SIRE

Throwing Muses

When Throwing Muses' leader Kristin Hersh started writing songs and formed a band at the age of 14, she was not your average suburban teenager penning ditties about boys and fantasizing about how cool it would be to be famous. Her creative ideas came to her in the form of hallucinations, images she thought were real – "I couldn't see the difference between a song image and something just coming out my wall." Hersh, who'd already been playing guitar for years, started to express these visions in song form, and in them found the source of the stunning musical gift that ultimately made Throwing Muses one of the most influential bands of the decade.

In the mid '80's, the Muses left their Rhode Island hometown to play the Boston club circuit. Hersh, at 19, was a visual study as strangely compelling as her music. A baby–faced kid with a guitar slung across the swell of her pregnant belly, she sang like a child wracked by nightmares, alternating suddenly between fragile melodies and savage outbursts of frustration and pain. Throwing Muses' unconventional musical style – a jarring tumult of waltz–time guitars and eccentric backbeats with no basis in traditional verse–chorus pop song structures – soon made the band an underground sensation.

Although the turbulent, troubled nature of their music inevitably attracted legions of obsessive fans who plagued the band with accounts of their own dark demons, Throwing Muses never set out to be the standard bearers for teen angst. Their musical approach was founded in innocence – they played what they heard.

"We had a lot of faith in what we were doing, so we just assumed it would be accepted for being good," says drummer David Narcizo. "It was a naive kind of cockiness. We had no sense of business or money or image, just a sense that everyone was going to be so happy to hear this."

Throwing Muses had the savvy to realize that an American major label wouldn't know how to begin promoting a band for whom there was no commercial precedent. In 1986, Throwing Muses became the first American band to sign a deal with the powerful U.K. independent label 4AD, a match that was weird enough in many ways, but proved to be the right choice. "We didn't have anything in common with all those dark English bands (that defined the 4AD sound at the time). We were completely out of context," says Hersh. "We were playing country hardcore, basically, but I guess they thought it sounded scary enough, like a really scary country band."

Throwing Muses self–titled 4AD debut landed them on the covers of such major British music magazines as NME and Melody Maker, and made them superstars in Europe. As an import, it secured their status as underground icons at home, which inspired more respectful overtures from the American majors. They signed up with Sire Records in 1987 and released a series of albums that were each distinguished by their own individual moods and merits, but maintained the unparalleled honesty and originality of the Throwing Muses sound.

Although the band sustained a few line–up changes (bassist Leslie Langston left the Muses to get married in 1990; Hersh's stepsister Tanya Donnelly struck out on her own to form Belly in 1991), Throwing Muses have managed to remain in favor with both the fickle British music press and with their core following of impassioned American fans. Kristin Hersh, now the 28–year–old mother of two young boys and a seasoned major– label artist, has never lost her ability to hear her inspirations as tangible entities. The demons in her head didn't kill her; they made her stronger. Her voice has matured to something more sublimely beautiful than the crazed vocal acrobatics of her earliest work; her simple, astonishingly powerful poetic style is more oddly perceptive and moving than ever.

University is the kind of record that could extend Throwing Muses' U.S. audience far beyond its cult following. If the churning, galloping rhythms of earlier Muses albums were somewhat childlike in their unfettered exuberance, the sinewy grooves of *University* suggest a more grown–up, powerful sexuality. Throwing Muses, which now consists of Hersh, founding drummer Narcizo, and bassist Bernard Georges (who was won over by the band's sound while in their employ as a tour roadie), has found musical muscle in the rock–trio format. "It's amazing to me that a trio is so strong, like a triangle," says Hersh. "There's all this understood music in every measure – silence plays a role, every fading note plays a role. There's all this space, and you can raise the energy level at any given time." The rhythms of *University* are decidedly "female" – a term Hersh uses when referring to a genderless approach to song patterns. "The form that's accepted as the pop music that's usually played on the radio is very masculine. It's predictable," says Hersh. "There's a hook that repeats and a build to a climax...It's like every play, every TV show. This "feminine" approach doesn't rely so heavily on building power by going up in a straight line – it goes all over the place, with lots of details. It's not more appropriate to the human condition or anything, it's just a little more necessary now that we've leaned so much in one direction for so long."

Significantly, *University* is the first Throwing Muses' album produced solely by the band, and they've proven that nobody knows better what to do with their music than they do. The direct impact of the songs has a lot to do with a dry production technique that brings every tone into sharp relief. There's a sense of reinvented, groovy psychedelia throughout the record that recalls a mid–'60's mood without taking on a retro feel. The first single "Bright Yellow Gun" is an infectious rocker; "Shimmer" springs from a driving backbeat and never lets up. The most remarkable thing about *University* is that almost any track could be the hit single. "Snakeface" is as hypnotically seductive as a snake dance; the haunted lullaby melodies of "Crabtown" are hard to get out of your head; the shimmering "That's All You Wanted" is unflinchingly pretty and vulnerable. There's no question that *University* is Throwing Muses most accessible record to date, however, it's as multi–dimensional as the most complicated Muses opus; the songs wrap around you, get under your skin, and become progressively more intriguing as they reveal themselves, layer by layer.

Robin Vaughan
