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Sax talk

JOSS STONE
Soul mate

STEVE VAI
No limits

ALANIS MORISSETTE

Digs deep, bares all

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ROCKING THE CRADLE

Motherhood hasn't softened
Alanis Morissette's passion for
baring all her emotions in song

By Russell Hall



It's a midsummer morning, and Alanis Morissette is enjoying some rare downtime in her hometown of Ottawa, Canada. Although she's lived in Los Angeles since the mid-'90s, clearly there's no place like home. "It's been a long time since I've been here," she says. "I used to come up three times a year but almost two years have passed this time. Today we're getting all the cousins together—having about 10 kids in one place. I'm being Auntie Alanis. It's great."

Family has been on Morissette's mind of late. In 2010, she married rapper Mario "Souleye" Treadway, and on Christmas Day of that year the couple's son, Ever, was born. A devoted mother, Morissette has never let her artistic spirit languish, but she admits with a laugh that touring and recording have become complicated propositions. "We just got back from doing some shows in Europe," she says, "and my arms have become very strong with Ever in tow. I bow to my husband and the team we travel with for making all this possible. We travel now as a large village."

Casual fans might be surprised at how fervently Morissette has embraced domestic life. She exploded onto the scene in 1995 with *Jagged Little Pill*, a ferociously soul-baring album that helped erase the boundaries for what so-called women-in-rock could accomplish—both artistically and in the marketplace. Produced by Glen Ballard, the record sold more than 30 million copies worldwide—and it remains the best-selling major-label debut album in music history on a global basis. *Jagged Little Pill* earned Morissette a slew of Grammy nominations and several wins, including the coveted trophy for Album of the Year. One of the album's harrowing singles, "You Oughta Know," nabbed Best Rock Song honors.

Morissette's rise appeared meteoric to the world at large, but in fact she had already achieved stardom

as a child in her native Canada. By age 12 she had not only written her first song, she had also earned enough money to record and self-release it. Her debut album, a dance-pop record titled *Alanis*, went platinum in Canada and garnered three 1992 Juno Award nominations. She earned a win for Most Promising Female Vocalist of the Year. A second album, *Now Is the Time*, yielded three singles that reached the Top 40 on the Canadian charts.

Still, Morissette's youthful success hardly prepared her for the onslaught that came in the wake of *Jagged Little Pill*. Disillusioned with fame and its trappings, Morissette embarked on a spiritual quest, embracing an ongoing journey of self-discovery that's shaped her subsequent work. She doesn't disown her role as a pioneer for the likes of Katy Perry and Avril Lavigne—who

have cited her as a profound influence—but she admits to mixed feelings. "I have some conflict with that, but only in the sense of ego versus humility," she says. "There's a certain humility that's indigenous to the Canadian culture. I'm proud that I was on the crest of a massive wave—a social movement—but it was going to happen whether I was there or not."

Morissette, 38, often refers to her albums as snapshots of her life, and her latest, *Havoc and Bright Lights*, is no exception. While many of the songs center on her new role as wife and mother, the record remains distinctly Morissette as matters of gender, celebrity and social consciousness are explored as well. "I never really know the theme of an album until it's finished," she explains. "Only then can I see what's emerged. For this, I think it's mostly the deepening of intimacy in relationships, including the one with myself."

To record the album, Morissette turned first to London-based producer Guy Sigsworth, who manned the boards for her 2008 "breakup" album, *Flavors of Entanglement*. But where *Flavors of Entanglement* was rife with foreboding, sporting a dense, sometimes industrial sound, *Havoc and Bright Lights* contains less clutter, more equanimity. Part of the sonic difference can be ascribed to initial sessions, which took place in Morissette's L.A. home. She also credits co-producer Joe Chiccarelli for adding "human elements" to what she and Sigsworth came up with. "Guy is a savant-genius," she says. "He has a magical quality about him that's almost otherworldly. And then a lot of the songs—like 'Numb' and 'Empathy'—really wanted what Joe Chiccarelli provided, which was warmth and an earthy, modern-rock sound."

