



# Kooky Cookie?

**She was a star in her native Canada at 14, is responsible for one of the best-selling albums of all time and has even played God (in Kevin Smith's *Dogma*). *TotalMusic* corners Alanis Morissette on the eve of her new album release, *So Called Chaos*, to talk anger, happiness, transparency and the mysteries of production...**

Chances are, if you have a particular opinion on the subject, you will fall into one of three camps regarding Alanis Morissette. Camp one is "she's a mardy mare who should shut the fuck up" (generally a male view and more often than not attached to additional thoughtful insights about how a good shag would help her no end). Camp two is "she's a hippy nutter and as mad as a bag of otters", and camp three "she's a very talented singer/songwriter who survived early stardom relatively intact" (unlike say, oh, I don't know... Michael Jackson?). This camp would argue she pushed all the right buttons for a hell of a lot of people – male and female – on the multi-million selling *Jagged Little Pill* and has since continued to create clever, thought-provoking, often viscerally exciting music.

In fact, she's actually an amalgam of the last two opinions, and now she's ditched the 'peering through a tent-flap' hair-style (explained thus: "I'm a sucker for my next challenge and definitely my next challenge was to see how I could survive without my security blanket"), revealing more of her face, she is quite stunningly attractive, if incredibly tiny. Also, given the lofty peaks to which she has ascended and the fact she's spent most of her life in the spotlight, she is absolutely charming and very, very smart, if prone to the odd crazy utterance – like the following when asked about growing up in public: "I actually think it was my purpose in life to do that, so other people can define themselves, be inspired by or comforted by my experiences." Or this, when quizzed about her painfully personal lyrics: "I think that I'm here to hearten and whether I do that by sharing experiences that are difficult, or my revelations, or hopes, I'm here to send the message that our human condition and all the colours it embraces are all OK."

## TRANSPARENCY

So far so much psychobabble, but there's far more to Alanis Morissette than hippy sound-bites and Brit-embarrassing US therapy-speak, and if we're going to get any 'closure' here we

need to dig a bit deeper. Thankfully, Ms Morissette seems willing to oblige. "That's what interviews are good for," she smiles, radiantly. "I know that my life is constantly judged on the 10 songs on an album. I totally get that."

OK, let's start with why she thinks people have such extreme reactions to her? "I guess that's because I sold 28 million records," she laughs. "So some people got excited by that and some people got pissed off. I also do say things in ways that seem to bug people," she chuckles – in fact she laughs a great deal – "but also inspire people, so... Who I am has always seemed to provoke some sort of response, so it makes sense to me that my songs would as well. My tendency is to be self-enquiring."

Pushed further about the rawly personal nature of some of her lyrics, she admits she's "much happier being transparent", but given that she sees her work as a series of snapshots in time, surely even she can't look back at some of her less worthy moments without wincing? (To stretch the 'snapshot' analogy somewhat, would you happily exhibit your old photo albums so the world could judge your hideous past fashion *faux pas*?).

"Sure, there's some things that I might not feel totally..." she begins, and then pauses and frowns. "To think that there's some parts of me I'm happy to share and others that I'm not, that sort of implies that some parts of me are bad and shameful, and my goal is to be whole. So if I'm actually going to walk my talk, that means I have to be willing to share my vulnerable side as well as my empowered side, my pathetic side and my on-fire side. I don't think I'm doing anyone a service by just saying here's the shiny happy great part of me."

## EARLY ADOPTER

If this all seems a bit too, umm, raw for us reticent Brits, let us not forget that anyone who has lived their lives in the public eye since the age of 10 is about as far removed from the 'real' world as it's possible to get, and under the circumstances Alanis Morissette is actually remarkably down to earth. To wit, she

recalls her early years with fondness

"My parents' friends were musicians, they would be singing in bars and clubs around Ontario, and I was way under age – maybe seven or eight – but I would peep my head in through the exit door and watch them play music, and was just totally enamoured. I had always written poetry, and I was dancing and playing piano since I was about six, but I didn't write any songs until I was maybe nine or 10. I sent a tape to my parents' friends and they were so excited that I took an interest, to the extent that I recorded my first six songs with them and released my first single when I was 10. At the time I didn't think there was anything odd about that."

