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Music Interview: Shawna Virago

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Left Coast author, writer and editor



PHOTO: LYDIA DANILLER

[Shawna Virago](#) agreed to be interviewed for HuffPo. Whoohoo! It's exciting for me because Shawna's music is raw and articulate. And she has a bad-ass reputation, along with being a socio-cultural celebrity. So who wouldn't be excited, right?

As you read the interview, you will discover, as I did, that Shawna was blessed with one of those personalities which petrifies or pulverizes history. Either way, you know she's been there and no one will forget her. In addition, she's hella intelligent.

Read and enjoy!

What is the most trouble you've ever gotten into?

As a reformed juvenile delinquent and someone who was also a practicing hooligan well into early adulthood, there's a fair share of trouble in my history. I'm pretty well behaved now, although recently I dealt with a sexist jerk on the bus and berated him for a good 5 minutes in a tirade comprised entirely of profanities.

What are the five things you can't live without?

In no particular order: My cerebral cortex, Ruffles chips, Scottish whisky, Lelo Personal Lube, Claire Fontaine notebooks.

What's your favorite song to belt out in the car or the shower?

In the shower I love to belt Billy Bragg's "To Have And Have Not." It really gets me inspired to march against the dullards who hold the reins of power. I've had the neighbors screaming at me to "Shut the fuck up!" on more than one occasion.

What kind of guitar do you play? And why?

My main guitar is a Sigma acoustic. I also play a Martin dreadnought and a Gretsch Electromatic. All my guitars are left-handed models. These guitars are my tools, they allow me to play punk, rockabilly, cowpunk, celtic tunes, country. I also try to invert the tone on my acoustic guitars, to make them sound less pretty than the standard acoustic guitar.

What musicians influenced you the most?

There have been so many musical influences: the band X is a big one, great songwriting and Billy Zoom is a punk-abilly virtuoso. Seeing X play many times, I've always found them a revelation. By combining a nocturnal edge with undertones of the Bakersfield sound they sound like no one else. Of course the first class of punk music changed the world, especially the women like Sooo Cat Woman, Exene Cervenka and Poison Ivy.

In my review of your album, I described your musical style as folk-punk. How would you describe it?

I'm comfortable with my music being described as folk-punk: I've been called worse. Without question, punk music changed my life, opened me up to questioning everything, including punk music itself. I'm not concerned with trying to play perfect Flatt and Scruggs licks.

Why folk-punk rather than alternative rock or some other style?

Folk punk or anti-folk is a distillation of two great lyric traditions, folk and punk music, obviously. It allows for maximum lyric expression with emotional directness. Unlike other music forms, staying in tune is a plus, not a requirement.

Where do you find inspiration for your songs?

I'm a very experiential writer, a minor adrenaline junkie, and need to get my hands dirty a lot to write— and I have the scars to prove it.

What is your songwriting process? Does the music come first and then the lyrics?

I'm just grateful that once in awhile a song comes knocking into my life, and lets me write it. I don't have a method, just a deep gratitude for all the songwriters who have come before, all the troubadours and trobairises, Celtic balladeers, African Griot storytellers and country blues singers. Mostly unknown artists who are every bit as great as Picasso or Mozart.

Was *Heaven Sent Delinquent* well-received by the critics? By listeners?

Yes. I feel fortunate the album has connected with writers and audiences who still crave albums.

Will you be touring in the near future? If so, where?

I'd love to tour the West Coast later in the year and am starting to put it together. First I have to get off my couch a little more and put some air in the tires and prime the carburetor.

It's presumptuous to ask at this point, but are there any new songs on the drawing board? If so, when do you plan to go back into the studio?

Yes, I have written some songs for the next album and have recorded a handful at Tiny Telephone Studio B.

The production values on the album were very good; who produced the album?

I produced the album but I worked with the brilliant West Coast recording engineer, Laura Dean. Neither of us has a real sweet tooth with our music tastes. We tried to keep the guitar from getting too pretty, but still be interesting. I'm a natural minimalist and wanted the record to be very sparse. I had a "good is good enough rule" in the studio, trying not to kill a song by over-recording. Laura Dean made sure we followed this rule when I got a little crazed with insecurity.

In the music industry, what obstacles have you encountered as a transgender musician/singer/songwriter?

The mainstream music or entertainment industries have never held any allure for me. I believe the commercial entertainment industry is bad for the soul, the way the tobacco industry is bad for the lungs. Luckily I have found community with like-minded oddballs in outsider music and art scenes. I have experienced sexism and transphobia in recording studios, guitar stores, and years ago when I started out and was usually the only trans person in the club. But it was never anything I couldn't handle. I feel very lucky to still be here.

Thanks for the great questions!

Find out more about Shawna Virago: www.shawnavirago.com