



SHANNON SHAW

TEXT ALIXIS RAITKEWICH PHOTOS ALIXIS RAITKEWICH + LAUREN BAKER

SHANNON AND THE CLAMS

CHAPTER 2 INTERVIEWS



favorite singer, but hearing Roy Orbison in this freaky-ass movie opened my mind in a way. And then all the other musical scores associated with David Lynch stuff, were just eye-opening.

When I moved to Oakland, I started to see female musicians, and got involved in queer punk. That move to Oakland was really eye-opening. Seeing people that aren't guitar gods, playing in stained t-shirts, and not expecting anyone to be there, it made me think, "Oh-wait, he's just a dude. I'm just a dude. I can do this too". I didn't grow up playing music, I didn't start till I was twenty-five, an old maid.

What is the recording process like for you?

I use to hate recording because I felt in the dark about the process. I felt like it was a boys' world, that I could never comprehend. When we first started recording with someone else I just felt like a loser who wasn't contributing. All the boys were really confident and knew the basics of recording and I didn't. I felt embarrassed the entire time, and just let them tell me what to do.

Then I wasn't that pleased with the recording because all the stuff that I wished I'd said, I was too chicken to pipe in.

On the second and third album, I felt more empowered because I started saying what I wanted. Saying "I have no idea if this is possible but I want this to sound this way", and then we would figure out how to make it sound that way.

Now I feel like I have so much more control over the final product. I feel like a sculptor now. The last two albums, I contributed greatly to mixing and all the other elements. On tour you have to be able to tell the sound person what you want or else it's not going to sound good. So I had to start going out of my comfort zone, and describing what I needed. I'm so glad I started stepping out to do that, because things sound better, how I want them to be.

What instruments do you play?

I only play bass [but] I would love to play drums. In my

Shannon Shaw has been a staple of the Oakland, CA punk scene for years, fronting Shannon and the Clams with guitarist Cody Blanchard and drummer Ian Amberson, as well as playing and writing with Hunx and his Punx. Shannon and the Clams' early releases came out on 1-2-3-4 Go! followed by their latest LP, Dreams in the Rat House on Hardly Art. In addition to her work as a musician, she is also a painter and metalworker who draws inspiration from fairy tales and the symbolist movement. If you asked Shannon, I'm sure she'd humbly declare, that she is "just a dude", and if she can do it, you can do it. We sat down in Los Angeles to explore her creative process and what inspires her as a highly creative musician and artist.

SHE SHREDS What is your songwriting process?

SHANNON SHAW I have to say 95% of my songs come while I am driving. I'll suddenly feel almost like I drove over a bump, but it will be like a [melody]. I'll just sing alone in the car, exploring whatever music comes to me. I'll record into my phone and later I'll sit down and try and build a song. Another place where I write songs is swimming. I love jumping into a pool or a river and going down to the bottom, floating there just makes me come up with ideas. But then it's hard to capture them because I'm soaking wet, and in a body of water. Or waking up from a dream. "Baby Don't Do It", was something I was able to trap from a dream and "Sleep Talk".

Do you think about your audience while songwriting?

Sometimes I think of the audience, not while it's being written but afterwards. I don't want to think about that [though]. I think that would control what I was making too much.

I worry sometimes that people are going to think something I'm doing is too weird. I did this song called, "Heads or Tails", and I was really worried that people were not going to get it, but that got a good response. Cody hates that song, but I pushed to put it on there anyways, as an exercise to be open to trying new things.

When does the collaboration process come in with the rest of the band?

I take tons of notes, I call them scraps. I'll have one scrap recorded into the phone and I'll try to work out a demo on the computer where I add percussion, usually just thigh slaps, then guitar which I can barely play, and maybe a bass line. I'll send it to Cody, and then he usually forgets to listen to it. Then we get to practice and I struggle through showing him, but he knows me really well, and he's good at figuring out what I'm going for.

