

Matthew Sonne

Paul McLaughlin

AP-WRIT4002

Friday, March 31st, 2023

Tamara Toussaint's Ethereal Emergence at the Drake Underground

The clock hits 9:00 p.m. on August 17, 2022, and the marquee on the wall adjacent to the Drake Hotel entrance focuses on 21-year-old independent artist Tamara Toussaint's (pronounced "two-saint") debut concert. She and her band await to take the stage in the building's newly added corridor and green room; generated from recently purchased space.

Encircled by warping guitar samples and whirring synth drones, *Ethereal's* first lyrics "My body has forgotten what it's like to be here," echo against the walls of her stage side green room. Toussaint's spoken words rattle the snare of seasoned drummer Yoshito "Yoshi" Ono's Yamaha kit from the subwoofers under the stage floorboards.

The young adults all across the club erupt in a sudden roar, charged in energy from bar beverages. The elders clap politely, Tamara's mother chief amongst them. The projector curtaining the band slowly rises, and Toussaint leads them out to the audience. Dante Hayes plucks the opening notes of album cut "Under Pressure" on his seafoam green Fender jazz bass and rarely stops, aside from exploring crowd participation with clapping.

All four members spent three months jamming in collaborator Alex Sadowski's condo's basement, converting songs permeated by electronics into riffs and parts, and turning those into muscle memory. With four crashes of the hi-hat, Toussaint firmly grasps the microphone and breathes deeply, ready to find out what she remembers about performing live.

In the nine months from starting work on her EP *Ethereal* in December 2022 to the show coronating its release, Toussaint has oscillated between meeting commercial demands for a modern independent artist, and keeping her art honest and natural.

The warm, late summer climate of her show is a familiar atmosphere to Toussaint. Unconsciously, she chose a similar time of year as her Cabbagetown Youth Centre (CYC) Performing Arts Camp productions that culminated her summer camp experiences. From as early as age 9, she grew from participating in these shows to directing their productions for years past the designated age group.

She learned to appreciate music differently when she joined the CYC Block Party competitive dance team. She was tasked with creating dance mixes for their performances. "[She] was being taught by one of the choreographers, and instead of just dancing to the beat or embodying movements that correlated to the lyrics in the song, we were dancing to accents and space in the beat and that made me hear music differently."

The mixes she created almost informed her wish to be a DJ, as she didn't feel wholly confident in her creative voice then. Toussaint constituted DJ Conrad "Adroc" Hendrickson to spin cuts during the intermissions to foretell the mood of the forthcoming performance. The neo-soul and ambient mixes that preempt her and friend Mileena Sobeira's respective sets were a conscious choice informed by her DJing experience.

In her adolescence, she prioritized performing academically as well, holding memories of middle school teachers rewarding her high marks in mathematics with congratulatory ribbons. She even attended Ryerson University for a year, taking classes for a major in accounting. Her mother even implored her to take piano lessons as early as the age of 10 to "better understand math."

She started singing from an early age, and continued long after her tenure in school choirs for the inherent enjoyment more than her apparent aptitude for it. Eventually, she came to the conclusion that she could inspire more emotions and movement with her own music, and bet on obeying her artistic direction. She dropped out from Ryerson a year in, but her steadfast,

scholarly diligence manifests through her commitment to re-learn the piano, as to aid her future songwriting.

According to Statistics Canada's 2021 census, black people account for roughly 15% of Scarborough's 103,449 residents. Toussaint grew up amongst them and their diverse sounds of R&B, soca, reggae, rap, and hip-hop. Her education out of district in downtown Toronto exposed her to new genres such as rock and brought about her admiration for them.

On *Ethereal*, Toussaint guides the listener through a unique blend of her musical influences and introspective lyrics with the help of producer David "Davy" Uphadya. Toussaint caught the attention of 21-year-old Davy, who had made his name around downtown Toronto working with underground trap artists. Clients flocked to the minimal recording setup in the basement of his house, paying \$25 for four hours of Davy's services.

Though, he couldn't display the full capabilities of his classical training on piano or his artistic vision by furnishing overcompressed, YouTube instrumentals. Davy's personal music taste reflected more of Toronto's diverse exports, from different scenes of independent electronic music such as techno and house.

He made a change, focusing on being overt about his interest in these genres. He founded Panpsyche, a producing and composing project that has gotten him working with more local artists that meet his artistic desires than he would've known were possible had he remained in a successful, but stagnant market.

