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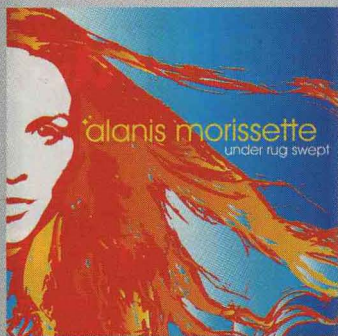


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ALANIS

by Jim Kelly



It's a dull afternoon in early November and I'm scurrying through the grey shadows of downtown Toronto office towers, trying to find a hotel I've never heard of where I'm supposed to interview a rock star that everyone knows. Alanis Morissette is in town for a couple of days, granting press interviews in advance of the release of her new album, *Under Rug Swept*. And I'm late.

My hope is that things at the hotel will be running late too – not unheard of with these press junket situations. I find the hotel and dart towards the entrance. The automatic glass doors whisper and part and usher me inside. The modest but smartly appointed hotel lobby is deserted, save for some hotel employees going about their duties. The place is not as posh as I would expect for an international rock star's temporary headquarters. A simple, beige sofa is squared off against a pair of dark red mahogany-trimmed armchairs, mediated by a brown, oval-shaped coffee table. The autumnal reds and greens of the area rug and the dark, oak-panelled walls lend a sense of warmth. I install myself on the sofa, catch my breath, and wait.

At least this gives me a chance to compose my thoughts about the impending interview and review the questions I intend to ask the Ottawa-born superstar. The interesting thing about meeting and interviewing someone like Alanis Morissette is that it amounts to a kind of exploration. So much has been said and written and speculated about this young woman, that it becomes part of the interviewer's task to machete through the thickets and tangles of media reports, rumours, gossip and her own hype machine, to find out where the truth lies (if you'll pardon the oxymoron).

Having scored such a huge success with her monster breakthrough album, 1995's *Jagged Little Pill* (28 million copies sold, and counting), and its 1998 follow-up *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*, Morissette also drew many doubters who questioned her credibility, alleging that her co-writer and producer for both of those projects, music industry veteran Glen Ballard, was the real creative force behind her success. The Svengali accusations were hard to shake. Over 40 million records sold worldwide and seven Grammy awards later, and some still aren't convinced that "Miss Thing" is the real thing. So, as if to put all those questions to rest, on her new album, *Under Rug Swept*, she's assumed total creative control, handling all of the songwriting and production herself. Obviously she felt it was time to take on that challenge.

My challenge will be to navigate through all the stuff that surrounds Alanis Morissette the pop star, and attempt to find out about the other Alanis: Alanis Morissette, the musician.

After a few minutes, one of the Warner Music Canada reps emerges from the elevator and apologizes for keeping me waiting so long, but they've been running about a half-hour late. I am gracious and forgiving, of course. He escorts me up to a suite where I set up my tape recorder and get out my notebook and list of questions. Alanis doesn't keep me waiting long, breezing into the room with a cordial handshake and pleasantries.

Dressed casually in a dark red turtleneck, lived-in blue jeans, dark blue suede running shoes and wearing no noticeable jewellery, she tucks her healthfully slim frame into the nondescript hotel armchair. Initially she props herself up in the lotus position, but later unfolds her legs to sit more conventionally, crossing one leg over the other, sneakered foot casually dangling. Her attire matches her demeanour: comfortable, calm, relaxed. Clear, brown eyes gaze from her oval face. Two rivers of long, straight brown hair flow down her torso,

MORISSETTE

ebbing at her waist. As we talk, she sometimes absentmindedly plays with her hair, criss-crossing the tresses to form an X across her body. If it weren't for the fact that she seems so at ease, I would guess that it might be some sort of defensive gesture, as if her hair was a shield in case she leaves herself too vulnerable.

But instead, the impression she gives is mostly one of openness – with perhaps just a slight hint of guardedness when certain topics come up. But that comes with the territory, I suppose. The sense of sincerity certainly seems in keeping with the nature of her music, especially her lyrics. The title *Under Rug Swept*, a phrase which appears in a line from the CD's first single, "Hands Clean", reflects that same notion of openness.

"A lot of the subject matters of a lot of the songs were certain things that I was either in denial about previously or was hesitant to sing about or speak about, really," she explains. "So this was my way of saying these are certain things that ordinarily I would try to keep out of my own consciousness, let alone sharing them with people – but still edging toward sharing more and more of myself as much as I can."

She came to Toronto last year to start writing for the album, a process which attained the very prolific pace of a song a day. "The writing of this record was even faster than anything I've done before," she says, "because while there is a definite charm to a collaborative experience. The one element of doing it alone that I prefer, actually, is that there's no one with whom I have to explain certain things or articulate what it is musically that I'm going for. It's like, whatever it is that I want, I just do it."

However, she says that the reason she ended up writing alone, instead of reflecting a desire to prove her critics wrong, was actually nothing more than a matter of circumstance. "It just happened," she explains. "I came to Toronto with the intention of just investigating what would emerge from being in the studio up here, and I was open to eventually co-writing with anybody, really. But as I started to write, I realized that there were a lot of things to say musically, and it just turned out that I didn't wind up collaborating."

