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Interview: Lady Lamb strives for courage, emotional vulnerability on new EP

By Kaiya Gordon | March 17, 2017 | Comments Off on Interview: Lady Lamb strives for courage, emotional vulnerability on new EP



"Be present / be patient / be transparent" Aly Spaltro writes at the end of her Tender Warriors Club manifesto. Originally written as a personal reminder to refrain from retreating emotionally during difficult periods, the manifesto is one of many creative projects coming out of Spaltro's latest EP as **Lady Lamb**, *Tender Warriors Club*.

Spaltro's voice is slow and enduring on *Tender Warriors Club*, bubbling into emotive highs and sinking into yawning lows. On "Heaven Sent", the EP's lead track, Spaltro's voice drops into a resonant echo as she sings that "heaven bent to hell / heaven - herself — the tender warrior." It's a compelling moment, one which both departs sonically from Spaltro's previous work and lyrically ties together the EP's concept. As we chat over the phone (I in my friend's SUV, hidden from the rain), Spaltro unpacks the meaning behind "tender warrior," a phrase she conceived while searching for words to comfort a struggling friend. "She was doing her very best to stay emotionally connected and vulnerable through the hard time," Spaltro tells me. "I was inspired by her...I thought it was really courageous to stay sensitive, when it would have been easier for her to just shut down. I called her a tender warrior."

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To be a tender warrior, Spaltro continues, she actively practices vulnerability, "trying to be conscious of [her] emotions, trying to be conscious of being open and trying [her] best to have courage through hard times." It's a moving idea: instead of disengaging from or fleeing difficult situations, Spaltro encourages herself and her listeners to stay emotionally engaged. "It's more fulfilling," she tells me.

My first exposure to Lady Lamb's music was in 2011, as an uncertain and unstable senior high school student. I was attracted immediately to Spaltro's lyrical commitment to the visceral and disgusting; the ease with which she combines exact and startling description ("my blood will fill the ditch / my blood will bury the mountain," she sings on "Heaven Bent") with vocal tremor is deeply affecting. "I like singing about body, and anatomy, and blood," she tells me. "It's worked its way into my music for many years. It just has such a visual connotation. It's a messy thing."

Beyond the blood, in Lady Lamb I saw unflinching emotional amenability—the courageous ability to need and desire without apology. On days I spent curled at home, huddled in my bathroom on top of piles of dirty laundry, avoiding the sudden impossibility of high school, I watched Lady Lamb's collaborations with The Wild Honey Pie on YouTube.

Tender Warriors Club does not depart from Spaltro's interest in the sublime, nor does her exacting and intimate writing style falter. If anything, the EP prioritizes Spaltro's lyrics even more than previous works. "I always write the words first, and then the music comes later, as the vehicle for the lyrics," she explains. "To me, the words are the most important." In fact Spaltro began her musical career as a student of writing—the poetry she wrote in high school would eventually migrate to some of her earliest songs.

"When I was in high school I would buy CD's, and the first time I [listened] I would open up the booklet and read the lyrics along with the music," Spaltro says. "So that was the primary way that I heard records—from reading the songs." This experience deeply impacted her, encouraging her to make songs her listeners would also want to read. Other early influences include her religious background, The Fiery Furnaces, and bands local to her hometown, Brunswick, Maine.

Perhaps the most recognizable aspect of Spaltro's writing is her tendency to write in parts: Songs will often include two, three, or even four separate movements. The effect is startling—with long and shifting songs, Spaltro is able to advance character development, narrative, and metaphor so that it unfolds as though it is being performed onstage. "I really like when an artist makes me pay attention and holds that attention for a long time," she tells me. "I like collaging many songs into one long one."

Spaltro's commitment to detail definitely does command attention: Lady Lamb's music saw me through my high school graduation, through my first stumbling relationships, and, eventually, through treatment for the undiagnosed illnesses that had kept me trapped in a dirty bathroom. *Ripely Pine* was my soundtrack the summer I killed my best friend's cat, and I looked to the video for "The Nothing Part II" as inspiration for some of my first successful poetry projects.

But what still strikes me about Spaltro's music, and what cuts deeply each listen, is the power Spaltro's œuvre has to drop me down to those high school bathroom tiles, and then bring me back up into eager emotional yearning. Spaltro is not shy about emotional investigation, and it is this kind of stark, unflinching exploration that sent her on the path to *Tender Warriors Club*'s unique website and tour.

Announced as a "living room tour," the majority of Spaltro's live shows this year have been performed in intimate settings—bedrooms, art studios, community spaces, etc. She plays alone



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and acoustic each night, running through much of the new EP, as well as a few old favorites. Spaltro's ability to command an audience with her stripped down shows is remarkable, but perhaps not surprising; the entire *Tender Warriors Club* EP was recorded with acoustic instruments, and mostly live takes.

"The living room tour has been really special," Spaltro says. "There hasn't been a single one I didn't enjoy. They've been really intimate, and I can see the crowd's faces...It exceeded my expectations even. It's been really great."

In San Francisco, Spaltro played one of her few venue shows, at The Chapel on March 11th. Regardless of venue size, the show offered an intimate look at Spaltro's music. Under shifting blue light and the old, soaring mortuary walls, Spaltro played to a nearly sold-out crowd. It wasn't the first time she's played in SF, but it has been a while—and fans from all stages of her career crowded together to celebrate being tender.

"Going into these living room shows I was really nervous," Spaltro tells me. "It's actually really nerve-wracking to be so naked—to just sit with this big instrument in somebody's home." It's true: It's hard to present yourself, honestly, regardless of the reaction. And frankly, to throw yourself into intimate art—to turn some private part of yourself public, is brave and enduring. The prospect that music shows could be turned into spaces where any body—but especially where marginalized bodies—could truly rest leaves me humbled and hopeful. Because, though vulnerability is a current political buzzword, many bodies don't get the chance to be vulnerable in public. To throw yourself into the world, sans caution, sans protection, sans deflection or contingency plans, is a privilege afforded to few.

Perhaps we can start by being kind to ourselves—by offering ourselves the luxury of emotional engagement—by naming ourselves as we are—by dressing our bodies as we wish. Was the lack of this empathy what was keeping me huddled on the bathroom floor? In part, yes. Unable to transcend the cages of illness, dysphoria, and dissociative identity, I hid.

Lady Lamb calls us all to the open, where Spaltro is done hiding. Being vulnerable, Spaltro says, "is a challenge that I'm no longer afraid of. It's worth it."

In essence, Spaltro tells me, "the decision to be vulnerable feels good."

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Kaiya Gordon is a writer and poet from the SF peninsula. Kaiya believes that impact is more important than intent, and is not interested in listening to your normcore noise band. Follow them on twitter @ayobaio

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