



Spinema Issue 50: Trans Punk Pioneer Shawna Virago Talks Music, Film, and More

Kickass musician, trans activist, and SF Transgender Film Festival artistic director, [Shawna Virago](#) sits down for a brief chat



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Shawna Virago is an amazing musician, full of power and positivity, who also happens to be the artistic director of [The San Francisco Transgender Film Festival](#). After you check out a bit about her and her current endeavors, you can find more at her [website](#), her [Facebook](#), and virtually every music platform out there. Before you dive headlong into her amazing work, take a second to learn about what she's got going on now and about the upcoming edition of the film fest.



Hi Shawna, let's start with a brief bit on who you are. Some know you as an advocate, others as a writer, many as a musical pioneer, and yet others as the artistic director of The San Francisco Transgender Film Festival. Who is Shawna Virago?

I'm a singer-songwriter and prose writer who also wears a couple other hats. I'm the Artistic Director of the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival. We started in 1997 by my friends Christopher Lee and Alex Austin and are the worlds longest running transgender film festival. I became Artistic Director in 2003. This year our festival is Online from Nov. 12–15, more info at www.sftff.org.

So, before we dive into the upcoming edition of the film festival, let's talk about your music, your latest single, and what it's been like doing music during this crazy time. Let's start with your new single. Tell the readers how ["Heaven Sent Delinquent"](#) came to be and what it's about.

My song "*Heaven Sent Delinquent* (Electric Single Mix)" is about the impact of growing up in a conservative Christian home, which I did, and its negative impact on a young queer person. It's a song about escape and hope for all outsiders.

How does this song fit into your overall catalog? Do you think it's representative of what newcomers should expect if they dive into your discography?

I think the song fits in with many of my ongoing themes: power, religion, sticking up for the underdog, isolation, and writing about the trans communities of the late 80s and early 90s, when there was not a critical mass of us and worrying about getting hassled by the cops, paying my rent, hopefully not getting hassled on the street or the bus. But I think it has an appeal for lots of people.

Prior to releasing this song I've spent the past several years releasing very raw acoustic songs. This song is still raw, with minimal instrumentation, elements of lo-fi, but has

drums and electric guitar, which my new album will also have. Plus, you can actually hum it!

What's it been like as a musician cooped up in your home and away from live audiences and venues these past months? How has it been hardest and what about it has been good for you, if anything?

We're all in such uncharted territory right now, on so many levels and I can't make sense of lots of it. As a transgender person, I am forced to think about gender all the time, literally every time I leave my flat, and I'm constantly surprised by what I consider bizarre manifestations of the gender binary. Especially people afraid of wearing masks, which we know blocks transmission of the virus, and is seen as not manly. I don't get it. Not wearing a mask, foolish and selfish. Luckily, most people in my neighborhood wear masks. Even the butch guys.

Also, I'm lucky I've had some virtual gigs, and am able to work from home and pay my rent. If there is anything good about it, is that I've been exploring different types of music.



I personally have been listening to you for a few years and this latest may actually be my favorite song yet. I love the stuff you've put out over the past few years and hope to get into some more of your earlier stuff soon. But thinking about your music begs the question for me, how did it lead you into becoming a writer, a film festival programmer, and all the other hats you wear? Or did music come after some of these other things? I guess, what I mean is how does it all fit together?

Songwriting came first and remains my strongest creative commitment. I've been writing songs a longtime. The punk rock in the late 70s. That just set off a spark for me. It's a story that we all heard a thousand times. That music gave a lot of us permission to become musicians or artists. The British punk bands opened up so many channels to explore and got me to circle back to people like the New York Dolls and Lou Reed. And somehow this

led me to check out Country artists, like Waylon Jennings. So, my consciousness formed pre-digital age.

Somewhere I got interested in the No Wave and New Wave film movements and also started making my own music videos, especially since I didn't know anyone else who could do it. And this path lead me to connecting with the San Francisco Transgender Film Festival.

So, the festival is obviously a key focus for you right now, since it's only a few weeks away. Can you tell the readers a bit more about the festival's programs this year and maybe even a bit about how it came to be and when you came to be part of it yourself.

The San Francisco Transgender Film Festival will be online this year. All films will be Closed Captioned for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing audiences. People can get more info at www.sftff.org. All genders are welcome. We screen all kinds of films, but consciously hold space for trans and gender non-conforming directors outside the mainstream. We started with DIY principles and we continue to prioritize films made by the most marginalized people in our communities.”

We started in 1997 and somehow, have kept it going ever since.



Thanks for taking a few minutes to chat with us. I'm stoked on the festival and I'll be listening to your music for years to come, I'm sure. Once the festival wraps up, what's next for Shawna Virago? What should people expect from you?

I was in the studio working on a new album when the pandemic hit. Like most of us, we're hoping for the best in 2021. I'm continuing to write songs for the album, and will release another stand-alone single, as well as a music video in the next few months.

Before I go... as I hope to catch some of the programs and films at the fest, could you highlight 2 you haven't mentioned (or have for that matter) that I really should prioritize and why?

Here are two of the highlights this year:

[**Love You Forever**](#), which is a musical experimental horror film. Directed by Sepand Mashiahof, Sepehr Mashiahof, Hana Harada.

[**Lou: A San Francisco Fantasy**](#), based on the experiences of Lou Sullivan, gay trans pioneer, the film is an erotically charged snapshot into mid-70s SF gay life. Directed by Mya Byrne.

But there is so much more!





Thanks again, any final thoughts as we say adeiu?

Thanks Justin for the great interview!

Remember to check out Shawna at shawnvirago.com and the SF Transgender Film fest at sfff.org.