

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE!

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THE BEST-SELLING LESBIAN MAGAZINE

WANDA SYKES

Why her coming out has changed everything for lesbians and made TV even better, too



159
GREAT
HOLIDAY
GIFTS

+ MARGARET CHO

on Sex, Addiction
and Murder

Drop Dead Diva

Margaret Cho's done stand-up, TV, movies—but who knew she could sing?
By Rachel Shatto



What can't Margaret Cho do? The answer, seemingly, is nothing. Known around the globe as an award-winning, paradigm-shifting comic, the tattooed bombshell has also made a name for herself as an actor (both in film and on her current hit television series, *Drop Dead Diva*) and an outspoken queer political activist. But who knew—the girl can sing, too! While her subversive and intimate comedy has always been music to our ears, she's teamed with lesbian faves like Tegan and Sara, Ani DiFranco and Fiona Apple to make sweet, sweet music on her debut album, *Cho Dependent*. Boasting a smoky, sultry voice, Cho belts out ditties light in mood and tempo but heavy on the intimacy, rawness and raunchiness that fans have come to love. Exploring themes of domestic abuse, addiction and even the search for suitable seed, she manages to blow us away and endear herself to us even more through her music. From the swan song for her beloved pooch, "Hey Big Dog," to the shocking murder/suicide that inspired her to write "I'm Sorry," Cho uses her gift for turning personal triumph and tragedy into comedic (and musical) genius. As she wraps up her four-month, nationwide *Cho Dependent* tour and prepares to compete on *Dancing With the Stars*, Cho shares the inspiration behind the album, plus talks animal love, body diversity on TV, dildo shopping and the Tea Partiers.

Word Play

Inspired by her new song "My Puss" we asked Margaret Cho to play an improv game where we suggest a noun and she tells us her puss equivalent... and lucky for us, she was game.

If your puss was furniture, what would it be? Probably a very comfortable couch.

If your puss was a politician, who would it be? Nancy Pelosi.

If your puss was a musical instrument, which would it be? A tuba.

And what if your puss was a sitcom? Umm, I don't know, but it could probably take *Two and a Half Men*.

What inspired you to make a music album?

I had wanted to do something like this for a long time. I play guitar and piano and I also play banjo and dulcimer, which is an odd thing to play. But I do know people, though, who are very good at what they do in composing. What I am is a pretty decent lyricist, so I wanted to write an album of songs that was a comedy but at the same time had a lot of musical merit, that had musicianship and...lavish production.

You have some amazing collaborations on the album. How did those come about?

I convinced all of my very amazing musician friends, people who I absolutely adore, to write the songs with me. Some people, we just sent Mp3s back and forth, and some people, I actually sat in their studios. The album was recorded in all these different places that I went to, like Vancouver with Tegan and Sara, Austin with Patty [Griffin], New Orleans with Ani [DiFranco]. I got to kind of get in their home lives and work with them in their environment, which was really amazing for a fan. I always felt like I'd won some kind of weird contest, because everybody was forced to spend the day with me, and also forced to teach me how to play something.

Your duet "Hey Big Dog" with Fiona Apple is really beautiful. What inspired it?

Thank you. I wrote that with Patty Griffin, who is my favorite singer/songwriter. My dog was dying—he was really old. He was totally, like, my soulmate. This song was a tribute to relationships with animals—[relationships] that I think people don't really celebrate. They're such intense love affairs that people have with their animals. People don't talk about it as much—they're not as lyrically inclined to talk about it. It was great connecting with them about it.

I would get him this very big dog bed and play the song to him, and he would let out these big great dog-sighs, along with a real stinky dog fart that would make the whole room feel like a hot spring. It was really funny. He really liked the vibration of the guitar. I think it really helped his joints so it was a great thing to do for him, like, as a therapeutic thing. It was very sweet to be that close to him in his last few moments. So I love that song.

Which other songs have personal meaning?

There's one that's called "Give Me Your Seed." It's such a great queer song. It's really just about getting sperm, trying to get your girlfriend pregnant. You don't want to deal with the guy—just go to the sperm bank and make a deposit. To me that is a very personal journey and also very practical and something that a lot of lesbians have to deal with. You know, it's like, We want to have a family, but we don't need you, but we *do*. So I do love that song.

Another personal song that is very important to me is "I'm Sorry," which is based on a horrible, horrible true story, inspired by somebody I was really in love with who killed someone—who killed his wife. He murdered her and stuffed her in the attic and left her there for a month, until the body had partially mummified. And this is someone I was really in love with for 17 years, and I had no idea that that had happened. That song was really about me trying to maybe find some way of getting over it. Even though it didn't happen to be me, it could've happened to me. So this song is about the selfishness of domestic violence and how sinister it is, but, you know, told from the perspective of this murderer who is so selfish. So there are serious elements to it, but to me, sometimes the only way I can relate to tragedy is through comedy and through jokes, because it's how I can cope with things.

