



THE RUMPUS INTERVIEW WITH SHAWNA VIRAGO

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I first saw Shawna Virago perform with the Deadly Nightshades at Folsom Street Fair in 2001. There were half a million men in assless chaps drinking beer in the street, and at the end of an alley stood this platinum blonde rock goddess in a bustier and fingerless gloves playing electric guitar. In my memory, there was also a plushy fox dancing on stage, but I could be conflating. The plushy fox might have been unrelated.

Time magazine [recently let us know](#) that we've reached the "transgender tipping point," and we can certainly celebrate this moment of trans-awareness and visibility, even though it is overshadowed by staggering rates of [violence against trans women of color](#) and legislation that attempts to criminalize trans lives at every turn. Shawna comes out of an era that pre-dates positive media representation of trans folks. It's easy to use a phrase like "trailblazer" figuratively, without appreciating the tremendous labor involved in this undertaking. Shawna is an artist who cut the path she walks on, enduring violence and hatred along the way, and never once trying to make herself palatable, never seeking acceptance or striving for

assimilation. She describes her music as “raw observations about survival in a predatory world, sticking up for the underdog, queer love, and gender outlaws.”

Last year, Shawna rented my dungeon, **Maison de la Maitresse**, for a video shoot. The request went something like this:

Shawna: Hey, can I film part of my music video for Transsexual Dominatrix in your dungeon? There will be adult infant back up dancers.

Me: YES. [Falling over with happiness]

I caught up with Shawna over tea in the dungeon recently to talk about the video, songwriting, her trajectory as an artist, the new album, and what it's like to be top Google hit for “San Francisco dominatrix.”

The Rumpus: We're sitting here in the Salon de Sade of my dungeon space, and I'm having fond memories of you shooting the “Transsexual Dominatrix” video here. My favorite part of that video might be my best friend in a French maid's uniform playing the toy drum kit. But also you had adult baby back up dancers...

Shawna Virago: That is correct.

Rumpus: What was the conception behind the song and the music video?

Virago: Well, you know I love a good musical. And I love the whole tradition of great MGM musicals with like these kind of swishy boys that are in sailor suits that are dancing behind Frank Sinatra. And so, I just felt I needed to have something referencing that. I wanted to have some of the tropes of breaking out and doing some dancing, but also having other characters, and I felt that the adult infants as sexy go-go boys was just a dream of mine. It was a dream fulfilled. And then also sexy adult infant playing bass with the French Maid on the toy drum kit.

Rumpus: I have a lot of ABDL fantasies and even I didn't realize that I had the fantasy of the adult baby back up dancers until then. And these were not just people you picked up off the street; these were actually quite trained dancers...

Virago: Yeah, they're very acclaimed dancers from San Francisco. One of them was in the original cast of *La Cage* on Broadway. And had a great Broadway career. The other one has won the Dancer of the Year award here in the Bay Area a few times.

Rumpus: And you released the video as a short film, and it screened at film festivals?

Virago: Yeah, it screened I believed at 25 festivals exactly at this point. It played CineKink in New York and the London BFI Film Festival. And then it played in Amsterdam at the Trans

Festival there. Which was one of my favorite screenings; what was good about that was the curator took the time to really talk to me about what the film was about. Too often people hear the title and they think it's going to be a kind of exploitative, really salacious thing. And it's not. And so they were curious about my motivations. Those damned Europeans. They're so educated.

Rumpus: We always say things like, *Well, maybe this isn't the right audience. It will find its audience in Europe.*

Virago: Exactly, everything we do the audience for it is in Europe, pretty much.

Rumpus: I don't know if you know this about yourself, but when you google "San Francisco dominatrix," and you go to images, stills of you from this video are the top hits.

Virago: That's crazy.

Rumpus: The way I found this out was, well, you know how we engage in the narcissistic process of googling ourselves occasionally, and I thought "what comes up when you google San Francisco dominatrix?" Oh! My friend, Shawna Virago.

Virago: Well it's always the things that you're indifferent about that you usually succeed at; it's a universal law. I would not have known that if you had not mentioned it.

Rumpus: You have a secret Google image life, which I would hope this interview would do nothing but help propel.

Virago: Really, the story for me is just the fact that I'm still here making music. Hopefully as you keep pursuing art you get your own voice, a voice that might work for some people and not for others. So I'm almost indifferent to all the other trappings of trans-ness right now. In fact, for me I think the trans civil rights movement or trans revolution, if it's not attached to the struggles of people of color, and if it's not attached to dismantling prisons, then it has no legs to stand on.

