

OUTLAW ON STAGE: SHAWNA VIRAGO UNPLUGGED

San Francisco musician Shawna Virago is tearing up the stage, attacking her guitar and deadpanning lyrics to the title track of her album, *Objectified*: “I am ready for my close-up/ First I better go and throw up/ Other girls can burn their bras/ I will look really mean/ On the cover of a magazine.”

Virago’s trademark songwriting weaves together commentary on insidious patriarchy, the proliferation of plastic surgery, and the fear our culture pushes on women and girls to internalize their own oppression. With her earnest rock and genre-bending persona, Virago seems ready-made for a Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival stage.

Only they won’t let her in. “One of the phrases that makes my skin crawl is ‘woman-born-woman,’” Virago says. “A movement based on liberating all female-spectrum people whose gender expression is oppressed by male supremacy would unite more of us.”

But Virago has gotten used to finding her own musical path. “When I started playing music as an out trans woman, it didn’t seem possible you could have a music career,” she recalls. “There was just too much transphobia. I was a gender misfit [and] a musical misfit.”

Julia Serano, author of *Whipping Girl*, describes Virago’s music as “Johnny Cash-style old-school country music,” a genre “often considered to be inherently masculine [that Virago] transforms with her own trans feminine perspective.”

Virago cites musical influences from Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley to X, which “melded punk and early rock ‘n’ roll and country influences seamlessly. I loved their frontwoman, Exene Cervenka, and I’d try to replicate what I saw their guitarist, Billy Zoom, play.”

Due out this fall, Virago’s latest album (tentatively titled *Devil’s Daughter*) is an effort to reconcile “my rejection by the church with my Christian upbringing” as well as “the contradictions of the repressed sexual values teenage Christians are raised to believe in and the realities of their domestic lives—abuse, violence, addiction.”

“I’ve been an underdog most of my life,” Virago admits. “I was the class faggot who got bullied constantly. And I’ve had more shitty jobs than I care to remember. Add lots of transphobia to the mix, and voila—that’s the swamp world my songwriting comes from.”

But Virago’s not just a rocker chick. She’s also an author, an activist, an award-winning filmmaker, and the artistic director of the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival, the world’s oldest fest dedicated to trans films.

“It was started by my friends Alex Austin and Christopher Lee,” Virago recalls, noting sadly that Lee, a talented filmmaker who battled depression, recently committed suicide.

Involved with the festival since it launched in 1997, Virago



became codirector in 2003, then took over the reins entirely. “Shawna’s blown everyone away with what she’s done with SFTFF,” says Sean Dorsey, a renowned dancer and Virago’s partner. “Shawna is dedicated to keeping the kind of punk rock, DIY feel of the festival’s early days, while exploding the audience size and international scope of the festival.” Last year’s festival broke attendance records and featured works by more than 60 trans and gender-queer filmmakers representing more than a dozen countries.

“[Shawna’s work] offers revolutionary insights into the larger feminist community,” says writer and performer Ryka Aoki. As an activist, Virago sees connections between feminist and trans causes. As the first trans woman

board member for San Francisco Women Against Rape, she admits, “There was more transphobia there than I anticipated, but I knew it was important. It was groundbreaking, and I knew it would lead to better and more positive experiences for trans women in the future.”

“Trans women have more allies in the broader queer culture than ever before,” Virago says, honoring the work others have done before her. “Change is slow and painful in our fucked-up white supremacist, heteronormative, sexist, sizeist, queerphobic culture. But there are so many powerful, kick-ass people working for change, I like our odds of winning.” —*Diane Anderson-Minshall*