There's a lot of different elements throughout the album that to me are personal and serious. I've had my own issues with addiction—drug addiction, addiction to food, addiction to exercise, anorexia—and so in the song "Intervention"...my worst nightmare is for my friends and family to have to come in and make me stop, make me consider what I'm doing to myself. So, that was a wonderful thing to be able to write with Tegan and Sara, who are so amazing.

There is also a lot of humor, like on the song "Your Dick." How many exes have come out of the woodwork hoping they are the inspiration?

Oh, a lot of people—women too. Because there's nothing better than going with your girlfriend to Good Vibrations and picking out a new dick. That, to me, is the best thing about being in a new relationship is going to get your new dick.

Drop Dead Diva continued on page 70

AUSTIN YOUNG

know, I was waiting for the babies to be born. [Laughs] I couldn't really leave town or go off to the clubs like I would normally do. I was just waiting for her to give birth, so I definitely wanted to be there. Once I was able to go to the clubs everything just sort of worked out for me. I was really happy about it. I wish I had taken more pictures with the president because...all my friends and family, they've got these great shots, and I was just so focused on the job that I didn't really absorb the moment, or, you know, get my *face time*, as I should say. [Laughs] So does that mean you didn't get to touch Michelle Obama's biceps?

I did *not*. And you know what? I so wanted to do that. It was so funny, because I was at the table and she leaned over to say something to me, and I was going through my notes, and I kind of gave her a look like, Hey! I'm busy, woman! [Laughs] Can't you see, I'm working on this?

Oh no, you shushed the First Lady!

I kind of blew her off, because I was so focused. So looking back, it's like, Oh, man—there were definitely a couple of missed opportunities there. But it was great. [Laughs]

You have a degree in marketing and worked at the National Security Agency. Is that a career trajectory you'd recommend for a comic?

[Laughs.] No, no. College, yes. You always need something to fall back on. And also, your experience in college just gives you material. And it's also just a growing up period and you see that you can accomplish something—like, you set a goal and you finish it. Work at the NSA? No, I wouldn't advise that. [Laughs] They will suck the funny out of you.

I guess we're glad you survived it then. You also spent five years on *The Chris Rock Show*. How did that inform your work today?

Oh man, I can't even put a value on what I learned from that show, and working with Chris. He has a work ethic like no other performer that I know. He has such a high standard, that it made me a better writer and a better performer. I thank him all the time. I don't send him any money, but I just thank him. I'm very grateful.

One more for the *Curvettes*. You've done a number of films—*Over the Hedge* to *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* and *Monster-in-Law*. Would you ever do a lesbian role?

Yeah, of course! I'm sure my wife will want to see the script first. All we have to do is get Angelina Jolie on board and hey, I'm there. I'm ready. ■



Drop Dead Diva continued from page 49

"I convinced all of my very amazing musician friends, people who I absolutely adore, to write the songs with me..."

There's always these situations with lesbians—your eyes are bigger than your vagina. You get that giant thing that's never going to fit but it's so romantic to talk about how you're going to get...the maverick—but it's just so huge.

We are huge fans of *Drop Dead Diva* and the body diversity it represents on TV.

I really love it. I wish more shows were like that. As a survivor of eating disorders, for me positivity in terms of body image and the presentation of new beauty ideals is so important. I think it really saves lives, and I don't think it can be taken any other way. It should have the same seriousness as any disease. Eating disorders are just as destructive as any other disease. It's so insidious because the way that people catch [get a] disordered body image is because of the lack of representation, so it's harder to define where it starts. When you don't see people that look like you, you start to feel like there's something wrong with you. I think it's important [that everyone sees] people who look like them and people whose physical ideals are attainable. So I love the show *Drop Dead Diva*. I think it does great work in a very silent way.

Has your visibility impacted the way that the public sees Asian American women?

I think that people have different images of what Asian American women can do or what women of color can do. I think a lot of Asian American people feel restricted by their

culture. Like they feel like, Oh, I can't come out of the closet, because of parents who can't deal with that. Or, I can't deviate from this career path, because my parents have worked so hard as immigrants to make sure I could do this career. There are so many limitations that Asian Americans and immigrant families put on their kids. It's a definite handicap when coming out in the world. It's OK to be queer. It's OK to be an artist. It's OK to be myself. So hopefully, I have contributed to people's feeling like they have permission to do something, which I think is really lacking a lot—in many Asian American cultures.

Prior to the elections, you wrote a *Huffington Post* article about the hope Obama represented. Do you feel like he's fulfilled your expectations?