Davy first found Toussaint's music — including a cover of pop artist Johann's "Green, Yellow" — through streaming service Soundcloud and was interested in working with her. The first of their sessions in December 2021 spawned "A Place With No Name," an album cut with crunchy guitars, pounding drums, and synthesized ambience.

From there, the pair began serious work on realizing what eventually became her album *Ethereal*, spending 5 to 8 hours a day in the studio. The production process encompassed one of them bringing the other songs they liked, and they'd analyze the elements they appreciated about them to influence new songs.

Sometimes, Davy would create ideas that reflected their inspiration in mood or tone, and Toussaint would provide feedback to guide them closer to their goal. Other times, the inverse would occur. "When we're making a song, it's like growing a bonsai tree, we just trim it. And eventually, it's grown into a finished representation of who she is," Davy says. "We're trying to bring into reality what's within her already."

As a result, what the pair do so well on the 14-minute listen is blend 80s sounds, 90s melodies, Y2K rhythms, and 2010s electronic sensibilities. The project is anchored by thrumming guitars and driving drums, and yet, it remains so airy and with synthesized atmospherics and twinkling keys.

This feat isn't accomplished overnight, though. Toussaint and Davy worked methodically for about six months until they had a body of work that felt fully representative of her vision. "I don't want to put something out that I feel insecure about. If I'm 100% happy with it, then [someone] can say whatever they want. And then, if it's constructive, then I can use that going forward," she says.

When Mileena's band took the stage about an hour prior, she was backed on the drums by producer/partner Hans Li and YouTube-famed guitarist Justice Der. Together, they spent 250 minutes soothing the audience with modest cuts from Mileena's back catalogue and forthcoming album. Though their musical paths diverge in different directions, she and Toussaint have been friends for several years.

Mileena and Toussaint share the same measured philosophy towards music creation — being for themselves first. Mileena says, "Music is something you have to be extremely present to enjoy, and extremely present to make. I think having that balance between creativity and being able to connect with people on the ground and not just through social media makes a huge difference." Toussaint selected Mileena to welcome the crowd with smooth neo-soul tunes, before her set changed the mood.

Surveying the club floor, fan engagement varies. Numerous heads bob, and plenty of shoulders sway. Eyes widen, impressed at the competency shown by the performers. Sweaty limbs sprout all around, extending high to memorialize the show through phone cameras. A miniature mosh pit even forms a few rows back from the subwoofers underneath the stage.

Toussaint's then-partner/lighting director Jasper (Jaspreet Singh as he was known in school) shouts along happily to every word, nods in encouragement from his post ahead of the bar counter.

Back on stage, the triumvirate of instrumentalists behind Toussaint channel their roles in different manners; Ono whips his arms and stamps his legs stridently, Hayes pairs his metronomic plucking with gingerly hops, and guitarist Tatsu Uehira embraces his lead guitarist machismo with an outstretched stance and fierce headbanging. They each uniquely exude confidence in their mastered parts, especially while unable to hear one another.

Her band is styled in dark pants, white dress shirts, and black ties; their states of dishevelment attuned to the players' personalities. Their Avril Lavigne-inspired outfits were designated by Toussaint to convey her standing out from a world of carbon copies — a topic she broaches pensively on *Ethereal* closing track, "Surrounded."

Her confidence in her artistic vision began being built as far back as her middle school years spent deepening her own interests while estranged from her inner city schoolmates. Her

starved socialization brought on bouts of depression, anxiety, and self doubt. In one scene in her self-directed “Ethereal” music video, she’s surrounded by three Black actresses portraying her vices of vanity, smoking, and overworking.

She fights these off with the effects of these vices on her mental health by prioritizing its maintenance. For instance, her morning routine of three handwritten pages of stream-of-consciousness writing was sourced from her copy of Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*, gifted to her by a friend. Though the morning pages didn’t directly influence *Ethereal*’s thorough lyrics about isolation, loneliness, and dissociation, they decluttered her mind and bolstered her focus in the present.

Toussaint aids her mental health through limiting her interactions with social media to solely posting promotional videos she creates alongside inventive videographer Rayul Genesis. Otherwise, she communicates primarily through email and phone calls.

