

PJ Harvey: 'I feel things deeply. I get angry, I shout at the TV, I feel sick'

Polly Harvey opens up to Dorian Lynskey about 20 years in music and the emotions behind her latest dark masterpiece



Dorian Lynskey
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Polly Jean Harvey in March 2011. Photograph: Seamus Murphy

Polly Jean Harvey chooses her words carefully. Her lyrical perfectionism is the chief reason why her new album, *Let England Shake*, has been widely hailed as her masterpiece – quite an achievement for someone 20 years and eight albums into her career, at a stage when most songwriters are leaning on their back catalogue. But she is almost as exacting when it comes to interviews. She talks in eloquent, formal sentences, with nary an um or er, as if even one careless utterance might betray her.

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PJ Harvey
Let England Shake
Universal / Island
2011

At 41, Harvey is revered for what she does not give away. We don't tend to draw

distinctions between artist and celebrity. Usually the life promotes the work, and interviewers comb the lyrics for gateways into autobiography, but Harvey likes to keep certain doors closed. Apart from her short, inevitably public relationship with Nick Cave (they fell in love while filming the video to their 1996 duet "Henry Lee"), her private life is terra incognita. Last time I met her, in a pub in Abbotsbury, Dorset for 2007's *White Chalk*, it struck me that she answered questions the same way she poured our tea: elegantly, precisely, without spilling a drop. The only personal detail I can remember extracting is her unexpected love of *Wife Swap*.

This time she is warmer – literally so, because the fire in Kensington's Gore hotel is on full-blast despite the sunshine outside. "I can't work out how to turn it off," she says apologetically. She is dressed so chicly, all in black, nothing out of place, that I assume she's doing a photo shoot later, but no, it is just how she likes to present herself. Even the room feels carefully chosen. Wood-panelled, lined with stern oil paintings and ranks of unread books, it's so remote from the 21st century that even the mineral water bottles on the table between us seem anachronistic, and my Dictaphone looks like something that fell off a spaceship. It speaks to Harvey's fondness for old things. When I mention that I often go on holiday in Dorset, where she was born and still lives, she excitedly rattles off some Harveysque sightseeing recommendations: graveyards and ruins.

Like *White Chalk*, *Let England Shake* has an ancient quality – in the words of one song, "the grey, damp filthiness of ages and battered books/ Fog rolling down behind the mountains/ And on the graveyards and dead sea captains." It's about national identity and conflict, initially inspired by Iraq and Afghanistan but roaming across centuries and continents, following the ribbons of blood that tie all wars together. She thought it a strange, dark record when she finished it, and the intensely positive reception has surprised her. "It's been overwhelming," she says. "People from all walks of life tell me how much it's touched them. It's a wonderful feeling, and not one I'm used to – the feeling that people were hungry for this kind of work."

A few weeks ago she played the Troxy in east London. Even as she paraphrased Eddie Cochran on "The Words That Maketh Murder" and sang "What if I take my problem to the United Nations?" – a goofy joke in Cochran's *Summertime Blues* half a century ago and a bitter one now – an ocean away in New York the UN Security Council was debating what to do about the rebellion in Libya.

"It strikes me every time we play that song," she says. "Or indeed any of the songs on the record – how you can apply them to different situations. Certainly that night at the Troxy it had a different meaning because of what was happening at the time, and I'm sure it did for many people in the room as well."

Whatever Harvey thinks about the Libyan intervention, or about any specific political controversy, she keeps to herself but the richness and ambiguity of *Let England Shake* allows listeners to make their own connections. It's about war, and the damage it does to countries and to human bodies, but it doesn't yield anything as simplistic as a message. The album is a collage of so many different voices – sampled, quoted or alluded to – that Harvey's own point of view is lost in the fog, and deliberately so.

