

# ROCK STAR AND... THERAPIST

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WORDS DEBORAH FINDING

### How the singer Tori Amos is helping female survivors of rape and sexual abuse

When Tori Amos released her iconic debut album *Little Earthquakes* in 1992, few could have guessed the impact that one a capella track towards the end of the album would have. But *Me And A Gun*, a harrowing rape narrative based on Amos' personal experience, was to set in place a chain of events that would help countless women who had been in Amos' position. It is a chain that continues to grow, even now, 17 years later.

Rather than setting the story in the past, *Me And a Gun* narrated the rape as happening in the present, with its wrenching internalised description: 'It was me and a gun / And a man on my back / And I haven't seen Barbados / So I must get out of this.' After the song was released, Amos received thousands of letters from young women who had also experienced sexual violence and had been feeling alone until they heard Amos' voice in solidarity with theirs. The response was so great that it led Amos to co-found RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network) in 1994 – the first national support network of its kind in the USA. Amos isn't alone in realising that, as a public figure, she has something more to offer her audience than her music. Other singers have been spokeswomen for anti-domestic violence charities, including Jamelia in the UK and Christina Aguilera in the US.

But in addition to the official channels of support that were created, other, unofficial networks formed, inspired by Amos' music and her example. When Shannon Lambert created a personal website peppered with Tori Amos lyrics, telling her own story of how she had been raped at the age of 15 by an older boy at her school, she too received a huge response, including an invitation to speak about her experiences on a national news show. Knowing she could not respond personally to everyone who would write to her after such exposure, Shannon set up an online forum called Pandora's Aquarium (named after another Tori Amos song).

When Shannon appeared on the TV programme to talk about how *Me And A Gun* had helped her, she found herself face-to-face with the woman who wrote it. After the segment was filmed, Amos took Shannon backstage, where they shared a conversation that Shannon describes as 'very healing, private and emotional'. Amos autographed a photograph for Shannon with the words 'We'll get there together', a phrase Shannon admits became something of a mantra to her when developing Pandora's Aquarium. 'My hope,' Shannon offers, 'is that Pandora's Aquarium will be a place where rape and sexual abuse survivors break the silence, tell their stories, heal those most invasive, unseeable of scars, and begin to live again.'

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Shannon's wish was granted. Since the forum was set up in 1999, Pandora's Aquarium has registered 20,000 members all over the world, the vast majority of them women aged between 18 and 35. The forum provides a safe space for them to talk about all aspects of their experiences, from how to deal with traumatic flashbacks to practical support if they choose to report their experiences. There is also a thriving LG-BTQ section in which lesbian and bisexual women can help each other with negotiating relationships and issues of identity after abuse.

Lindsay, now 24, stumbled across Pandora's Aquarium by chance at the age of 17. Sexually abused by her paternal grandfather as a young child, Lindsay had also experienced rape at the age of 13 by the father of the girl she babysat. 'It left me seriously emotionally scarred,' explains Lindsay, 'because I had trusted him and loved his family.' Of finding Pandora's Aquarium she says, 'I had never intended to look for resources for sexual assault survivors simply because I had no clue

# TORI AMOS



that any even existed. I was looking for a card trick that I thought my brother would like, and Pandora's Aquarium was one of the links on the side bar of the website.'

In Pandora's Aquarium, Lindsay found the help she was looking for. 'I did not have much support in my real life, and had been socially isolated since telling people I was raped. Pandora's Aquarium became my main outlet. I began to make friends online, some of who became friends in my life outside the boards.' Unusually, it was Pandora's Aquarium that led Lindsay to the music of Tori Amos, not the other way around. 'So many of the members talked about how Tori Amos' album *Little Earthquakes* had helped them, so I bought it. I listened to it for days and so many emotions that I had buried inside suddenly became released within me.'

At the age of 20, Lindsay suffered another horrific experience, at the hands of an employee at her college, who raped and slashed her with a knife. She was targeted because of her sexuality. 'He wrote horrible slurs about lesbians, and said he was trying to make me "turn straight".' This time, Lindsay had the immediate support of the community of Pandora's Aquarium to turn to. 'I would have been

## HELP AND SUPPORT

To join the Pandora's Aquarium message board, or to support the project financially, please visit [pandys.org](http://pandys.org)

*Tori Amos has just released her tenth studio album, *Abnormally Attracted To Sin*, and is currently touring*

very lost without them to help me through that terrible time. I turned to the members to provide me with advice and support as I rebuilt my life.'

Four years on, Lindsay has been in therapy for some time, says she has a healthier relationship with both herself and her family, and is engaged to her girlfriend of two years, who she

describes as 'the love of my life'. 'Life is beautiful now,' she smiles.

Lindsay credits some of her survival to Tori Amos, as well as the wide circle of supportive friends she found through the community: 'Each of her albums has inspired and touched me in unique ways. Her music helped get me through the darkest hours of my life.'

**'EACH OF HER ALBUMS HAS INSPIRED AND TOUCHED ME IN UNIQUE WAYS. HER MUSIC HELPED GET ME THROUGH THE DARKEST HOURS OF MY LIFE'**

Though the hardest part of Lindsay's healing journey is over, the chain of events started by *Me And A Gun* continues. It was perhaps Amos' willingness to place herself not above, but beside her fans, with regard to this particular journey, that has inspired not only respect and devotion, but also a desire to reach out to others and extend the help that Amos herself is able to give. Just as Shannon turned her experiences into Pandora's Aquarium, so Lindsay too wants to pass it on and help others. She is currently completing her master's degree in social work, as well as continuing to help others on the Pandora's Aquarium forum. 'I may not have musical talent like Tori,' she says, 'but I know how important having a good therapist, who is empathic to the needs of survivors, is to the healing journey. I hope to be that therapist to many people, particularly to survivors of sexual violence. In my early years, I felt I took more than I gave because I needed a higher level of emotional support. Now, I am at a point where I want to help others who are struggling.'