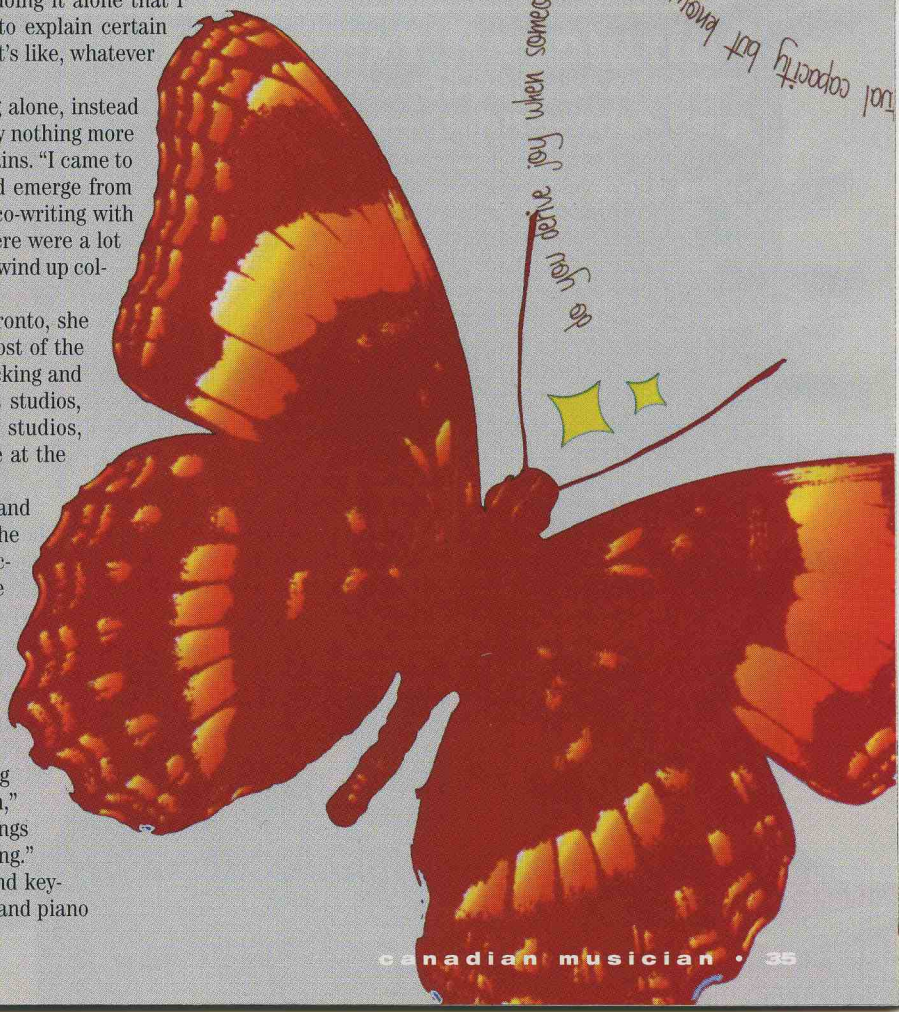
In addition to completing the bulk of the writing in Toronto, she also recorded the initial demos and the basic tracks for most of the songs at the city's Great Big Music studios. Subsequent tracking and mixing was completed in Los Angeles at several different studios, including Glenn Frey's Dog House studios, Westlake studios, Royaltone and Larrabee North. Some mixing was also done at the Battery in New York.

In all, she wrote and recorded somewhere between 25 and 30 songs during these sessions, and chose 11 of those for the album. The remaining tracks will apparently surface on a second volume, possibly an EP, said to be on the way sometime later this year.

While her stream-of-consciousness, diary-style method of lyric writing is still very much in evidence, Morissette says that with this new album, her writing, which she characterizes as "not precious, and very channelled," has indeed evolved and matured.

"Yeah, by default it has. And I also think the act of doing it alone is in and of itself its own little marking of evolution," she says. "But then the way I feel in my gut about my own songs is that I haven't even begun. It's a constant pull to keep going."

Morissette wrote the music for these songs on guitar and keyboards mostly, and she plays guitar (acoustic and electric) and piano



on the recordings. She started playing piano when she was six years old. "But I'm not very well trained," she admits. "I just kind of go by ear."

She picked up the guitar in 1995, during the *Jagged Little Pill* tour, but she harbours no illusions about her playing. "I use that term [playing] very loosely," she says with a laugh. "I can play enough to write, certainly, and I can play enough rhythm and stuff to support a song, but when it comes to some of the more intricate playing I bring in the people that really do it well."

For the most part, she worked with the same band with which she has recorded and toured for the past seven years: guitarists Nick Lashley and Joel Shearer, bassist Chris Chaney and Gary Novak on drums and percussion. Notable guests who pop up on various songs on the album include MeShell Ndegeocello, the Red Hot Chili Peppers' Flea, former Jane's Addiction bassist Eric Avery and Stone Temple Pilots' guitarist Dean DeLeo.