While this may sound like a dream come true to all you poor sods stuck in your parents' garage being roundly ignored by the world, there is a downside to all this early stardom – not least going to school with a load of people who aren't famous pop stars. "That was a bit weird," she agrees, "and it definitely took a toll on my twin brother as well, 'cos he was on the end of all the feedback, positive or negative, no holds barred. It was two different lives, really – there was me being at school and me working in the studio until three in the morning or filming a video, and then getting up at seven to go to school, but in a way it worked for me because I wound up feeling like a 30-year-old at work but acted more my age at school."

Do she think she missed out on a lot? "Yeah, I missed out on some things," she admits, "like maybe having a bit more fun, but I've made up for it." The smile that accompanies this statement is ever so slightly suggestive: "I think a lot of people's perception is that I work all the time, but I don't, I definitely know how to enjoy myself."

So much, then, for the myth that she's not a very happy person. "Well, that's part of me," she admits, "but, as I say, my aspiration is to be whole rather than simply good or happy, so there's a part of me that is fantastically discontented, but that fuels me, and it's really more about how I channel it."

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## THE BITTEREST PILL

Which brings us rather neatly to the phenomenally successful *Jagged Little Pill* (comfortably sitting in the top 20 best-selling albums of all time and still shifting units). Of course, such overwhelming success can be a double-edged sword – the only place left to go being down.

"That album was a little overwhelming to say the least," she admits ruefully, "but it's not like I now feel the magnum opus has been written so I can go and plant tomatoes. I want to keep writing and see what happens next. I know that I will write until I die, and whether two people or two million give a shit, I can't control. Would I love to share my music with millions of people every time out? Sure! There's a part of me that thinks 'bring it on, I'll sell 50 million,' but another part of me just feels, wow, what a crazy convergence in 1995 – the stars were obviously aligned, and people around the world were ready to hear what I was writing."

It must have been hard to start work again after such an all-encompassing success, though? "Yeah, it was obviously a pinnacle of sorts, and achieved all the things I had been taught about goals – financial success, status, and so on. After that there was no other direction to go other than inward, because I had gone externally and outward as far as I could go, so it forced me to turn around and go within –

possibly in a way I wouldn't ever have done if I hadn't experienced that success."

What followed was another hugely successful – albeit less so in sales terms – album (*Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*), and then a bout in the producer's chair for the next two outings (*MTV Unplugged* and *Under Rug Swept*). What is immediately apparent this time around – and it should be noted here that *So Called Chaos* is a step back towards *Jagged...* territory and possibly the best thing Morissette has recorded since that illustrious album – is that the producer's chair has been given to Sheryl Crow and Pink producer John Shanks. Was this by choice or necessity? "By choice. I had proved to myself that I could produce, it was really just curiosity to see if I could do it and what the experience would be like. We did something like 23 songs so I feel I got producing out of my system," she

laughs. "This time around there were two stages to the album – the writing and making the demos [Alanis



does all of her writing and demo recording simultaneously in the studio and, by all accounts, very quickly]. Then the band came in to play on it but I knew it wasn't finished, so I talked with my manager and he suggested John, and I said 'bring him in 'cos I got movies to go see!'"

All of which more or less boots the whole 'tortured artist' schtick into touch as well. If you imagine the Alanis Morissette you think you know spends all of her time picking over every last detail, you're sadly wide of the mark.

"I'd rather stick needles in my eyes than spend 24/7 in the studio," she grimaces. "I'm more of a 'first take, that's done' type. But John was amazing and he added a more meticulous, cleaner sound, adding things like loops. He did ask me to redo a couple of vocals, because sometimes when I'm writing I'm not making sure I articulate enough, so he ensured I recorded some clearer vocal takes."

And with that she's whisked away to answer the same damn silly questions all over mainland Europe. So, in conclusion, happy, grounded, playful, not at all precious and, yes, slightly dippy in a harmless enough way, but nobody's fool and totally in control of her life and work. She may have had a remarkable career to date but she's just released her best album in almost a decade and it's pretty much certain there's a great deal left yet to come.

*So Called Chaos* is out now on Maverick Records.