I've seen too much of the trans stuff veer away from other struggles and issues. Worse, we've become just like everybody else. And that shocks me. Because here's this opportunity being forced to live outside the margins of the gender binary—why stop there? Why not let your mind keep smashing binaries and margins and try to build something bigger

Rumpus: I appreciate that so much. It's interesting to observe; I have my own vantage point as a queer woman who also came of age in the 80s and was engaged in radical queer organizing. There's something kind of Twilight Zone-y about this current moment of marriage equality and popular celebrity transitions of white people; it's so mainstream and about conformity and about these kinds of conservative values. And those values are not the histories of our communities. The history of our communities has to do with actually fighting police brutality and fighting these deep systemic injustices.

Virago: Yes, absolutely. And it's shocking to me that that's not the norm. That we have kind of succeeded in a way by advocating for ourselves so successfully that too many of us have

become tame animals, with the trappings of bourgeois culture and culture of oppression, and pawns in capitalism's game.

Rumpus: We've had these conversations about Johnny Rotten and about other musical slash political figures that hold, what's the word I want to use, volatile social space? I don't think of you as being volatile, I think of you as being quite revolutionary.

Virago: I think too often the volatility can also become a caricature wherever you go, and people want you to get angry because they have their cameras out to take selfies with you now and send their friends. "Look! It's me with that foul-mouthed Shawna Virago!" But I felt that the song "Transsexual Dominatrix" was, I wanted to write a song about underground economy work, alternative ways people survive economically. It's a composite piece, many people's stories create the narrative, and that was the goal of the song. It started out electric and now is a folk-punk anthem.

Rumpus: It's a nice segue into how your own musical expression has grown, and even thinking about this moment we're in right now where there are so many youth-based artists whose trans-ness or whose queerness gets to come up with their being emerging musicians. And your path was really different than that. I have a highly romanticized version of this 80s LA rock scene that you were this integral part of.

Virago: Well, you know, I've been playing as an out trans person for a really long time. Musically I feel most aligned with this small window of time that happened in the late 70s, with young American musicians being highly influenced by British punk rock. I'm sure people have done an analysis of why this happened; I don't really



know.

But I was just crazy for the Sex

Pistols and the Clash, the Buzzcocks and the Damned. And Stiff Little Fingers, and the Undertones, and all these bands that unleashed this powerful bedlam.

I was in different music scenes [in the 80s] and playing lots of clubs. My band kept climbing through the club scene and people would come to our shows and check us out, it was very organic. We put out our album, got good reviews. I knew the whole time though that I was going to transition. I remember we were playing the Roxy, and there were these girls in the front row who knew all the lyrics. And I thought I'm going to be leaving this kind of life behind when I transition, what does that mean for me? Am I a fool to do this? But it just had to happen.

Playing music then as an out trans woman was a completely different universe. I intersected with a lot of Riot Grrrl scenes and played shows with Riot Grrrl bands, as well as still playing straight music clubs. Some people in those days were genuinely trans allies, but a lot of people got stuck in second wave feminism and decided to be the gender police.

Rumpus: What do you think that was about, back in the early 90s, in terms of trans women's visibility and available community space?

Virago: It was very scattered, I think. So there were some bars here and in New York for the working girls, where people really had a house mother that would help you navigate the ropes, the streets and things like that. Some people are going to get mad at this but I think that was the only place with a critical mass of trans women at that time.

Rumpus: Bar scene, ball scene, house scene, that sort of thing?

Virago: Exactly. There was not a critical mass of us anywhere else. Wherever I went, I thought “Am I going to get hassled on the bus by some jerk?” I mean, that was my first thought for probably 15 years, at least, when I left my flat. *Am I going to get hassled today?* On the bus, coming home, on the street. And then the cops, wondering, *Are the cops going to leave me alone?* I feel like I should ask if there’s anyone next door in a sensory deprivation scene that you need to go check on?

Rumpus: [Laughing] Not today.

Virago: OK. Please step out if you need to.

Rumpus: I reserved the space specifically for us to chat; nobody is in the hallway cell, we’re all good. But thank you, and I’m sure if someone was here they’d thank you for your consideration.

So in the 90s, I first came to know you and see you perform with the Deadly Nightshades. Tell me a bit about that band.

Virago: I took off from performing for a couple of years, because I got tired of my gender always being on display versus just my music. Then maybe in 1998 I started to do all these open mics on my own. I’d just go by myself. And that kind of lit the spark to put a band together. That band was a pretty fierce rock and roll band. A real musical onslaught. Everyone in that band was like me, a music lifer. The only thing we were ever going to do is play music. And all the things that go along with it. And we were part of a short-lived scene here in the early aughts, I guess, with bands like PepperSpray and the Whoa Nellies.

Rumpus: What was that process like for you as you were navigating your image, packaging yourself? I’ve heard so many artists talk about how they don’t want the prefix. They don’t want to be a *queer* artist or a *trans* artist or an *API* artist, they want to be able to be seen for the artistry itself.

