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'Objectified': An Interview with Singer/Songwriter Shawna Virago by Matt Kailey



Shawna Virago isn't shy. This in-your-face singer and songwriter lets you know just what she's thinking – about being trans, about being a woman, and about being *Objectified*. Her first CD is out now, and I hope there will be a second.

As someone whose iTunes collection pretty much came out on vinyl first, I appreciated the '60s political folk influences on Virago's album, *Objectified*, but this isn't your mother's (or your grandmother's) protest music. Virago's "folk punk" is definitely twenty-first century stuff – and here's what she has to say about her music and herself:

Shawna Virago: I would describe myself as a songwriter who happens to be a transgender person. I don't identify with any one particular gender, although I have used terms like trans woman, transsexual and she-male, as well as debutante, bitch, femme and the-girl-next-door. I'm proud to be transgender. Life would be so boring if I wasn't.

MK: How would you describe your music and who are your influences? I definitely see some good ol' '60s folk/protest music influences, in both the lyrics and the musical style, but it might just be my age.

SV: I would describe my music as folk punk with a touch of Americana. I listen to a lot of country music and roots music and music that comes from swamps. I have also been influenced by political songwriters, such as Woody Guthrie, Billy Bragg, John Doe and Exene Cervenka and Joe Strummer.

MK: Is *Objectified* your first major CD? Please describe your musical history – when and how you first got interested in music, singing/songwriting, etc.?

SV: *Objectified* is my first solo CD. I've been in many bands over the years, each one of them quite raunchy. Playing guitar and writing songs is something I've wanted to do since I was young and I've been playing guitar for over twenty-five years.

MK: The title track is significant, because trans people are often objectified, and, at least for me, it can be interpreted in a couple of ways – as a sarcastic attack on being objectified, either as a woman, a trans woman, or both, or as an in-your-face response to those who might criticize you for putting yourself out there as a trans woman and a sexy and sexual being. Am I close, or is it something else entirely?



SV: I think you're right on the mark! The song "Objectified" is about dealing with many contradictory pressures of being a trans or cisgendered woman. We want to abolish the patriarchy but look our best while we do it. Every month in this country there are about 500 "women's" magazines put out, and every month they have the exact same stories as the preceding month: how to lose weight, how to improve you abs, improve your ass, how to lose more weight. It's a recipe for self-hatred. So the song is fueled by that.

MK: "Johnny Law" is about police harassment, including sexual harassment (a similar reference also appears in the song "Meat"). Have you experienced police harassment as a trans woman? What was the impetus for this song?

SV: Yes, I have experienced police harassment and so have many friends of mine, and I wrote this song for us. I'm shocked when I meet trans women who haven't been hassled by cops.

MK: "Transsexual Dominatrix" could be seen as a song of power, or at least reclaiming power that has been taken away by society because of being trans. It could also be seen as a song of frustration at the extreme lack of power and privilege that trans people, and particularly trans women, experience in our culture. Can you talk a little about this song and what it means for you?

SV: "Transsexual Dominatrix" started off as a song that wanted to look at male supremacy and the saucy and serious strategies for dismantling it. I think wearing lots of leather and having an arsenal of toys is one way of doing it. As I kept writing it, I was channeling many people's experiences, both mine and several friends, about our economic survival doing under-the-table jobs or alternative-economy work of various kinds. I feel very empowered when I sing it.

MK: What is your favorite song off this album and why?

SV: I don't have a favorite, but I am proud of the album. I really wanted to write a collection of songs about the various political and cultural forces arrayed against trans people and I wanted the songs to convey the anger

that I feel about it. I think I did that, hopefully with some humor, too. I think that's why I have so many non-trans and straight fans, too – they connect with the songs, too.

MK: You are definitely an in-your-face artist. Your lyrics and style reflect both anger and pride, and many songs seem to be a response to being beaten down, but also reflect a refusal to be beaten down. How do listeners/audiences respond to your music? I'm also curious if there is a difference between responses from trans and non-trans listeners.

SV: I have experienced a wide array of responses to my music. I would say people who love lyric-based songwriting, regardless of being trans or not, respond very well to my music. I think music really does break down barriers between people better than any other art. Music is like catnip to humans – it just gives a quick jolt of euphoria.

MK: In “Transsexual Dominatrix” and also in the liner notes on your CD, you use the term “tranny.” In the liner notes, you say “Special thanks to the Almighty for making me a tranny.” You are obviously aware of the current controversy over this term, with some saying that it shouldn't be used, even by members of the community. Obviously, you don't agree. What are your thoughts on this?

SV: I will respect however anyone wants to identify their gender expression. We have 6 billion people on this planet and we could have at least that many different gender expressions. I believe dismantling the gender binary is important so we can create more space for people to express gender. Context is very important with language. For example the word “cock-sucker” is commonly used as a hate term in our homophobic culture. Yet, “cock-sucker” can be a term of pride and I've used it that way many times.

MK: What are you working on now, and what are your plans for both your short- and long-term future?

SV: I'm a lifetime musician, so my short-term and long-term plans are to keep playing music. I'm writing songs for my next album right now and would love to get in the studio later this year if I can get the money together. Also, I'll be performing in trans choreographer Sean Dorsey's amazing new show, *The Secret History of Love*. We'll be touring that show to Boston, Miami, Chicago, a couple towns in Wisconsin and other inviting locales.

MK: What else would you like to say?

SV: Thanks a lot, Matt, for this great interview! People can check out my website, shawnvirago.com and I hope to be touring throughout 2012. So I'd welcome folks from festivals, clubs or universities contacting me!

(Photos of Shawna Virago by Lydia Daniller)