



## Earth Angel: An Interview with Sarah Fimm By Gail Worley



A number of years ago, I wrote a review of a Tori Amos performance where I compared the singer to "a female version of Peter Gabriel, if there could be such a thing." When I was hired this past summer to write a press biography for a young singer/songwriter/pianist named Sarah Fimm, and was then introduced to Sarah's music, I knew that if any woman could channel Peter Gabriel's genius, it was her. Sarah grew up in Connecticut, taught herself to play piano while still a young child and, through a troubled adolescence, began writing her own songs at age fourteen. Now just 23, Sarah has recorded and self-released three critically lauded albums, *Cocooned*, *A Perfect Dream* and her latest, *Nexus*, released in the fall of 2004. Already praised in *Billboard* magazine as "another rare jewel" *Nexus* is a riveting and almost impossibly beautiful collection of 15 musical journeys exploring various themes of connectedness. In this startlingly honest and provocative

interview with Ink 19, Sarah talked about her vast and complex sources of musical inspiration and revealed herself to be not only a truly gifted musician and songwriter but also a profoundly compassionate and inspiring woman. Sarah Fimm, a rare jewel indeed.

### **How did you end up studying at Berklee College of Music?**

After high school, I applied to all music schools but none of them would take me because I didn't have any formal musical training. You can imagine what that does to you when you're eighteen years old and getting totally rejected. Music schools don't want to accept people who can't prove that somebody had taught you basic theory and harmony, which I didn't even know existed at the time. I applied to Berklee College of Music in Boston and at first they rejected me, but I said I'm not going to let that happen. I called their admissions office and said, "Look, you're going to take me into your school." They said that I hadn't had any musical training and gave me this whole run-around, so I asked what I needed to do. They said, "You need to take some music lessons." [Laughs] So I said, "But I can play." And they said, "But you need formal training." I had to put aside my bitchy nature and get a teacher. I wound up with this amazing guy named Franco Richmond, who is an incredible musician. He'd spent most of his time in Africa playing drums on the street. I studied with him for about three months. Then I submitted another tape to Berklee and they let me in.

While going to Berklee I studied a lot but I realized that the traditional approach was not really for me. But I met a lot of people there including Peter Geraghty (bassist) and Jim Perry (drummer) who became my band and are now also like my family. We've been together for about three years. From them I learned a lot about electronic music and about world music. That's more or less my story.

### **What bands or artists most influenced you or helped you to create your sound?**

My influences changed all along the timeline of my life. I would say that Bach, for one, was extraordinarily influential and absolutely ripped into my soul with his music. When I learned about him it made me want to learn about more classical musicians. That started me off on Beethoven and Chopin who is one of my favorites. I would always put on his music so I could sleep. I also grew up with a lot of metal because my brother was an insane metal head, so bands like Alice in Chains and early Metallica were influential. I definitely have a lot of that in me. Of course the way Tori Amos played piano was very learnable to me, because it wasn't something you had to read; but more like something that was very open to interpretation, so that was really special. Bjork was incredible in that vein because she really opened my eyes to using nature as a form of rhythm. I loved the albums she made where it was just potentially sampled life and then making music out of that life. Leonard Cohen was very important and I had very deep roots with him and my father, who used to play me his records so I would go to sleep. Sometimes I think that's where some of the melancholy in my music comes from. His lyrics were always so full of imagery that I wanted to be able to embody. When I learned about his life I started to travel more and it really broadened my perspective. I think those are definitely some of the biggies, but there are so many.

**You are often compared to artists like Sarah McLachlan, Fiona Apple, and Tori Amos. How do you feel about the comparisons?**

Well, truthfully, I don't know. I never really listened to Fiona Apple until people told me that I sound like her. While I think that she has a lot of talent, her music doesn't particularly affect me. Performance-wise Sarah McLachlan always had something I admired. She was very simple and I appreciate that, because I think simplicity is overlooked in music. I stopped listening to Tori when I was younger, as soon as people told me I started to sound like her. Obviously I wanted to be something else. I think when you're compared to people you have a tendency to do all the more work to separate yourself. At the same time, those are all very accomplished artists. Sarah has done Lilith Fair, which I think is very admirable. Bringing people together to make music in any respect, whether they're men or women, is a good thing.

When I admire an artist, I try to really learn about who they are and what they're trying to accomplish; if they're actually good and kind people who are contributing to humanity in some way. I think Tori Amos is that kind of an artist. I had the opportunity to meet and have coffee with her when I was in Boston years ago. Just the absolute light that shines from her eyes when she's talking to you is enough to make you go into some kind of paroxysm, because it's just too much. I admire Sarah McLachlan because she seems like more of a normal person who's somehow found a way to balance music with life, which I'm constantly struggling with. I think any woman who succeeds in music is admirable because I know how hard it is to really get your stuff heard.

