



transgender **FORUM**

Transvocalizers By Pamela GeGroff

August 12, 2013

SHAWNA VIRAGO is a well known West Coast musician/singer-song-writer and film maker who was first introduced to TGForum readers back in October 2010. In November 2010, a review of her album *Objectified* was posted. Since that time, she's been very active, particularly in San Francisco. She has participated in several LGBT events as well as having done gigs outside of the community. She's currently working on a new album and has had the opportunity to perform in Europe. We're fortunate that Shawna has taken the time to fit this interview into her schedule. So, for your dining and dancing pleasure, here is the latest update from this incredibly talented lady.

TGForum: Your first album, *Objectified* came out in 2010, correct? I understand that you're currently working on a new project. Why so long between projects?

Shawna Virago: I am working on a new album and recording currently at

Women's Audio Mission in San Francisco. My friend Laura Dean is engineering. In between releasing my last album, I've been busy writing new songs, organizing the *San Francisco Transgender Film Festival*, touring my music, touring also with gifted transgender choreographer Sean Dorsey's dance company, and also writing for several anthologies.

TGF: How does this project differ from the last one? Same kind of straight up rock material?

SV: My last album was recorded as a very lo-fi collection of songs, with minimal bass and drums. The themes were urban-based, concerned with the various daily realities of discrimination and street violence transgender people face.

The new album is more personal: coming-of-age, family conflicts, growing up with old-time religion, overcoming internalized self-hatreds, and of course a fair amount of love and sex.



Musically, the new album will be even more sparse, featuring just my voice and punk attitude. I'm really excited about it.

TGF: You mentioned to me that you had recently performed in Amsterdam. How was it?



SV: I was invited to perform this past May at *TranScreen*, the Amsterdam transgender film festival. My music video screened there and I was the headliner at their closing night party. It was a real blast! The audience was also very warm. I've had my last four short films screen there over the years, and have been a fan of *TranScreen* for a long time.

TGF: How does the acceptance level for transgender musicians differ in Europe compared to the U.S.?

SV: I have found Queer audiences in Amsterdam and Paris, the two European cities I've performed in, to be very attuned to my music. Europeans have a long troubadour tradition and love the intersection of music and verse-and this is so satisfying for me, as a lyric based artist. I've found U.S. audiences to

be super supportive of my work, but also see that U. S. audiences seem to have many more divisions between communities: the Lesbians don't hang out much with the Gay boys; and Transgender communities too often don't get invited to the big dance. I want everyone at the party!

TGF: Traveled any where else in Europe?

SV: I've performed in Paris, as I've mentioned. And I actually lived in Paris for a few months in the late 1980s. I lived in Pigalle, the red-light district and the corner of my apartment building was one of the spots for trans people to hook up with tricks and dates. It was great making friends there and getting to see a different side of Paris than the tour books. My partner and I have gone back there several times since and we love it.

TGF: While there, did you work as a solo artist, or did you use a band and/or back-up musicians?

SV: I performed solo-me and my guitar. This is how I've primarily performed now for several years.

TGF: Any U.S. tour plans at this point?

SV: I plan to tour with my new album early next year. I'd love your readers to contact me if they run clubs or venues they want to invite me to! People can watch my website for dates (www.shawnvirago.com).

TGF: Given the state of the economy, have solo artists such as yourself been impacted much?

SV: I've been fortunate. Besides playing my own shows, I've been touring as a special musical guest with Sean Dorsey Dance for the past year and will continue to do so throughout 2014 and 2015. Touring and performing with Sean Dorsey is really helping me pay my bills!

TGF: During the Grammy Awards, acoustic artists such as Mumford And Sons were recognized big time. I know that you're technically not in that category, but as a solo artist, do you see a shift in musical tastes happening? Or is this just a sort of fad du jour?

SV: The music and art I focus on the most is stuff made by other transgender and queer artists. I don't pay a lot of mind to many non-LGBT musicians, although I think acoustic based music and Americana music has had a rebirth that will last,

especially the music with good content. But one of my complaints about a lot of Americana and blue grass based music now, is everyone learns the same exact flat picking licks, or the same steel guitar licks. There's not much originality to a lot of the artists.

TGF: In doing some background research on you, I found a book entitled *Trans/Love: Radical Sex, Love, and Relationships Beyond The Gender Binary* by Morty Diamond. How did you come about to be involved with this project?

SV: Like many lyric based songwriters, I also write prose pieces. I performed many of these pieces over the years at the Fresh Meat Festival and the National Queer Arts Festival and that's led me to be invited to various anthologies. Morty Diamond, the editor of *Trans/Love: Radical Sex, Love And Relationships Beyond The Gender Binary* was kind enough to ask me to submit something. My work also appears in *Gender Outlaws: Next Generation* and *Take Me There*.

TGF: If you had one thing to say to the transgender community as a whole, what would it be?

SV: That's a big question. I will say that there is an explosion of great transgender art and music going on right now. I was on tour this past spring in a all trans-woman show called the Fully Functional Cabaret, organized by Annie Danger. We rode around in vans and pulled up to all kinds of venues: Anarchist collective galleries, off-off-off Broadway theaters, and beautiful old art deco houses. Some places barely had electricity, other

places were well funded Ivy League Universities. Everywhere we went transgender and queer people came out to see us.

TGF: In closing, any final thoughts?

SV: While I was on tour this spring, I thought of a trans-woman pal of mine from back in the 1980s. We both drove trucks for the same warehouse and would go out to various clubs such as the Queen Mary, although in our motorcycle boots and punk hair we didn't fit in. She wasn't as lucky as me and passed on from AIDS around 1990. I thought of her and wished she could've witnessed the amazing community and art that's going on now. She wouldn't have believed it! I barely believe it myself. There's never been a better time to be transgender than right now.



Shawna Virago can be contacted on the web at www.shawnavirago.com.

Her *Objectified* CD as well as the aforementioned books she has contributed to are available through Amazon.com, also on Facebook and YouTube.