arranger, bass, drums, guitars--they all bring so much to the records so that if I don't write compositions--how do I explain it? [thinks] There are some singer/songwriters who, if you're producing them, you bring in drums, bass and guitar to back them up. You are not bringing in these great musicians to come in and be at the forefront ... [and be] absolutely pushed to the limit of their musicianship. They are told to reign in most of the time. They are back up musicians, even if they're the best in the world ... [So] the last couple records have been about "I have to write music that challenges them." This can't just be about "you fit around my piano playing and this is the center." No, the song is the center. And if the piano isn't the instrument that best expresses the song, then give the piano player a break and let the others come forth.

So, it represents a collective growth of you and the musicians you work with.

I hope so. They're such amazing players, I wanted to create things that showed their talent.

Do you think there's a narrative line that runs through the record?

There's an emotional narrative. I think this is a real emotional record. For me, anyway.

What story does it tell?

It tells the story of this time. We've all been, I think, shocked by the changes that have happened in the last year and a half. Our world has changed and it won't be what it was again. We can't go back to three, four years ago. The boom of technology and all the abundance--that kind of lifestyle. These songs came out of this new world.

Are you sad for the world we lost?

I'm sad for the people who have lost everything who didn't do anything malevolent to lose it. There are people who cannot send their children to college. There are kids who were going to college that I know personally that cannot go because their family has lost everything. But it's not as if their parents did something [wrong] ... They have worked very hard to get there. It's not like they had stolen it or won it in Vegas. I'm interested in the emotional fallout. The earthquake is one thing, but then it's the destruction after that, the emotional destruction. So then, as a songwriter ... if you can, you have to kind of peel your skin off and walk into a place where you can observe and then absorb. Then, usually, what has to happen is I have to have a kind of experience ... that makes me resonate in order to write that song. I'm not allowed to escape. I can't just get the song free and clear--it doesn't work like that for me. I can't just watch something happen totally to someone else and say, "Oh, I'm gonna take your life and write about it." I have to then ... a pound of flesh. There has to be something that happens or I cannot translate the song. It just will not come.

You're sort of saying that the songwriter has to be a bit of a Christ figure, taking on the sins of others ...

I'd like to keep it out of Christianity. Let's go to Native American [culture.] I think it's more of "You have to chop wood and carry water." You have to be able to taste the

medicine--walk that path in order to understand it. But that's me, that's not anybody else. But I can't just steal somebody's life and write about it. And some people can and they're scot free. But somehow, in my life, I have to have an experience, whatever that is. And it won't necessarily look the same. So, in "Maybe California," I wasn't standing at the edge of a cliff ready to jump, but I had to get pushed to certain places in order to understand that feeling to be able to write that song.

I think these "experiences" are why your fans are so rabid. They can sense that you have a true connection to what they're feeling.

You know, if you just live your life and you're open to experiences, you are challenged. When people say "are you happy?" Well, what is happy? I think happy is living a full life. And there are some times in your life when you're gonna face death or health issues or loss and things like that.

One last question before you go: If you could travel back in time and say just one thing to the 19-year-old Tori Amos, what would you tell her?

[Pause] Hmm. What would I tell her? [thinks] Get a sense of humor quick. Start laughing now. You'll need it.