**Where do you think your music fits in the current scope of popular music?**

Well, I'm not sure who our music appeals to exactly but at the shows I know when it is appealing to somebody, because I can see it reaching people and I can see them listening. There are the younger girls who come from a Tori-listening background and sometimes that's good. But then there are often people who are forty and fifty years old who say, "Wow, this is like a modern version of what I would listen to in the '60s. I love this." Then there are people right out of college who obviously have no money to buy music, but for whatever reason came across it and will write me these really prolific analyses of our music and send them to me. I find that fascinating, because I had never seen it how they see it.

Hopefully it will appeal to anybody who actually listens. I think that people who tend to be open minded to music that isn't pigeonholed tend to come to me, or to us.

**Tell me a bit about your first album, *Cocooned*?**

I wrote that music when I was between the ages of 14 and 17. At the time, I had already been trying to find someone to help me manage this whole ordeal. My first year at Berklee I ran into this manager who turned out to be kind of a shithead, in a nutshell. But I also ended up meeting Mack Ritchey who produced *Cocooned* and *A Perfect Dream*. Working with him was an absolutely enlightening experience. He has a great sense of musicality and energy is always flowing out of him at full force. He really helped me to take the reigns on it and produce the music that is in your head. [He also taught me] how to utilize the tools, because I didn't know anything about that. It was a unique experience and one that I really needed to have because I'd never worked like that before.

**I understand the *Cocooned* CD experienced a real breakthrough on MP3.com?**

It did, which I was honestly really surprised about at the time. But after I saw that it was getting attention I said, "Wow, okay, I need to really utilize the internet here." At the time I was first discovering a computer, really. I started connecting with a lot of other independent musicians through MP3 and I could not believe it. I think it wound up receiving two or three hundred thousand plays when they closed it. That's really where I made the huge connection of friends and bands from all over the world, with whom I then ended up playing shows or talking to and meeting other artists. It was a really wonderful avenue at the time for introducing yourself to the world via the computer. It was also a very enlightening experience to realize that you don't actually need to spend the money or go out and tour in order to get your music heard. I didn't have the money to do that, so it was really great.

**When did you decide to record and release *A Perfect Dream* and how did that album come together? How are the two records different?**

I think *A Perfect Dream* was different because I had Jim and Peter. Peter was present for part of *Cocooned*, but he was really only a bass player. It was mostly me and Mack producing *Cocooned*. On *A Perfect Dream* I really brought in Jim and Peter and we really started to behave like a band does, which is something I also didn't know much about. I didn't know how to really keep a band together and how to make things work when you're such different people, with such different aspirations. Every musician wants to do their own thing and realize this dream in their head, but to really do it together is a challenge.

I remember we were up in New Hampshire at Mack's studio and there was this amazing thunderstorm. Everything was just extremely calm, and the sun was setting and we had this moment where we were playing "Wrong Side Up," which is the moment I believe we actually became a band. We played it together and it felt great, and that's when I said, "Okay, this is what I want to do. This is where it has to be." Ever since then, that's what I've been working towards. So it was different for a lot of reasons but mostly because it was a band producing an album, not just a producer producing an album. There was a lot of conflict at the time, which really enabled us to really focus all this energy and these problems into the music. It was heavy [sighs].

**What most influences your songwriting?**

I was 18 when I really started having an intense conflict in my mind about why I was here and what I was supposed to be doing. I still have this conflict all the time. I started looking to external sources [for answers] about whom people had said, "These are wise people,"

because I want to know what the wise people think and what it is that they think we're here for. Steven Hawking was absolutely instrumental, and still is, in the way I think about everything. For starters, he's an incredibly strong person who sits and observes and learns about the universe continuously from this chair. He still has an incredible sense of humor and he's still a very happy person, even though he's confined to a chair and, absolutely, what we would consider handicapped. When I started reading his theories about how the universe was formed -- like the *Big Bang* and the *Superstring Theory* and Black Holes -- [I was fascinated]. I've always had a fascination with space and time and how we're all relative to it. That kind of thinking was really instrumental in *A Perfect Dream* because I had always been thinking about it, but people so often dismiss those things because they don't understand them. The easiest thing to do when you don't understand something is to dismiss it as unimportant. I wasn't ready to accept that. I wasn't ready to give up my life and my wonder of the Universe just because people seemed to tell me it was crazy to even care.

Something I always cherished is that the existence we have is absolutely precious. For instance, I'm living in New York City now and there's nowhere else you can go where you feel quite so detached from everything special and yet, at the same time if you really look, it's all there. It's all there. Before I was in New York, when I was in Boston, I noticed the same kind of detachment from these things. I couldn't believe that people could wander around like robots without even the slightest interest in what your real purpose is here.

