



Mary Timony Ripz it Up

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ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
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I don't want to let you down. I just wanted this, wanted this, wanted this now. - Ex Hex, "Waste Your Time"

Mary Timony allows Merge Records to pass her mobile number to journalists. Her voice, at least while walking home post-errands on a frigid afternoon, is high and breathless, in contrast to the smoky vocals familiar to two decades of indie-rock lovers. In conversation she comes across as an Annie Hall type - smart but fragile and occasionally, politely annoyed.

She says, "I don't know, I don't know" and giggles often, seemingly embarrassed or frustrated that she's being asked, yet again, to analyze her career and the music scenes it has crawled, careened and capered through.

But despite her insistence, Timony does know, and the self-titled debut of Ex Hex, her latest band, proves it. The gist of it seems to be, take your craft seriously and yourself, less so. "We're trying to make music that we really like. It's really pretty simple," Timony says.

Ex Hex is a D.C.-based power trio featuring singer/guitarist Timony, 44; drummer Laura Harris, 32, formerly of Aquarium; and bassist Betsy Wright, 34, formerly of The Fire Tapes. They sound like the progeny of Johnny Thunders and Joan Jett, if that progeny were raised on a diet of Cheap Trick, Holly and the Italians and the Ramones. (Or, for millennials, think the energy and garage riffs of The Strokes.) That is to say they're fast, poppy, retro-tinged, economical and hook-heavy, with taunting lyrics. Their videos offer B-52s-worthy doses of quirk, cameos from D.C.-rock royalty, and sexed-up Lisa Frankstyle doodles from cartoonist M. Wartella.

Released in October, *Rips* was lauded by critics and landed a spot on influential music blog Pitchfork's "best of 2014" list. The band seems to be more hyped, even, than Timony's last project, the short-lived super-group Wild Flag, which she co-fronted with Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney and Portlandia repute.

Timony has been the media point person for Ex Hex, fielding dozens of interviews. Except for a brief break to record the album (in Timony's basement studio and in North Carolina, with Let's Active frontman and R.E.M. producer Mitch Easter), the band has been touring nonstop since March. "It's not an artistic statement. It's not supposed to make anybody disturbed," Timony says. "But the amount of work that goes into making music that sounds easy, for me it's intense. It's way harder to write music that's easy and not boring than it is to write complicated music."

Timony's resume is rich. She grew up down the street from the MacKaye brothers, major proponents of the activist-infused D.C. hardcore scene in the late 1980s and early '90s. (Ian MacKaye played in Minor Threat and Fugazi, among other bands; co-founded Dischord Records, and unintentionally spearheaded the "straight edge" sobriety movement.) Her musical education began with viola lessons at age 9. By 14, she was studying jazz and classical guitar at a renowned arts high school. The next year she became a fixture at those hardcore shows.

"It was crazy here ... a lot of cool shows going on all the time and a lot of kids who were super excited about doing something on their own and putting out records," Timony says. "Shows were almost like religious meetings or something, where everyone just got together and all the money was given to charity."

A few years later she formed Autoclave with Christina Billotte (later of Slant 6), practicing in the basement of Billotte's group house, which also happened to be the D.C. epicenter of the Riot Grrrl movement. Timony "worshipped Fugazi," she says, but she never felt entirely at home in the hardcore scene. "It looked like an army. ... It was all these young guys with shaved heads looking really angry. ... I think Riot Grrrl was a reaction against that."

She found the Boston indie-rock scene to be a better fit ("more diverse in terms of styles and people in bands") and, while an English student at Boston University, fronted the moody, blistering Helium - a group that gained much of its following after MTV's Beavis and Butthead mocked its "Pat's Trick" video.

Helium broke up in 1998, and Timony began a four-album solo career (her 2005 release is also called Ex Hex), singing medieval-inspired folk tunes "about feeling depression and stuff" and paying her bills through packaging video transfers and dog-walking, among other gigs.

In 2004 Timony moved back to D.C. and began teaching guitar. "I spent all my 30s doing solo albums ... then I kind of burnt out with that. And then I was like, 'OK, I have done enough with music, I don't really want to do music anymore.' But then Carrie asked me to join Wild Flag and I was like, 'Oh my God, I guess I'm doing music again.'"

Wild Flag released a well-received 2011 album, but the bicoastal band (the other three members lived in Portland) was short-lived, serving as a springboard for Sleater-Kinney's reunion. Still, it convinced Timony that she wasn't finished with music. "I wanted to do something that was more fun to play, so that's where this new band comes from," she says. "Luckily, Betsy and Laura kind of came from the same school of thought, and we just all liked the same kind of music, and that made it easy to get a sound together."

For the first time, Timony took vocal lessons. "I've been around punk and hardcore kids. They don't study music, you just scream and stuff," she says. "And in the '90s, it's cool

to have a bad voice because it sounds authentic. ... But I don't have any respect for someone who doesn't learn how to play their instrument, so how should I be singing and have it be the main instrument on this record and actually not know what I'm doing?"

It's the rationale of a music teacher and of someone who has put in the time and yes, of someone who knows. Because, for all of its accessible pogopunk-ness and rock 'n' roll snark, an album as infectious as Ex Hex can only result from a situation where everyone knows what they're doing. Or, as Timony puts it, a band in which "no one is letting anyone off the hook."