

The Heroines of My Life

Posted by Monika Kowalska | Saturday, 22 February 2014

Interview with Shawna Virago



Monika: Today it is my pleasure and honour to interview Shawna Virago, an American singer/songwriter, writer, and Artistic Director of the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival. Hello Shawna!

Shawna: Hello Monika. Thank's for interviewin' me.

Monika: When did you decide that you would like to be an artist?

Shawna: I've wanted to be a songwriter and musician for as long as I can remember, since I was very young. Music for me has always been magic and I've been drawn to it my entire life.

Monika: Your 2012 debut album "Objectified" was a tribute to the power of women and their fight with the patriarchal system. Are you a feminist?

Shawna: I believe we need to raise our voices for the rights of women, including of course transgender women. The second you transition you are experiencing female socialization and all the discrimination that goes along with it. I used to love reading "Transisters: The Journal Transgender Feminism". I especially looked forward to reading the letters section, which were full of fantastic bickering.

Monika: In one of the interviews, you were critical of women magazines that lead women to self-hatred, tormenting them with instructions on "how to lose weight, how to improve your abs, improve your ass, how to lose more weight"...

Shawna: Yes, I believe women's magazines are bastions of articles that promote women to hate themselves. They glorify unhealthy body types via anorexic models. Plus these magazines are very boring.

Monika: Your music video Transsexual Dominatrix was screened at many festivals and was named an Official Selection of the 26th BFI London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival and was awarded Best Music Video at New York's CineKink Festival. What inspired you to show yourself as a dominatrix?

Shawna: I wanted to write a song that had to deal with ways we survive in a patriarchal/gender binary culture. So often we have to be creative and do alternative economy work or work under the table. That song is an anthem about that.

Monika: You are a prolific writer with your works published in Gender Outlaws: Next Generation and in the anthologies Trans/Love: Radical Sex, Love & Relationships Beyond the Gender Binary and Take Me There. What does it mean to be a transgender writer and artist?

Shawna: I am a lyric based songwriter and this also helps me to write prose. Being transgender is a true blessing when you're an artist of any kind. It helps you see the world in unique ways. I wouldn't trade being transgender for anything.

Monika: You are the Artistic Director of the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival. Could you say a few words about its origins, and maybe about the films screened last year?

Shawna: The San Francisco Transgender Film Festival started in 1997 and is North America's first transgender film festival. Our last festival took place in November 2013 and we had a special screening for our good friend and festival co-founder Christopher Lee, who took his life in December 2012. Christopher was one of the first radical Trans man porn filmmakers. We'll be sending out our calls for submission for the 2014 festival later in the spring. People can go to sftff.org for more information.

Monika: How would you define your music?

Shawna: I'm part of the American troubadour tradition, from Woody Guthrie up to Lucinda Williams. My music is mix of folk-punk and Americana. I try to write songs that aren't too sweet.

Monika: In 2011 together with other transgender: Mina Caputo, Angelica Love Ross, Our Lady J, Sissy Debut and Amber Taylor, you recorded a fantastic David Bowie cover "Changes", which promoted "Transbeats", a documentary by Michael A. Simon about six talented transgender musicians (including you) that come to LA to make it in the music business. How do you find your participation in that project?

Shawna: The director Michael A. Simon contacted me and invited me to L.A. and play some music. He is a very nice guy, but I told him the song “Changes” is a bit reductive for transgender folks to sing. I suggested we do “I’m So Bored With The USA,” instead.

Monika: At the time of your transition did you have any transgender role models that you could follow?



Shawna: I didn’t have any musical role models, but I came out in the 1980’s and started to live full time in the early 1990’s. I appreciated reading the autobiographies of Renee Richards, Christine Jorgensen and also Jan Morris. San Francisco in the early 1990’s was a very wide open place, with lots of artistic activity in the Dyke world and I was invited to play a lot of these shows. Sometimes it was challenging, and I experienced transphobia but it was also a great place to express my gender in non-conventional ways.

Monika: What was the hardest thing about your coming out?

Shawna: A few things come to mind: Finding a job was a challenge and even in San Francisco the transgender communities were quite small in the early 1990’s, so often you were completely on your own navigating the streets and trying to avoid violence. Also I was usually the only transgender woman in the clubs where I played music, so that was a little odd.

Monika: What do you think about the present situation of transgender women in the American society?

Shawna: There are so many different transgender identities and communities in the United States, and with so many various factions and alliances it would be hard to summarize. All the old struggles: racism, sexism, class, etc...impact transgender communities. Some people have more privilege than others, some at the expense of others.

Monika: Could transgenderism be the new frontier for human rights?

Shawna: I think the transgender movement has the potential to enlarge human rights and also help us move away from so much black and white binary thinking in the world, and look at things more often in shades of gray.

Monika: Are you active in politics? Do you participate in any lobbying campaigns? Do you think transgender women can make a difference in politics?

Shawna: I have done a lot of political activism around the area of police abuse. I consider myself a cultural activist and I express my leftist politics through my songwriting and my writing.

Monika: Could you tell me about the importance of love in your life?

Shawna: As Shakespeare said “When Love speaks, the voice of all the gods Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony.” I’m a lucky girl and have been in a relationship with my man, Sean Dorsey, for over decade. Sean is an amazing transgender choreographer more people should know about.

Monika: Do you like fashion? What kind of outfits do you usually wear? Any special fashion designs, colours or trends?

Shawna: I combine elements of rockabilly, punk and country in my stage outfits. I love what Exene Cervenka wears onstage and also Lucinda Williams. In my day to day life, my fashion compass veers between the traditional Parisian chic of Catherine Deneuve and a country queer like Tammy Wynette.

Monika: Many transgender ladies write their memoirs. Have you ever thought about writing such a book yourself?

Shawna: TransGenre press has asked me to write a book for them and I am slowly assembling the pieces. Hopefully later this year it will be ready.

Monika: Are you working on any new projects now?

Shawna: I have just started working on a new album of songs and am writing a book.

Monika: My pen friend Gina Grahame wrote to me once that we should not limit our potential because of how we were born or by what we see other transsexuals and transgender people doing. Our dreams should not end on an operating table; that’s where they begin. Would you agree?

Shawna: Your friend Gina sounds very wise. I completely agree.

Monika: Shawna, thank you for the interview!

Shawna: Thank you!!