

## Tirzah Interview

Katie Beswick

The first line of the bio sent over by her record label reads, 'Tirzah the artist is an idea that's hard to hold on to.' It's a sentence that comes back to me as I listen to her debut album, *Devotion* — a moody, melancholy collection of love songs with a distinctly British RnB flavour. There's an ethereal, other-worldly energy to it; the musical equivalent of smoke. Thick and dreamy, a beautiful texture that's not quite solid, drifting into nothing once it's done. *'I'll be thinking of you when you're gone,'* she sings over a soft electronic instrumental. *'But what's keeping me from holding on...'*

Tirzah the human is hard to hold on to too. She speaks quietly, in drifting, smoky sentences. It's difficult to tell whether she's unassuming or distracted, or maybe just tired. Her daughter was born in November ("I'm knee deep in nappies!") and Tirzah's juggling the first months of motherhood with the release of this record, which follows in the wake of gradual recognition due to the success of 2013's 'No Dancing', her 2014 EP *No Romance*, and sporadic internet releases over the past few years. She hasn't made any music since the baby was born, and she's not quite sure how she's going to adjust her working pattern to this seismic life change. "It's going to challenge me to be more organised," she laughs, "which is not something I'm really good at."

Tirzah doesn't laugh that often over the course of our conversation, which isn't to say she's rude. But there's a hesitancy there. "I'm not the most social person," she tells me. She's speaking about her song writing process, really, which mostly takes place over regular catch-ups with her collaborator

and childhood friend, the producer Micachu. They meet at one another's houses and communicate mostly through music. It's with Mica, Tirza says, where she feels most able to express herself.

"I sort of feel like it's more of a band or duo than a collaboration in a way. But as in we hang out together as friends, and making music together — it was all one thing. So that became our relationship. So it's kind of. It feels like a dual project in that sense as well. I've done the odd collaboration with other people but hardly any, and it's a nice thing to do, but I feel most comfortable when I'm working with Mica. And I think that's what I'm in it for — that's what I find most enjoyable about it."

The pair met at The Purcell, a school for young musicians near Watford on the outskirts of London, at the start of the Millennium. It was an environment seeped in music. "There was — everyone was playing music all around you, very much that's what's going on. It was a very small school. Like you're in a class with, probably, 12 kids. And obviously everyone's got that interest."

Tirzah joined Purcell at thirteen, after a music teacher suggested to her mother that it might be a good idea. Although she originally began her musical career as a harpist, the friendship with Mica, which started as "messing about on guitar" in class, writing "goofy songs", developed when the school built a music tech room. "So she started working in there and we did songs over the music we'd made."

And now, sixteen years later, they're releasing an album. It's almost a retro-move, to go from dropping experimental pop and stripped-back music videos online to creating an old-fashioned romance record. Eleven love

songs. “I think it was just, we toyed with the idea of doing EPs, and it felt like something more creatively challenging to do an album and exciting therefore,” she shrugs. “And I always listen to music in albums. I don’t really flick through singles, so it didn’t feel like – it felt natural. Like I would want to do that, I would want to sit and be in someone else’s head for a while. So the process then was not really too dissimilar from the EPs but way harder to pick tracks, because we had so many singles over the years.”

So how do you select eleven songs from a sixteen-year collaboration? “Well, the tracks on this span the years, but most were written in the last four years — but there’s like billions of versions. So it felt more, kind of like, difficult from that sense but not too dissimilar from the EPs, although when we’re doing the EPs it got easier to pick the songs, four songs that have a similar flavour to them — but when you’re doing an album and you’re choosing songs that stretch over a longer period of time, it’s harder to get that. And so we kind of gave up trying to get that. We just tried to get them so we could stand by each one rather than try and have a cohesive body of work.”

Despite this approach, the album *is* cohesive. There’s a sense of journey, and of place too. A defiant, street-inflected sound that comes from the South East London scene that she and Mica are fledging products of. Although she seems embarrassed when I say so.

“It’s not on a conscious level. Maybe just by being around people that we all know well and create music has had an impact like that.” Perhaps it’s a fear of appropriating a place that doesn’t feel quite hers yet. “I feel like a bit of an intruder because I’ve only lived in South London for about four years or something. I lived in South Norwood and then I lived in Lewisham, and now

Catford. It's something that's just come about, lots of our friends who are also musicians also live in South East and yeah, it's like a, quite a – it feels more by chance. My partner's sort of born and bred South East so in that sense it feels quite family oriented in a way. But a lot of our friends are living and working in the same spot so you do get a sense of a lot of stuff coming out of there you know? But I can't speak to people who have been there for a long, long time.”

Living in South London, in these times — what with the house prices, and the historic racial tensions, and the looming Brexit, it strikes me as odd that she's not been drawn to a more explicitly political mode of expression. Not least because that's what it seems every artist, of every genre, is doing as we try to make sense of the madness.

“I guess, I think because it's been a kind of a habitual way of making music. It's always something that I've sort of fallen into doing. Writing and talking through emotional things. And I would only feel ready to come to writing with a more social political angle if I felt really ready to do that. I don't want to just come to it and feel like there's not a cause, I want to really go ham at it. I am aware that we have made an album all about love and there is no other interpretation of it than that. Love in a way can be political, but it's not my intention to bring that into it, I can't pretend that that it was. It's definitely something on my mind. But I wouldn't want to do anything that is forced in a way. I mean I am aware of the stuff going on around me. But I'm just writing a bunch of love songs.”

And they are love songs. It's hard to interpret them any other way. The sad, meandering tracks, introspective and sweet, are the kind you want to

listen to right at the beginning of a love affair, or at the end, when everything feels raw and impossible.

“I guess, love is multifaceted. I guess in a way. It’s forever changing. It can be applied to lots of different things so it’s a fascinating thing to me. It’s something that might be of some interest to one person and of no interest to someone else. But at the same time it’s everything to that person and nothing to another or...it’s something that’s so simple but extremely important. Not even on a romantic level. From woman to woman, man to man, man to woman, everyone has that in common I think. It can always be applied to everything. It is so forever changing. That’s all that I can deliver, that’s the only way I can deliver it. The way I know how.”