Virago: I’m grateful if anyone is even paying attention, actually. So my primary musical identity is I’m a songwriter. I think one of the issues with the last band was that we were successful in one way, having an edge to the sound, but the lyrics got lost.

I have no illusions about being trans, it will always be there, being called a trans artist, or trans songwriter, but being trans now is so different than being trans 20 years ago or being trans 40 years ago. There’s a billion ways to be trans or have an intentional gender expression. Yet, too many people decide to be the gender police. There are all kinds of police. We have the gender police, the music police, the literature police. We used to have

the punk rock police, you know, judging what was punk enough. And all these crazy things. And we have the acoustic guitar police, because that's primarily what I play now. And some guy was telling me what strings I should use to optimize my tone. And I said to him, is it possible that I'm choosing a certain tone right now? That I'm choosing this sort of string arrangement, to purposely get a lo-fi tone? I don't want my music to have a pretty tone; I'm sick of a pretty tone acoustic guitar. It's been done.

Rumpus: So this is how you also bring your punk roots into this transition from being punk to rock and roll and now doing... how would you describe your music today?

Virago: I don't know, it's kind of a rootsy folk punk, I guess.

Rumpus: I heard you describe yourself on stage once as being stranded on the island of folk.

Virago: I really don't like most folk music. It's not my thing. And yet this is just the most expedient way to play music, and not deal with a bunch of stoners that want to jam for two hours before getting down to business.

Rumpus: And you've been performing and recording primarily as a solo artist for the past few years.

Virago: Yeah, definitely. And even back in the 80s with my band, I'd go play acoustic shows at certain clubs in Hollywood.

Rumpus: What's your songwriting process, or is there a process?

Virago: I don't know if I have a process. I feel like I try to stay open to catch the songs that are vying for my attention, and I'm always grateful for when that happens, because you just never know when it will. If I can write two songs a year I'm very happy. Very happy.

Rumpus: Do you have songwriting influences?

Virago: I think I have people whose trajectory as songwriters I'm interested in. I don't always like their songs, but I'm curious about their process. It's usually people who have been at it for a very long time. I think there was a shift in consciousness and the parameters of



songwriting that happened in the 1950s, with Chuck Berry.

Then you know you have Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. And I think those are the big two, they're the champs. They're duking it out somewhere on a big mountain, but they're both so evenly matched. And what I like about them is I think in their spare time they're doing all sorts of other things. They're also not trying to sell the most records.

I like people that are allowing themselves to get old, just like great poets. The heirs of Keats, or Alan Ginsburg, or Charles Baudelaire. I am drawn to songwriters that are legitimately trying to find their own voice, like one of my favorite songwriters, [StormMiguel Florez](#). I hear a lot of singer songwriters, and he definitely stands out for me.

Rumpus: This is bringing up this question that I've gotten around industry, and the ways that music making and music distribution has changed so radically. And also the sort of tremendous popular emergence of what I call the Hey Ho bands, that there's all this banjo on popular music right now, and it seems like it's tipping its hat to some kind of Americana resurgence, and yet your music remains sort of gloriously untouched by that. I never listen to your stuff and think of it as being commercial or prefabricated or that it would fit into that clean kind of box, and yet it's imminently listenable. All of that is making me think of the process of performing, producing, and disseminating music, and how that works for you as an artist who is not interested in shiny packaged Hey Ho music, but in music as poetry, as communication, as expression.

Virago: It's an interesting time to be a musician because you can stay out of the music industry if you want to, and have an alternate career. Maybe I won't make a lot of money, but my goal is to make enough to keep doing it. That I can keep making records, play shows, if I can keep having my own personal steady state economy with my music I'll be succeeding.

As far as Americana goes, I love Merle Haggard. And I love Hank Williams. But I don't want to go and learn every guitar lick that they've played.

I'll just be honest. There are too many boring Americana bluegrass bands out there. They're boring because they spend their whole time trying to replicate these Flatts & Scruggs or Merle Travis licks. Move on. Get a life. Back in the South, it used to be the great stock car racers came from these certain areas because they were bootleggers outrunning the cops. And the frenetic bluegrass guitar and banjo came from that speed too. It was a cultural thing. Now it's just hee haw bullshit.

It puts me to sleep, it's boring, it's like fake punk rock. It's just boring. Life is so short, why would you ever do anything other than try to stay in your own path as an artist, or a person? Why try to rip off Jimi Hendrix or Chet Atkins? They didn't rip anybody off, that's why we're talking about them. Mumford and Sons please go away.

Rumpus: Mumford and Sons, off the Christmas card list.

Virago: They're off the list. They're off the list.

Rumpus: You self-produced your albums, you self-produced the last album *Objectified*, and you're in the studio now working on the new album?

Virago: I'm working on my new album right now

Rumpus: Does it have a title yet?

