Harmony Beyond the Keys: Exploring the Motivations Behind Repeated Attendance of Tori Amos Concerts

By Phyllis Horridge

Abstract: This paper explores motivations behind the repeated attendance of Tori Amos concerts. It examines the diverse set lists that create the magical and spiritual concert experience that fans cherish. The study traces Tori's career, highlighting her critical acclaim and industry recognition. The personal narrative of the author's Tori Amos concert experiences adds a qualitative dimension to the investigation. A survey within the Tori Amos community provides insights into fan motivations, with set list statistics from the 2023 leg of the Ocean to Ocean tour revealing the intricacies of Tori's performances. The paper discusses Tori's connection with fans, exemplified by her pre-show meet-and-greets and post-show interactions, and the post-COVID adaptation of letter drops which play a central role in fans' loyalty. The research further explores the fan community, emphasizing the friendships started through Tori Amos' music. The paper concludes by positioning Tori Amos' legacy not just in her musical contributions but in the profound impact on the lives of her dedicated fanbase, creating a magical world of solace and belonging.

Tori Amos fans are asked how many shows they have attended on the live concert DVD *Welcome to Sunny Florida* (2004). The range is substantial with the highest at 125 and the lowest at 10. The latter perhaps expressing a sense of regret, stating "I'm kind of new." It is not unusual to see the same people concert after concert, many who have travelled from all parts of the world and seem to all know each other. Fans sometimes referred to as Toriphiles or more often Ears with Feet[1], including myself, travel together, with many of us dedicating months off to attend every show on a single tour.

This research paper seeks to investigate and understand the motivations behind the repeated attendance of Tori Amos concerts. It will delve into the appeal of diverse set lists, combined with what fans describe as a magical and spiritual concert experience. Additionally, it will touch upon Tori's connection with her fans and the supportive community within the fanbase. Being part of the Tori Amos fandom, much of this paper will be presented in the form of an autoethnography.

Tori Amos' first solo studio album, *Little Earthquakes*, was released in the United Kingdom January of 1992 and the United States in February of the same year.

> "She wrote and sang in a naked, compellingly honest way; there was an unparalleled intimacy and frankness to her writing and playing, an internal monologue playing out, direct to the listener – but crucially with a master songwriter's craft … You knew instinctively that here was someone who understood what it was to be disenfranchised, powerless, a little out of place; ultimately, her music showed you, as listener, that you have what you need within you and that, really, you're not alone." (Barton)

[1] Tori Amos tells a fan at the 9/16/96 meet and greet "I hate the word fans. I'd like to call you Ears with Feet and never call you a fan again because you're ears with feet."

Colin Larkin's *All Time Top 1000 albums* (3rd Edition, 2000) voted *Little Earthquakes* as number 73, and Rolling Stone's prestigious list of the 500 greatest albums of all time positioned it at 233.

Tori Amos has since released 15 studio albums and embarked on 15 world tours. Her contributions have been recognized with five MTV Video Music Award nominations and eight Grammy Award nominations. Tori won an Echo Klassik[2] award for her classical crossover album *Night of Hunters* and earned a place on VH1's esteemed list of the 100 Greatest Women of Rock and Roll in 1999. Notably, in 2003, Rolling Stone magazine ranked Tori Amos as the fifth-best touring act, a testament to her impact on the music industry.

My Touring "STori"

While I was first introduced to Tori Amos in 1992, it wasn't until 1998, that the idea of attending multiple shows in one tour crossed my mind. I ventured to The Landmark Theatre on August 11, 1998, in Richmond, Virginia—an hour and a half away from home—for my third Tori Amos concert, and first for the Plugged 98 tour. The two previous shows were local to me, so the idea of traveling this far for a concert felt like a significant undertaking. Accompanying

1 The Landmark Theatre in Richmond, Virginia, August 11, 1998

[2] Germany's major classical music award in 22 categories, presented by the Deutsche Phono-Akademie

me were my sister, mom, and a good friend, who agreed to arrive early in the day. I had arranged to meet pre-show with other fans, including Richard, with whom I connected in a Fan Group on the internet. Richard proposes the idea of traveling to Knoxville, Tennessee, just a few days later, for another Tori show. Initially, I question the rationale of traveling such distances for concerts. It seemed like a crazy idea. However, my supportive and adventurous mother, recognizing my deep admiration for Tori Amos, enthusiastically says, "I think you should go! It will be fun!"