"I didn't want to tell people what to think or feel," she says. "I wanted to remain a narrator." In October 2008, around the time she was starting the album, she heard Stephen Wyatt's *Memorials to the Missing*, a Radio 4 afternoon play about Fabian Ware, founder of the Imperial War Graves Commission. "What touched me the most is that [Ware] heard the voices of the dead talking to him and he couldn't rest. I'd always be following the news and there'd be so many firsthand accounts from soldiers and

civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq. That's what I wanted to be heard – people who had been eyewitnesses through all different periods in history."

Even though Harvey has never written about such issues before, she says she has always been politically engaged, and music was crucial to her education. Her parents, a quarryman and a stonemason, were friends with Rolling Stone Ian Stewart and their remote Dorset farmhouse (she has said that even a day trip into town would make her dizzy) was often home to visiting musicians. The songs they played were windows on the world beyond. "Certain Neil Young songs like 'Southern Man' or 'Ohio', I'd go looking for the meaning behind them. A lot of Dylan's work, especially the early 60s. Beefheart's 'Dachau Blues'. I remember hearing that when I was very young and wondering, what's he singing about? 'Burning in the ovens in world war two.' Pink Floyd, 'Money'. I remember thinking about money a lot, and how this thing that meant so much was just a piece of paper." She laughs, and her laugh is wonderfully giddy and uncontrolled – it leaps out of her. "There was so much going on."

In sixth form she had an activist phase. "I think I went on a few different marches. I was involved in different action groups at the school."

What were the causes? "I can't recall," she says, unconvincingly. I suspect she just doesn't want to give away any information that might enable people to slap a label on her. Still, it's a surprising image: Polly Harvey on a demo, holding a placard. "I literally left school and went straight into music via art college for a year, and I've been so involved in my job of writing songs that the more actively involved part became channelled into standing on the stage and saying things that way. It's only now that it's come full circle and I'm using my voice again in a way that's tying everything together."

Like a more elegant Forrester Gump, she has a habit of wandering into pivotal moments in history. She flew in to visit some friends in Berlin the day the wall came down in 1989. On 9/11 (or "September 11, 2001" as she puts it with typical formality) she was on tour in Washington DC. This also happened to be the day that she won the Mercury prize, for *Stories From the City, Stories From the Sea*, and had to phone in her acceptance speech. "I can remember looking out of the hotel window and seeing armoured vehicles driving up the street and the Pentagon on fire, so of course everything took on an entirely different perspective. It felt very strange to not even be in the place where the prize was being given and then to be on the telephone and to look out of my window and see that scene."

The Mercury-winning *Stories* is her most commercially successful album to date and also her least favourite: an exercise in pop songcraft that left her unmoved. At that point, she could have gone either way. Her first two albums (*Dry*, *Rid of Me*) were raw and visceral. Her next two (*To Bring You My Love*, *Is This Desire?*) were spooky and sensual. *Stories* was predominately about New York (where she lived for a while) and being in love. On the cover, she stood looking chic and purposeful amid the bright lights of a Manhattan street. Entering her 30s, she seemed to have sanded down her edges and become comfortable, which, for all the album's charms, was a disappointment.

But no. Her next album, 2004's *Uh Huh Her* was a raggedy scrapbook of disparate ideas, less a coherent statement than an exercise in creative house-clearing, and with *White Chalk* she opened a whole new chapter. Perennially disgruntled by critics who took her songs for glorified diary entries, she embraced a more obviously literary approach, setting aside her guitar to pick out sparse, beautiful melodies on unfamiliar instruments such as the piano and autoharp. She sits down to write every single day instead of waiting for the muse to strike. Lyrics tend to start out as poetry, and some

then evolve into songs. "You have to be more disciplined, and you ultimately end up with a much stronger piece of work."

Listening to her talk about *Let England Shake*, it sounds less like a record than a novel or an art exhibition. "She comes from an art school ethos," says Paul McGuinness, who has been managing Harvey since she supported his other clients, U2, in 1993. "Had she not got a record deal she would have gone on to do fine art at St Martins. She did get a record deal, but in a way she's been at art school ever since. She's extremely independent. She makes a plan and then very methodically carries it out."