Morissette says she was just aiming for a "broad-reaching" sound with the songs on this album, and she wasn't averse to doing whatever it took to bring a song to life.

"If a song was begging for a crazy instrument from Asia, we'd bring it in. If a song was begging for a crazy loop, we wouldn't hold back in trying to find what that exactly was – sort of the songs having a thread of continuity just beneath, and letting them just become what they want to become."

Although she says they didn't do anything "overly crazy," they did employ some non-traditional gear and recording techniques. For example, when tracking the song "Precious Illusions", certain rhythm parts were recorded using what Morissette calls "one of those little, tiny, baby drum kits," while other drum tracks were recorded by filtering the sound through a Fisher-Price walkie-talkie. But apparently that was the extent of the experimentation. "That'll be the next record," she says with a chuckle. "The crazy instruments record."

The *Under Rug Swept* sessions marked the first time that Morissette has taken on the task of being the sole producer for an entire album (she was credited as the producer for her 1999 *Unplugged* album, but that was a live project). The decision to work without a co-producer was very much a conscious aspect of her continuing artistic growth.

"It was a natural step in my own evolution, having worked with producers over the years and very much learned from them," she says, "and then eventually co-producing with several people. And then I produced a song for the *Dogma* soundtrack ["Still"] on my own in London at Abbey Road [studios], and that felt really comfortable and really right. So it was just a matter of doing it for 25 songs."

Her approach as a producer was to be very hands-on, as opposed to simply supervising and approving the decisions of others. At the same time, she seems to have been acutely aware of the need to let her musicians and others do what they do best.

"It's the dichotomy again of very hands-on, very present, very there, but also when it comes to tracking musicians, very facilitative in a sense," explains Morissette. "I think most of my energy goes into investigating who the best people would be before we even consider going into the studio, so that once we're in, everyone's at the top of their game, and we're all synergizing together. That's not the time to be assessing whether I should be working with someone or not."

One way of looking at the process of recording is to see it was a two-sided enterprise. On the one hand, there's the creation and the writing of the music, and its performance – the realm of the artist. And on the other hand, there's the very technical, engineering aspect of recording, for example, placing mics in a certain way to record an instrument or the sound in a room – and that's often something the producer oversees. An artist who is also the producer has to wear both hats, and for Morissette that was a new and challenging experience.

"It was like how pregnant women talk about eating for two – it was like living for two," she says, positioning her hand in a chopping gesture in front of her face, as if cleaving her head in two halves. "But yeah, it was tough to wear both hats at the same time. Ordinarily in the past I would just be the artist, and the producer who I was working with or co-producing with would not only keep everybody at bay, but take care of the parts of making a record that I didn't want to have to worry about. So all of a sudden here I have to worry about it. It was good though – a good worry. But it was definitely a tall order, and one that I know will be made a little bit easier in the future because of having had this experience."

The album's first single, "Hands Clean", begins with a delicately plucked acoustic guitar before the introduction of a hip-hop-style rhythm loop that underscores the track. In the chorus, things get more energetic, with electric guitars charging in along with more aggressive drumming. Apparently the verses are written from the perspective of the person at whom the song is directed, while the choruses and the bridge represent Morissette's own point of view on the situation. Kind of a "he said/she said" scenario. For example, in one of the verses, "he" says:

If it weren't for my attention you wouldn't have been successful and

If it weren't for me you would never have amounted to very much...

While the chorus (i.e., Morissette) rejoins:

Well fast forward to a few years later

And no one knows except the both of us

And I have honoured your request for silence

And you've washed your hands clean of this

Thematically, it's a bit like "You Oughta Know", at least in the sense that it's obviously directed at someone and the sentiments expressed aren't always very pretty. And like "You Oughta Know", it will undoubtedly give rise to endless threads of speculation concerning who it was written about. Of course I just can't come right out and ask her who the song is about, so I try a bit of subterfuge, hoping to catch her off guard. The key is to be nonchalant.

Me: I won't ask you who it's about, but ... who's it about?

She laughs heartily. That's good. Humour is always useful in getting someone to let their defences down.

"You'll get the same answer as the 'You Oughta Know' question used to get," she says with a smile, as she crisscrosses her hair across her torso again, "Which is 'I'm not gonna share who it's about.'"



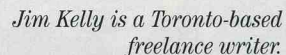
ALAN MORISSETTE



"Yeah, less for the sake of revenge, really, and more for the sake of my just finally

As she ponders the question, her eyes rove up to the ceiling and around the walls, as if searching for analogies that may be hiding in the corners, and then she proceeds tentatively. "It's a great merging of just visceral emotions and a wisdom that I feel like I've garnered over the years," she says. "And a naïveté," she's quick to add. "There's a little bit less confusion. It was very therapeutic, very cathartic, very eye-opening."

Whether you're a fan or a critic, it's hard to deny that Alanis Morissette seems to be genuinely engaged in a voyage of discovery and growth — both personally and artistically. As she said, “edging toward sharing more and more” of herself. Even if there are still things that she keeps swept under the rug, they will stay there only until she feels ready to share them. And when she's ready, she'll share them with the world. And the world will be listening.



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