



Transvocalizers By Pamela GeGross

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This month, Transvocalizers and TGForum would like to introduce **Shawna Virago** to our readers. She's new to us, but is something of a one-woman force of nature in San Francisco's underground transgender music scene. Her debut project, *Objectified*, is a collection of 12 original tunes, ranging from folk-punk to acoustic glam. We plan to bring you a review of this album in next month's column.



Ms. Virago is more than a singer/songwriter/musician however. She is a street level activist, involved in anti-violence work for over 15 years. She is also Artistic Director for Tranny Fest, the nation's first transgender film festival, with some of her own films being screened in the U.S. Canada, and Europe. She is featured in a new documentary entitled *Diagnosing Difference*, and is also in *Femmes Of Power: Exploding Queer Feminities*.

She is a published author, with her newest work to be published soon in *Gendered Hearts*, an anthology of transgender/variant writers' work. Along with all of this, Virago also conducts workshops on trans issues.

This is Shawna Virago's first interview with TGForum, and we believe you'll find her as entertaining and insightful as we do.

TGForum: Where are you from originally?

Shawna Virago: I grew up primarily in Southern California and the Southeastern part of the country.

TGF: Any formal musical or theatrical education? What were your musical influences growing up, and what do you listen to now?



SV: I haven't had any formal training. I've always been drawn to strong lyricists. So when I was starting out as a musician, I listened to lots of Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, and Hank Williams, and The Clash. I was also drawn to the manic energy of early rock n' roll artists like Little Richard and Elvis. I think Little Richard is the original gender queer. I found Debbie Harry to be an aspiring figure. I went through a Tammy Wynette phase. I listened to lots of glam rock. A very big influence on me was the Los Angeles punk band X, who combined rockabilly and roots influences into their sound. Their front woman, Exene Cervenka, was one of my idols as a

teenager. These were some of my decisive musical influences. I also went out of my way to see as many original blues, r&b, and rock people as I could, so I saw Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddly, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Big Joe Turner, and John Lee Hooker.

Now I'm drawn to people on an Americana spectrum, from Lucinda Williams, to the Handsome Family, James Hand, Hank Williams III, Elizabeth Cook, Merle Haggard, and lots of dust bowl singer/songwriter types.

TGF: From your web site, I found a couple statements I like : "...once a punk boy, now a sexy blonde...", and this excellent one, "...If Keith Richards was a tranny that got together with Merle Haggard, Shawna Virago would be their love child." Care to comment on either of these?

SV: I love those quotes! I don't have a problem holding the various contradictions in myself. I try not to box myself into any corners of gender expression that don't feel authentic and I think sometimes when non-transgender writers have reviewed me, they wonder about my music which is a bit rough around the edges and my presentation which is more feminine. As a transwoman, I feel I have to elbow my way into a lot of music scenes. It's not very ladylike, but it's the only way to be taken seriously.



TGF: You're very involved with street activism. Here's another quote from your site: "Virago is too busy and defiant to go stealth." This brings up the thought, do you feel there's a certain amount of apathy that's entered the gender community? Perhaps another way of saying that would be, is the community sometimes guilty of the "entitlement mentality?"



SV: I have done a lot of police accountability and anti-violence activism. I think we're living in a very exciting time, a time of profound changes in gender expression and making space for an abundance of gender expressions to coexist. Gender liberation is vital to social justice movements My music is now where I focus my activism.

TGF: Your site also mentions the training seminars and training sessions you conduct. Care to discuss these a bit?

SV: I've done a variety of trainings: anti-oppression trainings; anti-violence trainings, and a training called *Everything You've Wanted to Ask A Transsexual But Were Afraid To Ask*. I started them a bout 15 years ago and do them less and less. I focus more on my music now.

TGF: Over the last few years, there seems to be a more visible, pronounced presence of trans people in movies, TV (especially reality TV), theater, and music. This brings up a two part question: a) Is all this exposure beneficial to the community as a whole?, and b) Overall, how do you feel the community has been represented in all this media exposure?



SV: I curate the San Francisco Transgender film festival in San Francisco, which tries to give alternatives to the degrading stereotypes of transgender and genderqueer individuals found in much mainstream media. I'm very excited by the plethora of transgender and gender non-conforming people making music and writing and all kinds of art that speaks to our experiences.

TGF: You've been involved in some interesting "side" projects. The documentary *Diagnosing Difference* and you also provided music for *Uncovered: The Diary Project*, a dance theater work. Were these projects one shot things, or is this the type of creative endeavor you'd like to expand into, given the chance?

SV: I try to stay busy and when I'm not playing music I do other types of art. Work while the day is long! I have an essay in the new anthology *Gender Outlaws Next Generation*. I think everyone should see *Diagnosing Difference*, it's an important film. I've also made a few short films. My film *Hustle* was shown in festivals around the world and I'm currently working on another film. I hope to work with choreographer Sean Dorsey again.

TGF: Musically your material has been described as covering a range from folk-punk, to acoustic glam twang, to rockabilly, to laid back material. Do you have any one style you're wanting to emphasize or work in as a writer? Any new material or upcoming projects you can talk about?

SV: I take my songwriting seriously. It's the core activity of my life. I find myself mostly drawn to that big swamp where early rock n' roll and Americana co-exist, with a little more glamor and urban life thrown in. I love that idea of the crossroads in the American music mythos, where you have encounters with the Trickster figure. That fuels my imagination a lot and I hope that shows up in my lyrics. Right now, I'm working on a music video and promoting my album *Objectified*.

TGF: What advice would you offer to any musician, singer/songwriter (trans or not) who is just starting out?

SV: Drink lots of coffee and stay up late on school nights.

TGF: In closing, any final thoughts?

SV: I appreciate being interviewed. Thank you.

Check out www.shawnavirago.com at to order *Objectified* and for further information.