So, I went to the people that I thought would know, because they were listening, and those were people who live on the street. [One of the men I met] Dale, who is where the idea for *A Perfect Dream* came from, was so constantly in a state of flux and awe. Everything seemed so beautiful to him because he had experienced so much pain. He's the man whose voice is sampled right before the song, "A Perfect Dream." I also met Dave, who was an artist, and these guys spend their time every day wondering about these questions. I really noticed when I was sitting with them how people seem so incredibly uncomfortable with [homeless people]. These are the people who live in society and have jobs and kids and have this existence that can be very good. But then there are these strangers who seem to know so much more about life because they never had one, in the conventional sense. I said to my friend Rachel at the time, "I need to capture this because these guys are the people that we need to be listening to, and we're not." Obviously, some of them have endured such trauma that they're not even able to speak. I found it to be a moving experience and something that really changed my life forever, to just go outside with my minidisc player and my microphone and see what kind of humanity I could capture.

[The whole process] really got very difficult for me. There were times when I would go home at night and be so sad and drained. At the time I was at school and [my school work] was suffering because of it, but I knew what was more important to me. I knew that I had questions and I either needed more questions or more answers or more of both (laughs). I needed that thirst to be quenched by something, and it definitely was. It was wonderful to me that these people will be immortalized forever on that record. I try very hard to keep politics, at least direct politics, out of our music. But clearly I think a certain way and that's pretty obvious.

**It also reminds me of a song Peter Gabriel might have written. I did read that you're a fan of his music.**

Oh, I love him. He has to be included among my very important influences. Peter Gabriel, especially recently in the past few years, with his record, *Up* has really changed the way I look at music. What he's done with his life is incredible; the fact that he manages to have

this balance with his family and his career and running this amazing music label. The way he approached music with such an open mind and an "I'm always learning" kind of perspective [is also impressive]. He's so funny, too. I went to see one of his live shows. I took Peter on his birthday as a surprise, because Peter is a diehard Peter Gabriel fan also. What he was doing on stage was exactly what I wanted to be doing. He's such an artist in everything that he does and the way he approaches things. It's hard to explain because I haven't met him but he's really somebody who I'd collaborate with in a second.

### **Where was the album recorded and did you use a producer?**

We worked at Bear Tracks studio in Suffern, New York. We had an engineer who I gave co-production credit, because I believe that when people are involved in a project together that music needs to be a group of people all in the same wavelength, all understanding what they're doing. The album was essentially produced by Lance McVickar, myself, Peter and Jim. Lance was very good at just pressing the buttons that we needed to have pressed. We didn't have to think about it, and that was an incredible relief. Because when you're trying to capture moments, by the time you press the button it could be over.

### **I also like "Sky is Falling Down," would you like to talk about that?**

Oh, this one is really funny. We were actually in the studio at Bear Tracks recording the piano for this song and when you're in the studio you always try to get everything set up beforehand so you don't have to distract yourself with bullshit. We spent a good four hours getting sounds and it was one of the very first songs we were working on. As I was doing the piano I hear this unsettling noise in my headphones, like (imitates the sound of a distant car crash). I threw off my head phones because it was so loud and I was like, "Oh my god what the fuck was that?" And it was the black out that happened in NY in August of 2003. I flipped out! Everybody went outside and we turned on the radio and everybody thought it was terrorism and it was this complete mess. We were right in the middle of the song and we had to stop everything, which is really, for lack of a better term, "blue balls." I get really upset when I'm stopped in my tracks like that.

We went outside and Jay Beckenstien, who runs the studio, brings out his flashlight and says, "Wow, there was a blackout. I think you guys are screwed." We ended up just sitting by this wood burning stove outside and he took everything out of his freezer and we cooked it up. We looked at Mars through a telescope and talked about what it would be like if everything just stopped right now. I thought, "How appropriate." (Laughs) The next day, when we went back to that song I really had a better idea of what it would sound like if the sky really fell and everything did just stop -- because, basically, it did. Something that's always on my mind is our culture of fear, which is always breeding more and more. That song was really meant to vent that frustration about everything crumbling around you. People have no outlet for that and sometimes you've just got to vent. I really feel like "dark isolation binds us," you know? Every single word of that song is about how I was feeling at that moment about everything.

### **Now that the CD is out, what's next?**

There's always a plan [laughs]. I'm not afraid to admit that I am very ambitious about getting people to hear this music, to shake people up a little and make them feel something. I don't really care what it is and I don't care if they like me. I just hope that people listen. I want to put this music out there and see if it does anything for anyone, because it does something for me to be able to make it. I don't think I could live without it,

certainly not happily or feeling complete. I've gotten some letters that keep me up at night because of what people say. Especially now, more than ever, people need music, people need to be listening. Everything is falling apart before our eyes and we have all the power in the world to change it. There's nothing that peeves me more than people who don't take time to just listen and appreciate everything they have. Right now I hear crickets and birds and some children playing on the other side of this wall, and I hear the sky falling [laughs]

*Nexus is available for purchase at [CDBay.com](http://CDBay.com) and [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)*

**Sarah Fimm: [www.sarahfimm.com](http://www.sarahfimm.com)**