



Faster, Louder, Harder

Kristen Hersh in the no-mind place

by Judith Lewis

50-Foot wave: Kristin Hersh, Bernard Georges, Rob Ahlers

(Photo by L. Fletcher)



Kristin Hersh arrives to meet me with a baby boy on one hip, a young son at each side, and her husband and manager, Billy O’Connell, walking a few steps behind her. She looks tiny surrounded like this, the late-afternoon Pasadena sunlight glinting off her bleached-blond chin-length waves, her 1920s-movie-star mouth painted a perfectly muted red. The vision is almost comical, in the truest sense of the word: When she passes the baby off to O’Connell and separates from the entourage, it’s as if somebody’s comic book sweetheart has just emerged from the candy-colored frame to tread upon the drab green soil of an ordinary Starbucks. As O’Connell, 12-year-old Ryder, 7-year-old Wyatt and 1-year-old Bodhi (yes, after the tree) retreat into the adjoining bookstore, the pocket Venus steps forward to have coffee with an inhabitant of the workaday world.

In some rarefied circles, the Throwing Muses’ front woman and co-founder — a role she shared for the band’s first decade with her half sister, Tanya Donnelly — has been a rock star for nearly two-thirds of her life, even if her band’s moment in the industry spotlight lasted only a flicker and a record, *The Real Ramona*, in 1991, made in the days when Warner Bros. still had the stomach for beautiful rock music of marginal commercial value. “Their attitude toward us was, ‘We think Throwing Muses should be making records, but we don’t expect anybody to buy them,’” Hersh remembers. “I kind of agreed with that.” With her new band, 50-Foot Wave, a “math rock” trio that has Hersh howling through tunes that shift time signatures on a whim, she does not necessarily plan to alter that tradition. “I’m only doing this because nobody else is,” she says. “I wanna hear it. I would just play it in my garage if there weren’t

other people saying, ‘Go here, stand here and play it for other people.’” It is not, she acknowledges, “music for people who would go elsewhere for their musical opinions.”

As such, it is the ideal music for a singer-songwriter who has existed for a while now in that netherworld of career musicians who don’t care whether their songs get played on the radio. Hersh is adamant, and articulate, about where she thinks music belongs in the culture, about how necessary the music of the time is for people coming of age, how the business of music conspires to deprive them of it. She may look like a baby-doll princess, but she doesn’t talk like one — she laughs easily and heartily, and she speaks in an alto voice with authority about everything from politics to why she doesn’t read novels: “I just can’t get past the idea that somebody made it up,” she complains. (Instead, she reads books about science. Her favorite: Natalie Angier’s *Woman*.)

Hersh has packed into the last 23 years a life most people would feel proud to have squeezed into 50. She started Throwing Muses at 14 in her native Rhode Island, went to college at 16, released her first record at 19 — on the same day that she went into labor with her first son, Dylan, at a Meat Puppets show. (“Is that tacky?” she asks.) She resolved to never start another band, and kept that promise for nearly a quarter of a century. But she has never made such pronouncements about babies. “Some people ask me, ‘Why do you keep having kids?’ And all I can say is that they’re such great people — they are so much smarter and nicer and more everything than I will ever be. They’re just great roommates.”

And she has written more songs than anyone can count, enough songs that if you try to summarize her oeuvre — five solo records, 11 with Throwing Muses, many more EPs and singles — things start to spin inside your head and you stop. She writes songs about snowmobiles and men who speak in “fucked-up military time,” about twisted conversations and senseless rules, and about who knows what — often the words resonate but make no logical sense. On her most recent solo record, *The Grotto*, her songs seemed more than ever to be inspired by alien powers. (“I see a snake and a girl in the snow,” she sings on “Snake Oil.” She still aspires to be a herpetologist.)

“I’ve actually tried to stop many times,” she tells me, “but it didn’t work.” The songs come to her “as percussive melodies, as if I’ve learned the language phonetically and I’m just spitting it out,” and they always hit at 4 a.m. — even across time zones. “I don’t necessarily have to get up. I just have to finish the song — even if it’s not with my hands, just in my head, I have to work out the lyrics and the bass parts and the drums. But if I try to go back to sleep, it’s murder. That’s when I start to feel like a crazy person.

“I’ve been called one before and I always disagree. But if I fight the 4 a.m. thing — those songs can play really loud in my head.”

She never writes those songs down; in fact, the first time she sees any lyrics is when she sees the cover art for the CD and someone has transcribed them. “Mostly they get them right, but I always have to think for a minute. And sometimes what they think it is is better than what it really is.” She never changes them, she says, because she doesn’t know how to memorize words.

“Imagine becoming a musician to get rich!” Hersh huffs as she sips her coffee and bounces Bodhi on her knee. O’Connell and the kids have returned from the bookstore, and Bodhi has returned to his mother’s lap. “That’s not only evil, it’s stupid. You should play music because you have to, or because it’s fun to be in your garage with your friends. But you should not play music to sell it to people. That is not really playing music.”

It’s been a long time since Hersh could be accused of not really playing music. Despite Throwing Muses’ early successes, opening for the Violent Femmes and X before Hersh had turned 16, Hersh’s

songwriting never proved to be the commercial gold mine the record industry was looking for. After *The Real Ramona*, *Throwing Muses*, with bassist Fred Abong and drummer Dave Narcizio, hobbled along in major-label land for another five or six years, selling as many as 80,000 copies of one album, *University*, but never scoring a hit single and rarely playing in a venue bigger than an ordinary nightclub. When Hersh started making solo records, she filled them with moody, lyrical songs that play like fragments of waking dreams; except for her 1994 *Hips and Makers*, which featured a collaboration with Michael Stipe on a single, “Your Ghost,” and sold 100,000 copies, they earned her the adoration of critics but little attention from the record-buying public.