Virago: Yes, *Heaven Sent Delinquent*.

Rumpus: What does the process of self-producing bring to the process of getting the music out?

Virago: I think I have a lot of issues with authority. [Laughing]

Rumpus: Not with your punk rock past!

Virago: I'd have to really respect someone to be my producer, but truthfully I'm not interested in their ideas. Joni Mitchell, who ironically has become this very interesting person, this kind of aging curmudgeon crone, power crone...

Rumpus: Oh my god, I have a new career goal: power crone.

Virago: I guess she produces a lot of her stuff, and she said, "Did Van Gogh have a producer? Did Mozart have a producer?" And I agree. I am my own producer. I try to keep it so simple and direct; I'm just trying to capture the performance of how I write the song, and I either nail it or I don't. Don't fuck it up.

Rumpus: I often find in production this is my biggest mantra. It's not how do I create the most beautiful thing, but just how do I not fuck it up?

Virago: Yeah! And even if you didn't plan it, whatever it is that you just created is probably some kind of unplanned magic.

Rumpus: You are crowdsourcing fundraising for the new album. Is that something you did on *Objectified*?

Virago: No, this is a brand new experience for me, **doing a Kickstarter.**

Rumpus: How has that felt for you?

Virago: It took me about seven months to get the self-esteem generated to do it, I think. It is hard asking for support—I think it's hard. We don't all come from backgrounds and communities where we can just ask people for support. But I am looking forward to printing the album on vinyl, so I have costs that necessitate getting some revenue. I've seen my friends use Indiegogo and Kickstarter in really legitimate ways with a lot of integrity, with very specific goals and still very attached to community, so I felt inspired by that. It's very nerve-racking. I'm kind of socially phobic, and I try not to use social media very



often. I have a 10-minute boundary on e-mail and Facebook, and I take the weekends off. But you can't really do that when you're running a Kickstarter, I realized.

Rumpus: It's both beautiful and challenging to be that deeply analog in a digital world, at a time when so much promotion and dissemination and even just artistic presence now happen on social media. And we could make all kinds of commentary on what's the value of what you have to say if you have to say it in fewer than 140 characters...

Virago: It's an interesting time to be alive, because we're still at the very beginning of the digital age. And some of us, our formative years were definitely analog. We're the offspring of Guttenberg really.

Rumpus: I distinctly recall composing my first print ads on film. They were sent to the printer—I had a friend at the time who worked as a printer and it was a good union job; he was covered in ink to his wrists and worked in this toxic work environment where these paper magazines would be spun out—and that's how you found a dominatrix, in the back of a magazine. Versus today when you simply google San Francisco dominatrix and come up with your beautiful picture! But there's this way that it's interesting to jump that generation gap.

Virago: I think what I'm most interested in is songwriting. I've had people tell me I should just put out an EP. But I think in terms of a collection of songs, so this particular collection is an album, and I think that is from having my consciousness formed pre-digital age.

Rumpus: Pre-single age as well, I mean we had the 45, but still...

Virago: Right. So back when I was younger, when a new album came out by somebody that you liked, say the Clash or the Damned or X, you'd get your posse together at somebody's house, get out the marijuana, and you'd put side A on and everyone was completely quiet. It was reverential. Then you'd turn the album over and play side B.

Even when we listened to "Rise Above" by Black Flag, it was completely quiet. It was like going to the movies. And everyone's eyes were closed, or occasionally if something was really moving or good, looking at each other, shaking your head. So I think there was also this communal listening experience that also shaped me and my love of the album as an art form.

I feel like the last time I really had this, when it wasn't just nostalgia and trying to recapture something, was Lucinda Williams's *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, when that came out. It's such a great work of art, just so perfect, every song is perfect, the arrangements are perfect. When I was younger I worked in a bookstore and they gave me the philosophy and poetry sections to keep stocked. Well it was easy, because nobody really bought any books in those two sections, and they were never messy. I would alphabetize them on Monday and then if I went in the next Monday they were still they way they had been the previous Monday. Versus the celebrity biography section, which is the bread and butter of bookstores still to this day. It was a very arcane pursuit, and that's what I think of as the music that I like, and the music that I write. It's not a mass produced art form. It can't even be, you know, the Beatles, Stevie Wonder, those giants. Motown. They would not be allowed to be themselves now. They'd be artists on the margins, because they're too idiosyncratic.

Shawna Virago is a San Francisco-based transgender musician celebrated for her striking lyric-based song. Her music twists together folk, punk and roots music, creating anthems for a new generation. Virago is the Artistic Director of **the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival (SFTFF)**. Her writing appears in *Gender Outlaws: Next Generation* and in the anthologies *Trans/Love: Radical Sex, Love & Relationships Beyond the Gender Binary* and *Take Me There*. She has been featured in documentary works on PBS and NPR.

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