We've definitely always had that connection but it works better now. When we first started playing music, I was so limited with my bass playing, and I was so shy and embarrassed. Now I'm a lot more comfortable and I'm a little more proficient at the instrument. I'm more articulate with describing the percussion I want, or drawing inspiration from other songs, and I feel I can paint him a clearer picture of what I'm going for.

What was the concert or album that made you say, this is for me?

I grew up in Napa County [California] which is not very open minded. I never really saw any female peers play music, and all the dudes I knew played new metal. There was not really any kind of punk culture in Napa. There are cops everywhere and there's nowhere to hang out if you're not twenty-one.

So we would just go to the movie store and learn about counter-culture through VHS. We got so into David Lynch, I learned about a lot of music through David Lynch films. I grew up listening to Roy Orbison, he's my

SHANNON AND THE CLAMS

CHAPTER 2 INTERVIEWS

mind, I tell myself I would be such a good drummer but then as soon as I sit down I sound like a chimp that someone let get to the drums.

Who gave you your first bass?

My high school boyfriend. I got it when I was fifteen from this guitar store in Napa. It's the same bass I play with now, it's a Dan Electro. He taught me how to play, one bass line from a Nine Inch Nails song and that was the only thing I could play for years and years. I didn't really try, so it just sat in the corner of my room.

Then when I was twenty-five, I'd had it up to here with a bunch of things going on in my life, and that [bass] was an outlet. I was super depressed, I had lost my job, I'd got cheated on by my boyfriend, and I was alone in this horrible apartment in Oakland. I had no friends and no money, and just felt like I was going insane and everything was totally dark. I got this melody in my head. I had nothing to do and was miserable in my house and pulled the bass out, and I slowly built one little song, it's called "Heartbreak", I think we have it on a 7".

How do you achieve your specific sound?

I want the vocals to be dreamy and sound distant. I don't want you to always know what I'm singing. I want things ghostly and misty, like chiffon. Cody made us a box called the "barf blaster" that has all these pedals, and when you turn it on the right way it's the perfect vocal sound. Bass, I make it sound warm and bass-y. I hate when I accidentally get a new metal amp, and I have a hard time making it sound old or warm. I think that you can play anything, and tweak it and get it to sound how you want.

What inspires you?

I don't even know how to write a song that's not about something that I'm living inside of. I think it's like shedding. If something is super painful, removing it and changing what it looks like is a way of scooting it away. It's not even super conscience, it just naturally happens. Sometimes I think performing is about the sharing. I don't think I would want to play anymore if I didn't feel like I was connecting with the audience. That's a major

aspect of performing, what's happening together, the exchange.

Tell us about yourself as a visual artist

I moved to college to study painting and drawing but ended up getting into illustration. I graduated with a B.F.A in Illustration. I still do a lot of painting, jewelry, and metalworking. Over the last couple years, comedians and wrestlers are what I've been [painting]. People who were my heroes growing up. I think my next series is going to be some contemporary comedians. [For] wrestlers, I try and capture the pain and the strain and the falseness of wrestling. It's like acting but they really are being tortured and putting themselves through so much. Deaths in professional wrestling, most of it is suicide, that made me think of them as more human.

How did you create the visual aesthetic for the Clams?

A lot of it goes back to what I still love from my childhood, fairy tales. A lot of my painting style is inspired by the fairy tales I read growing up. Those stories are so bizarre, you couldn't write tales like that for kids now. I'm really into illustrations from the turn of the century, a lot of those artist are connected to the symbolist painters and the pre-raphaelite painters, who are my all-time favorite artists. [They] paint an allegory or a metaphor, or symbols that tell a whole story, and I love that. I do that with song writing.

Cody's songs are his own contemporary fairy tales, and my songs are kind of allegories, as in what I'm singing about is not really what happened. The lyrics will be saying something else when the song, to me, is about something different, which in some ways is what the symbolist painters were doing.

We're definitely DIY, I've handmade a lot of costumes and props. I like the hands-on, creative aspect of the band. I'm so glad I went to art school. I know a lot of people that are like "what a waste of time and money" but I really do use everything. Even history, I'll work it into a song. //