Harvey still likes to draw and paint, recently contributing illustrations to Francis Ford Coppola's *Zoetrope: All-Story* magazine, and owns paintings by Christopher T Wood and Alasdair Wallace. All the photographs and videos accompanying the new album are the work of the war photographer Seamus Murphy.

"I'm probably much more influenced by film-makers and painters than I am by other songwriters or poets," she says. "With songs I almost see the images, see the action, and then all I have to do is describe it. It's almost like watching a scene from a film, and that's what I go about trying to catch in a song."

Songwriters tend to be notoriously bad at describing the creative process, and loth to mention the perspiration behind the inspiration, but Harvey is visibly energised by talking about it. "I certainly feel like I'm getting somewhere that I wanted to get to as a writer of words. I wanted to get better, I wanted to be more coherent, I wanted there to be a greater strength and depth emotionally, and all these things require work – to hone something, to get rid of any superfluous language. I'm inspired by the other great writers I go back to and read again and again, and think how did they do that?"

Such as? She indicates a volume of Harold Pinter's poetry that she has brought with her. "Pinter leaves me speechless. Just unbelievable. A poem like 'American Football' or 'The Disappeared'. TS Eliot of course. Ted Hughes. WB Yeats. James Joyce." She leans forward, freshly excited. "Just that feeling of reading something profound and having your breath quite literally taken away by the end of a piece. I'm reading John Burnside's poems at the moment. Do you know his work? I'm getting that feeling – just reaching the end of every poem, going 'Oh my God!'" She clutches her chest and laughs. "And all of these writers offer me a greater understanding of what it is to be alive, and that is such an incredible thing art can do for other people. It made me want to try and get close to this strange, mysterious thing that people can do with words."

Even so, I wonder if she ever misses the jolting release of strapping on an electric guitar, turning it up loud, and bashing out a song in a couple of hours. "I think probably that desire is met in other areas – that immediate buzz you get from something taking off. It might be driving really fast somewhere. It might be screaming like a lunatic, running fast down a hill. Or playing music extremely loud and shouting."

This is the thing about Harvey. She has done such a good job recently of presenting herself as a patient craftswoman, chipping away at words the way her mother chips away at stone, that you could be mistaken for thinking she had become emotionally cool, but it's just that she doesn't advertise that side of her personality anymore, and for good reason. When, in 1992, she was promoting *Dry*, whose torrid, abstract expressions of female sexuality were new to indie-rock, she found herself fielding questions about when she lost her virginity. Along with the other sudden pressures of entering the music business, it precipitated a nervous breakdown. Circa *To Bring You My Love* three years later, when she adopted a lurid, glam-grotesque look she described as "Joan Crawford on acid," she was asked about eating disorders. Who could blame her for pulling up the drawbridge in later years? She is not cool so much

as contained, with a hint of underground streams foaming away beneath the surface.

"I'm not a removed person, no matter what I'm doing," she says. "I've always been very visceral in that I feel things very deeply. I certainly can get very angry about things I hear day to day, and shout at the radio, shout at the television, or actually feel sick or feel like weeping. Equally I laugh out loud quite a lot and I love comedy. I like to roll around laughing with tears streaming down my face. I do react to things."

I wonder how she was affected by researching *Let England Shake*. She hoovered up information about myriad conflicts from books and museums. When I last met her, she didn't even own a computer but she has relented for research purposes.

Unsurprisingly, she has not been seduced by such fripperies as Twitter. "I'm the type of person that if there's something I have access to I want to know everything it has to offer. I can't not finish a book. So if there's an open book like the internet, there's a temptation to sit there and learn everything. So I'm very disciplined. I just use it for very specific purposes when I know exactly what I'm looking for."