Contrary to what some believe, anger and heartbreak are hardly the only forces that fuel Morissette's creativity. "For me, passion leads the charge," she says. "Whether I'm scared, infatuated, loving, lustful or in pain, if there's passion behind the emotion, that writes the song." Morissette spoke with us about the new album, her goals and why fame isn't all it's cracked up to be.

When did you begin work on the album?

I had a naive notion that I could write the album while I was pregnant, but at around 3 p.m. every day I went down for the count on my couch. So that goal went out the window. But once Ever was born I moved quickly. I feel very alive when I'm writing, whether it's articles, songs or just having a philosophical conversation. When I'm not doing any of that, I feel I'm not living my purpose. I didn't want to experience that "unlived life" thing as a parent. So the challenge became how to be a vocationally inspired alpha woman—and a mom—at the same time. That remains the challenge, and it's a sacred one.



Onstage at the 2010 Winter Olympics, Vancouver

All portraits by Williams & Hirakawa. Performance by Cameron Spencer/Getty Images



Which song set the tone?

"Guardian" was the first one out of the gate. It was a very important song to start on for what are probably obvious reasons, with my having a 5-month-old baby. We hit the ground running. We built a makeshift studio in our living room so that I could be an attachment mom and be available 24 hours a day—and at the same time write the record. "Guardian" was the tone-setter in terms of the chorus being about protectorship, and wanting to guard my son's safety and freedom. And then the verses were about realizing the need to direct some of that maternal and paternal energy to myself.

How makeshift was the studio?

It was very simple. Basically we got ProTools and a table and some amazing speakers. My husband and I built a vocal booth. There was no lock on the door, but there was a "must knock" imperative. Probably 95 percent of my vocals were recorded there. After that, Guy did some stuff in London, and Joe Chiccarelli added some human elements at Sunset Sound in Hollywood. Today anyone can make a record in their living room and have it sound really gorgeous.

Describe your songwriting process.

It's like a stream-of-consciousness conversation. I don't want to get too precious or pretentious about it, but for me songwriting became a channeled experience. When I first began writing in that way it was overwhelming. Now it's something I rely on and am humbled by. It usually takes about 30 minutes to write an entire song. Once in a while, I'll escape and run upstairs to finish a verse or something, but the songs write themselves pretty quickly. Of course, the living of the life that I'm commenting on happens for years before the songwriting comes out. By the time I write, I'm ready

at long last to render what might be a complicated idea in a very pithy and clear way.

With pen in hand?

Yes. I'm sitting there with my journal as the music's playing, and I'm either guiding Guy, or I'm being guided by a sound or a verse that's inspiring. The music and lyrics are written at the same time. Sometimes we start with a chorus, although it usually doesn't matter which section of the song we begin with. We just go.

'I've heard some glorious misinterpretations of my songs, and that's great.'



Did that start with *Jagged Little Pill*?

It actually started long before then, when I was 9. As a teenager, I had two records in Canada that were well received. My style of writing at that time was more perfunctory. I had some fears related to not rhyming, things like that. That was a great experience as a kid cutting my teeth and getting a general sense of the craft—the whole idea of arrangements and how songs are written. But I also knew at some point I would return to an unprecious, unfettered approach to writing—the way I have a conversation when things come off the top of my head. I returned to that way of writing after teaming up with Glen Ballard on *Jagged Little Pill*.

Who were your early influences?

Aretha Franklin and Whitney Houston. I also listened to Heavy D and other rap and hip-hop artists. My brothers were into them. There was also my parents' music—Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Carole King. I loved the idea of blending technological, bass-heavy dance music with pop's beautiful harmonies and choruses, and combining that with real autobiographical storytelling. Blending those sensibilities became an ideal for me. On this album I feel all those things are well represented.

How did fame affect you?

I was sold the same bill of goods we're all sold in this Western value system, which is that the three most important things are fame, staying 21 forever and being really rich. That seems to be the way of North America, and I bought into it as much as anyone. I thought fame would afford me connection and give me high self-esteem and lots of friends, and that I would be surrounded by support. What I found instead was that fame amplified whatever was already there. If there was any self-hatred, any self-doubt or traumas being acted out, fame blew that up exponentially. So I was disillusioned for a while, and crestfallen. But sometime in the late '90s I began to think, "You know

what, I have an agenda here. I can use fame as a means to an end, rather than have fame be *the end*." That's when things started to get exciting again.