Though inspired by the otherworldly aesthetics of producer and artist Eartheater and the riotous stage presence of rapper Rico Nasty, it was the genre-blending Yves Tumor’s concert at Toronto’s Opera House in March of 2022 that convinced Toussaint of the theatrical possibilities her music could reach.

After conferring for days with her collaborators, she felt that the songs deserved a live show release. Being opposed to the contemporary stiffness of backing tracks and half-committed performances, Sadowski had informed her that she would need to be ready to perform like her idols did — just her, the band, and their songs. Luckily, Toussaint was up for the challenge.

Toussaint came to find the venue for her show through DJ Adroc, who frequently spun sets in the Underground. He contacted the booking manager Shawn Murphy. Adroc implored Murphy to consider her show for the venue.

He researched the album promotion her team presented and gambled graciously on her prowess. "To try out an artist and see how they're going to work in a market, this [venue] is the perfect size.," he says. Toussaint is in great company, as names like Kid Cudi, Billie Eilish, and River Tiber have made their Toronto debuts in this same building.

In meeting her backing band, Toussaint had remembered guitarist Uehira from work they'd previously done together. She met Hayes through Davy and met Yoshi through Tatsu. They convened almost daily in Sadowski's condo's basement to practice.

During rehearsals, they'd run the setlist over and over again, with Davy present to provide input on the adaptation of his production to a band. Sometimes, songs were elongated with jam sessions to accommodate Toussaint jogging laps around the rented space. She'd then return and sing the song again, controlling her now-compromised breath. "The least amount of work that can be done for a stage show or performance is to kick and sing," Sadowski says.

As performances phase out more and more live instrumentation for the expediency of backing tracks, local artists' performances have moved to being more stoic and reserved in their stage presence, "But we all understand body language on a subconscious level, so if it gets to a point where you can tell people are lip syncing, they care less. It's almost as if they've exposed you in their mind," Sadowski says.

On stage, Toussaint acts as ringleader, commanding the more-than-sold-out crowd from the first row to the Underground entrance and beyond. She lifts her sweat-polished, second-hand combat boots firmly from the black, wooden stage with a meticulous trudge, and can shift into an elastic jog on a dime.

Her frame contorts how her music commands it to — wilting back and forth around the bright spotlight. She says, "I make music that I can imagine dancing to now. If I feel like I can dance to it then it's perfect for me." She attunes herself to every song's energy and excavates it

from the crowd as well. Against the roaring music, her now-roughened vocal tone fits as smooth as thumbtacks.

Thirty minutes later, the crowd leaves their dynamic set satisfied. Some fans head directly to the Ramirez-manned merch table, ready for another helping of insatiable, fresh, and layered music. Some stay on the floor as Adroc returns and plays the night out with a club mix.

Most left content, primarily the band, whose preparation led to them confidently controlling a space that previously hosted female-fronted, national exports like Metric and Broken Social Scene. "We played everything, but I think we could have done more," Hayes says. "I think we had the ability to do more." More is what the group anticipated, planning a softer, acoustic set for their next live outing.

Similarly, Toussaint aims to incorporate zestful live instrumentation into her future productions. But, next doesn't quite mean imminent. Just as her album was tooled to her exact preference, it was decidedly meticulous to allow those decisions to sit. The batteries will recharge musically, and new inspirations will take hold.

In the interim, she focuses her attention on producing forthcoming film projects and . Toussaint's vision is as strong as her patience in willing it into existence. She traverses mediums aware of the trend of capturing audiences with flashy tricks: and choosing to do right by her artistic voice anyway.

Source Links

<https://www.instagram.com/toussvint/>

<https://www.thedrake.ca/thedrakehotel/underground/>

<https://torontolife.com/shopping/inside-the-drake-general-stores-flashy-new-flagship-with-an-in-store-cafe-barbershop-and-new-balance-boutique/>

<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&SearchText=scarborough%20guildwood&GENDERlist=1&STATISTIClist=1&DGUIDlist=2013A000435095>

References

Tamara Toussaint

@toussvint on Instagram

tamaratoussaintt@gmail.com

Alex Sadowski

@fullyfuckingfeels on Instagram

(416) 843-0821

David Uphadya

@psychedavy on Instagram

(647) 782-3236

Mileena Sobeira

@mileenasobeira on Instagram

(647) 549-1315

Dante Hayes

@dante.hayes on Instagram

Shawn Murphy

@torontowastemgmt on Instagram

shawn@thedrakehotel.ca