I think so. For me, it's about inclusion, and it's about this idea that a multiracial candidate can actually win, that we can have someone in office who's not white, who can be commander in chief. It's a huge amazing accomplishment. Because of that, Obama transcends politics and becomes a very important cultural icon, and in a sense, a kind of walking miracle, that we can open the door to so much.

I think there *are* problems with the administration. I have a big problem with the way he is handling marriage equality, that he can still reject this idea of marriage equality while still being such a great president in many other ways. But at the same time, I'm still filled with that hope and filled with a lot of encouragement about the administration.

PIXIE VISION PRODUCTIONS (CHO)

I think, in a sense, it's an administration that I can work with. I feel like I can definitely get behind where the country has gone because of Obama. There's a lot more awareness, a lot of racial consciousness, and I think that the queer community *will* get marriage equality, that we'll be able to accomplish that.

The country is still very divided, and with things like the economic crisis and the oil spills in the Gulf, it feels overwhelming. How do you resist the urge to bury your head in the sand?

Well, I think it's important to talk about it, and stand-up comedy is a good format. For me, it's interesting because I've been living in Atlanta, where we film *Drop Dead Diva*, and I'm surrounded by that Tea Party mentality. What's important to understand is the Tea Partier, that whole conservative area of thinking, has peaked because these people are really terrified of disappearing. Their vehemence is really evidence that their kind of ways of life and their ways of thinking and voting are disappearing. In a sense, their appearance on the horizon is a good thing. Because then you kind of think, Oh, they really are kind of crazy, and that it is very much a minor movement, compared to how conservative the country was right after 9/11. There's a great big change in the way that people are thinking, politically. So, the Tea Party is less of a threat, because they're in the minority—that's why they're so obnoxious.

Another group gaining visibility and acceptance are trans individuals. Thoughts on that?

I think it's really great. I think the trans community is really coming into their own. I think the way that things have changed, there's a lot more visibility and a lot more permission for people to transition, and I feel like that is a good thing they can be themselves. I look on that very positively, and an important thing, because I think in the LGBT community, the trans, the "T," gets lost in that greater community. So I'm really proud that the trans community has come forward, gotten larger and gotten more visible.

What's next for you?

I want to do another album. Maybe I will come back to some of the people I collaborated with on the last one. I'd just like to get better as a musician too. That's always something I'm working on. I just want to be a better comic. I want to do more. And I look forward to more seasons of *Drop Dead Diva*. It's really successful, so that's a great thing. ■

And, you know, they made it look easy. When I saw the episode, to be honest with you, I cannot believe that they made it look so easy. It was so much harder than it looked. My start-to-finish time was somewhere around five hours and 45 minutes.

You're a seasoned veteran of the series. Any advice for newcomers?

Keep your mouth fucking shut. If there's drama going on, don't get involved. If you think that you're the best competitor there, don't say it out loud, because people want to target you. Everybody on this challenge, we're all constantly looking for a scapegoat. The way to become that person is by opening up your mouth too much and sometimes even by winning too much. Nobody wants to see anybody win every time.

There were a ton of queer women on the cast. Were you happy with the cast?

I was happy to have Aneesa there. I hadn't spent any time with her in a long time. We were, at one point, close friends, so I was happy to have her in my corner. I was happy Jenn was going to be there.

Lots of lesbians meant dyke drama, including some ex-related. I didn't realize that you and Aneesa dated.

It was very brief. It wasn't on *Battle of the Sexes*. It was when we got home—I was living in New York at the time and we kind of dated for, like, two months, and then it didn't work out, and we stopped talking and then it was done.

But it seemed that living together rekindled some feelings for her.

The thing is, with Aneesa, she holds herself responsible for why we stopped dating. I think that when you do that, and you feel like maybe you should have done differently, it's one of those things where it's harder for you to get over it. But I think that the duel was such a therapeutic thing for us to go through, because we just got all our shit out. Now we're closer than ever. We've never been better friends.

Do you find it difficult to be so out on TV?

It's just a part of who I am. It's, like, as easy as it is for someone to say, yeah, I like men—it's as easy for me to say, yeah, I like women. People are always, like, how did you do it, how did you become comfortable with it? You just do. The biggest thing I tell people is, nobody can take away your comfort with it. Not your parents, not your best friend—just because they don't like gay people—no one. So when you're comfortable with something, I think people pick up on that energy and they don't question it in you. And with me I think it's very clear that I don't have an uncomfortable bone in my body when it comes to being labeled a lesbian. That is something I am proud of.

How are things for you now?

I'm so happy to be in Miami. I'm actually dating someone now. I'm really, really happy. I'm just enjoying being home and getting back to normal life again. ■

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