

SF WEEKLY

Shawna Virago Is More Punk Than the Punks

The anti-folk musician and trans pioneer's new album is called **Heaven Sent Delinquent**.

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“Glossy culture is not interesting to me,” says singer-songwriter **Shawna Virago**.

We’re at Cafe La Boheme in the Mission, talking about the Oscars versus alternative film. Virago is also the artistic director of the [San Francisco Transgender Film Festival](#), and she chose this spot because many of its regulars were once political prisoners in Central America. In the 1990s, it felt like the place where the revolution would start.

The neighborhood does not feel that way to her now.

“I walk around angry most of the time,” she says. “I try not to. I try to remind myself that we’re all people.”

In addition to the increasingly remarkable feat of inhabiting the same Mission apartment for almost 25 years, Virago is something of a pioneer, having been out as trans since the early '90s. She and her husband, choreographer **Sean Dorsey** — who

is also trans — might almost be considered a power couple, if their politics weren't so skeptical of the dominant paradigm. (She prefers the term “trans-working-our-asses-off couple.”)

Virago's newest album, *Heaven Sent Delinquent*, continues her lyrical explorations in the folk-punk (or anti-folk) tradition and grapples with the effects of hyper-gentrification on San Francisco as the “jeweled city” for lonesome queer renegades, prior to the first dotcom boom.

“My generation of trans people, who came out before the internet or before reality TV stars, was very small,” she says. “We survived, we were runaways, we did underground-economy work or escaped abusive families. ... I think a lot of the songs were trying to think of the original queer dream of coming here and finding out at some point this other reality interfered with that.”



The word delinquent is as deliberately chosen as “virago” — which refers to a heroic woman yet comes from same Latin root as “virile” — and the elusive trickster of the album's title alludes to Marlon Brando, Kenneth Anger, and “all the people your parents told you to stay away from,” she says. “That's the figure that is the fantasy catalyst of escape.”

Saying that “in some ways, I've never grown up,” Virago says she listens to a lot of X, the seminal Los Angeles punk band, and to Merle Haggard. (There's a big crossover between classic country and West Coast punk, she explains. Rockabilly acts might open for a punk band, and vice versa.) And to this day, the best show she ever saw was the Clash at the Hollywood Palladium in 1979.

Punk or not, she's firmly in the troubador tradition. And however wary she is about coming off as strident, Virago's anti-fascist and anti-White-supremacist politics inform her aesthetic — and make her simultaneously old-school and firmly in step with the times.

She doesn't like overproduced music, she says. ("The bass as an instrument has been reduced to a tone.") But she's not entirely disillusioned with humanity: The song "Burnout," on *Heaven Sent Delinquent*, celebrates the borderline-dropout hedonism that used to characterize teenage lust.

"It's about the way a lot of teenagers had their secret spot that you'd go and bring your beer and marijuana, and people drink and maybe have sex — and it leads from that to a young queer sexual encounter," she says. "Having to keep a secret about it. I wanted to write that song because I don't see that story told in songs. Bruce Springsteen isn't going to tell that story — and I like Bruce Springsteen."

In an era when transgender representation is becoming mainstream, Virago remains defiantly uninterested. She finds Caitlyn Jenner "boring" and isn't at all familiar with model Hari Nef. Exene Cervenka, the vocalist for X, holds her attention as a "true original."

"I feel for these young people," Virago says. "Now, it's like everyone is a beauty queen. I feel like I want to hang out with the power crones."

Who would they be?

"I would put Exene in there. Lucinda Williams, for sure," she says. "I've come to appreciate a lot about Joni Mitchell. She's so feisty now that she's older. Her voice has dropped a few octaves and it's like, 'Get the fuck out of my face.' She's more Johnny Rotten than he is, nowadays. He married a rich heiress, you know, and lives in Malibu. It's very sad.

"I root for him," she adds. "It's like, do we need to do an intervention? You can't do anything good if you live in Malibu."