But her small fan base was ferociously dedicated, made up of listeners who are never easily satisfied by any songwriter and cling like mad when they are — in other words, says Hersh, “people who turn to the Internet to make their presence known and to learn about music.” The band left Warner Bros. for Rykodisc in 1996, but ran out of record-making money a year later. So O’Connell placed the songs on the new Web site *ThrowingMusic.com*, and advised visitors to stay tuned for future music and live gigs. Ostensibly, the band had broken up, but on *ThrowingMusic.com* they were still selling records (they managed to put together two more, in 1998 and last summer), T-shirts and even tickets to shows. Some of those shows happened on severely short notice; Hersh was playing to flash mobs before the phenomenon had been defined.

She and O’Connell were also interacting with those fans long before anyone considered that a worthwhile activity. “We lowered the ticket price to \$10 from \$12 or \$25 because people posted comments on the site saying, ‘It’s too expensive for me to bring people to your shows,’” says O’Connell. With that approach, they’ve managed to recruit listeners who happily pay \$15 to subscribe to a works-in-progress series so they can hear songs as soon as they’re recorded, sometimes in very rough form. They have retained small clusters of followers who will drive significant distances to see Hersh play.

In the past decade, Hersh and O’Connell have made a living — enough to raise a family and tour the world in a bus full of kids, dogs and a goldfish living in the sink. The Internet helped, but it wasn’t all. “Only part of the change for us was technology,” says O’Connell. “The other part of it was getting real, realizing that it’s not all that important to grab the brass ring — or possible,” Hersh interjects.

“We had to create a sustainable way of making music. We had to make records with what we could afford out of our own pockets; we had to be realistic about how many records we could sell and how many people would come to a show. We had to create a bond with our fans, and part of that bond comes from the trust that you’re going to stick around. And the only way to do that was to make do with less.”

Looking back, O’Connell says that *Throwing Muses* was “built on a foundation that was unsustainable, mostly because the record business had trained them to think they needed a ton of money to make records.” No one working with the new band — the “collective” that includes photographer Lisa Fletcher, producer Ethan Allen, *Throwing Muses*’ other bassist, Bernard Georges, and now *50-Foot Wave*’s new drummer, Rob Ahlers — is getting rich now, but they are making records without commercial pressure or compromise.

Given the stratum of industry power they have chosen to inhabit, Hersh and O’Connell make less money off record sales than they do off Hersh and her band playing live. Consequently, they have a different attitude about what the record companies call piracy and fans call sharing. “I’ve always been very pro-Napster, very pro-sharing,” Hersh says. When I remind her that she’s now voicing a renegade, even criminal, opinion, she shrugs it off. “Only people with money object to music downloading,” she insists. “They want to keep their money and their stuff.”

“Not that I’m anti-record company — I really appreciated the advances we got from Warner Bros. when we got them. But as far as I’m concerned, music is not a commodity. It’s something that people have earned by being human. They have a right to hear it, and a right to share it, as they always have in churches and parties. That’s how music happens.”

On the first Tuesday of 2004, 50-Foot Wave began a monthlong residency at the Silverlake Lounge with exactly 11 songs and a stage full of vintage and modern gear to play them on. From the first chord, it was clear this was neither a reworking of Throwing Muses nor an extension of Hersh’s broody solo work, but something new, brighter, more polished and more intricate than anything she’d done before. “It’s a shitload of counting,” Hersh says of the band’s sound. “It shifts and shifts and shifts. But that’s the essence of a power trio — you’ve all memorized each other’s parts; it becomes this triangle of strengths. You have to be playing within each other’s beats and around each other’s notes all the time. It’s hard work, but every single measure is fun.”

Fun or not, it was hard to bring the band back for an encore that night; the audience wasn’t quite big enough to persist, and Hersh admits the band was out of songs anyway. “We had to dig to the bottom of the barrel,” she says. (They finally re-appeared to perform a straightforward version of “Your Ghost.”) Two weeks later, the crowd was bigger, louder, and rushed the stage as the show wound down. By the end of January, you couldn’t get in the club after 9 p.m.

Hersh and O’Connell have not let this go to their heads. They’re pressing only 5,000 copies of the band’s six-song debut, due out March 23, and offering volume discounts on the Web site so fans can resell them at a markup. “We need that kind of viral distribution,” says O’Connell. He also plans to get the songs on iTunes. “It’s a very fair model,” he says. “Their payment schedule is sober and correct.”

Ryder and Wyatt show up — they’d been wandering in the bookstore — and the 12-year-old graciously introduces himself and his brother. “He can play some 50-Foot Wave songs on the guitar,” Hersh says of her second-oldest son; the 7-year-old, who stares out from huge eyes “the color of the ocean,” is like “a little Jackson Pollock — he just draws and draws and draws wherever he goes.” (Dylan is already off at college.)

I ask Hersh what it means that a 37-year-old mother of four is playing faster and harder than she ever has in her life. On paper, it just doesn’t seem right. “It’s the only way I can play right now,” she says. “I need to remove my mind and keep it busy with something so the gut can kick in. I’ve got to get to the no-mind place, and the only way I can do that is by playing fast and loud. It’s like how mathematicians have to keep pogo sticks in their offices and jump on them or they can’t think clearly.

“I don’t understand why everybody my age isn’t doing it. Everybody should play louder and faster the closer they get to 40.”

50-Foot Wave performs at Amoeba Records in Hollywood on Tuesday, March 23.