Do your albums always capture a snapshot of your life?

Yes. If someone tosses me an album cover when I'm 100, it will be like seeing a photograph that reminds me of that era. There's always so much growth happening, I could—and often do—write new songs every day or every week. But there's something about corraling these songs every few years that feels like I'm compiling a chapter. But who knows? Someday I might start writing and releasing songs all the time.

Do you think your songs reflect what's happening in other people's lives?

I hope this comes across in the way that I mean it, but that's really a secondary concern. I write these songs for myself. The artistic process is by necessity for my own growth, my own understanding and clarity. When I'm being asked to distill a complex idea into a four-minute piece, that helps *me*. And then when I offer that to others—and this is where the fame part becomes a tool—they can make it their own. I've heard some glorious misinterpretations of my songs, and that's great, too. These songs aren't mine anymore once I share them.

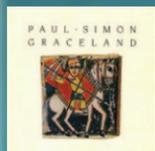
Are you into social networking?

I've begun to be more aware of it. I have great reverence for the old school in terms of the sweet mystery artists once had. You could create a sort of idealized fantasy



SOUND DECISIONS

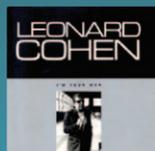
Alanis Morissette reflects on the albums that influenced her artistry



**GRACELAND, 1986
PAUL SIMON**
"The compelling thing about this album was his reaching out to an international community, a community outside America. I bow down to his decision to open up to the planet."



**TAPESTRY, 1971
CAROLE KING**
"When I was a kid, we'd take long car rides when we lived in Germany. I listened to *Tapestry* from the back seat and remember asking my parents, 'Who is this woman?'"



**I'M YOUR MAN, 1988
LEONARD COHEN**
"My dad played his music all the time, and of course he's Canadian. Knowing he was from the same culture, and telling image-based and autobiographical stories was inspiring."



**WHITNEY HOUSTON, 1985
WHITNEY HOUSTON**
"I listened to Whitney a lot as a teenager—like 'The Greatest Love of All.' My theory was if I could sing along to any of her songs, I was a bonafide singer."



**VS., 1993
PEARL JAM**
"I was being conditioned to be either a pop artist or rock artist or a dance artist—but not to blend those things. When I listened to Eddie Vedder, I thought, 'He's just being him.'"

ACTING UP

Creative rewards of performing in front of the camera

Alanis Morissette's forays into acting date back to her childhood, when she appeared in the children's TV show *You Can't Do That on Television*. In 1999, she took on the role of God in the film *Dogma*. Since then she's landed roles in film, theater and TV, including *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *South Park* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. So does acting affect her songwriting? "It does," she says, "just as writing articles helps the dancing process, and dancing helps the spiritual practice and so on. Each benefits the other."

"There's a charm to inhabiting a role that someone else has created," she continues. "A lot of times I'm invited into an aspect of humanity that I might otherwise shy away from. Oftentimes when I'm presented with a script I think, 'I don't really evidence this part of humanity in my life. How do I do this?' It shows me more aspects of humanity. That helps me in my compassion, in my social commentary and in my understanding of people. Acting helps me understand being human in ways my own life doesn't afford me."

around an artist. Today it's about leveling the playing field and creating human interaction with artists. I enjoy both. In an evening's tweet, I have to ask myself, "How transparent am I going to be? How much will I let people know about what I'm worrying about today?" It used to be about mystique. Now it's about how brave you're willing to be about what's going on in your life.

What's next?

I'm trying to segue into being more of a teacher than a student. It's a no-brainer that I'm a student. But I want to be brave and step into the role of being a teacher and a mentor and an active participant in larger conversations of social relevance, and not be ashamed of the part of me that's geeky and academic. I'll also be writing songs until I'm dead. I'll always make albums and I'll always write books and I'll continue to travel and be in the public eye. Beyond that, I hope to blossom my family—God willing—and nurture my personal life. **M**