She knows so much about Gallipoli, the subject of at least three songs, that she could probably write a doctoral dissertation on the fiasco. She planned to go there, and to other first world war battlefields, but never got around to it. "I went within my mind but I'd still like to go there and see if the place I went in my mind is how it is."

Sometimes, she admits, it was overwhelming, all that death. "I think as a creative artist it's crucial to be open – to feel. You can't do it with a closed heart. You almost have to hand over your soul to that action. And so there can be times when you can feel too full of the piece that you're making. It's almost like being a sponge and you just have to absorb everything in order to have all of the goods to make something out of that.

"I've been writing songs for many years, and you become more accustomed to taking care of that – knowing how much to expose yourself, knowing how to pace yourself. Just simple things like learning that when I come to approach my work every day there's a certain opening that has to take place, and then when I finish my work for the day I give myself time to close that down again. You just close up all your edges and carry on about your day."

Having lived in New York or Los Angeles, she's thinking of leaving Dorset again for a while. "It would be a good time for me to remove myself from familiar surroundings. It really opens my eyes and forces me to think in an entirely different way."

She already has several competing ideas for her next album, but you probably shouldn't hold your breath waiting for it. *Let England Shake* was the product of "hundreds of pieces of writing: entirely finished poems and songs, entirely recorded songs". Getting a record right has become more important to her than being prolific. "If it takes 10 years then I would rather wait and know that I felt each piece was strong than feel that it was time to put something out but five pieces are a bit weak."

The industry standard cycle of album-tour-album-tour doesn't apply. "There wouldn't be any point in me trying to persuade her to take the steps that I thought were necessary to get her into football stadiums," says Paul McGuinness. "She's not, quite honestly, that interested in success. She's not driven in any way by commercial imperatives. Really she's working to satisfy herself."

However charming and polite Harvey is, you can still come away from talking to her feeling that so much goes unsaid. She maintains her sense of mystery, which serves her art but leaves anyone who loves that art wanting to know more about the person who creates it. While writing *Let England Shake*, she dug out the war memorabilia of her own family: her great grandad's naval hatband, her grandfather's drum from the Home

Guard, dozens of old photographs. "I did find myself looking at them and wishing I'd asked a lot more of my grandparents when they were still alive," she says wistfully. "There's so much you want to know once they're gone."

I know the feeling.

PJ Harvey's Let England Shake and her latest single The Glorious Land are out now on Island

PJ confidential: Polly Harvey's career in brief

1969 Born in Dorset to stonemason father and sculptor mother. She is raised on a sheep farm to an eclectic soundtrack of blues, new romantics, indie rock and classical.

1987 Leaves school and, after contributing to a range of West Country bands, joins forces with John Parish in Automatic Dlamini as backing vocalist and guitarist.

1991 After touring with the band for four years, Harvey leaves and starts the PJ Harvey Trio. They relocate to London and release debut single, "Dress".

1992 Famously poses topless on the front of *NME*.

1993 Harvey goes solo, releasing critically acclaimed albums such as *To Bring You My Love*, produced by John Parish. Her recurring collaborations with Parish include *Dance Hall at Louse Point* in 1996 and 2009's *A Woman a Man Walked By*.

1996 Sings on two tracks from Nick Cave's *Murder Ballads*, a collaboration that leads to romance between Harvey and Cave.

1998 Appears as Magdalena in movie *The Book of Life* by Hal Hartley.

2001 Wins the Mercury prize for *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea*, featuring three tracks with Radiohead's Thom Yorke. Other collaborations include work with Marianne Faithfull and Tricky.

2003 Her albums *Rid of Me* and *To Bring You My Love* are put on *Rolling Stone's* Greatest 500 Albums of All Time list.

2010 Invited to be a guest designer for Francis Ford Coppola's *Zoetrope: All-Story*, a literary magazine where her artworks will sit alongside short stories.

2011 Awarded an outstanding contribution to music gong at the *NME* awards and releases *Let England Shake*.

Mina Holland

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