Fast forward to August 15, 1998, in Knoxville, Tennessee – a day that would forever alter my life. From the moment we arrive at the venue, I'm engulfed in pure joy. Richard introduces me to a group of individuals who have been following the 1998 tour since its commencement in the United States on July 15. This fact alone astonishes me. Upon arrival, a number is written on my hand and I find myself waiting in numerical order for a meet and greet – a tradition Tori Amos used to hold before almost every show prior to COVID. Despite previous attempts to attend meet and greets, I had always found myself too far back in line. This time, however, I was determined to see and possibly speak to Tori before the show. While I don't distinctly recall a conversation, Tori was close enough for eye contact, allowing me to feel the enchantment of her presence.

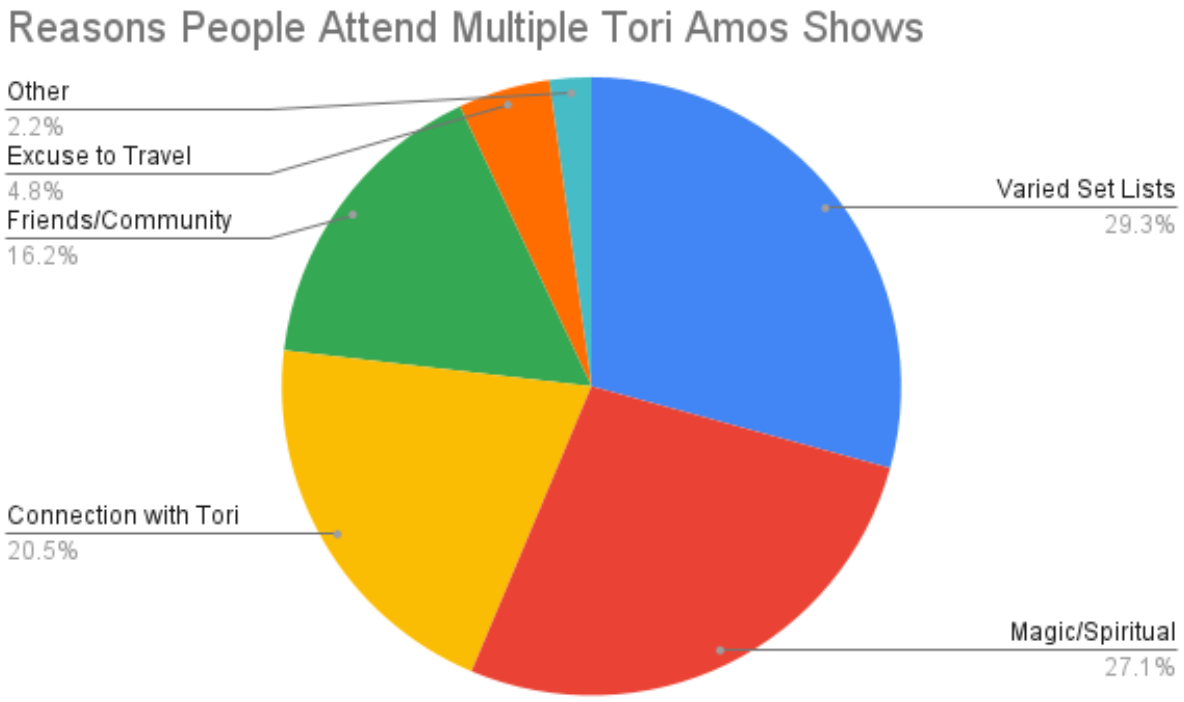
The concert itself, widely regarded by many fans as one of Tori Amos' best to date, left a lasting impression. Richard, reflecting on the experience, remarked, "I never used to believe there was such a thing as 'perfectly' played music. After this Knoxville show, I'm not so sure. My mind kept toggling back and forth between thinking ‘I have to figure out some way to get to more shows,’ and wondering if I really even wanted to go to the next show for which I have a ticket, because I didn't see how it could possibly compare with this one or take us anyplace new” (The Dent). It was on this day that I realized the necessity of attending multiple shows on one tour. I yearned to witness firsthand how each performance differed, to share the space with like-

minded individuals, and to immerse myself in the camaraderie that comes with being part of the Tori Amos community. To date, I have attended what I consider a modest number of 112 shows, alongside various radio and tv appearances, spanning 15 countries, 27 states, and 79 cities.

2 Tori Amos arriving to the venue in Knoxville, TN, August 15, 1998

The Survey

In November 2023, I conducted a survey within the Tori Amos community to inquire about the motivations behind attending multiple shows on a single tour. In a matter of hours, I received over 150 responses, and it was unsurprising to find that the answers shared striking similarities. The primary reason cited was the appeal of varied set lists, closely followed by the overall magical and spiritual concert experience. Additionally, the profound connection Tori establishes with her fans ranked high on the list, alongside the meaningful friendships cultivated during the tour.



The Setlists

For the scope of this research, I will examine the set list statistics from the 2023 leg of the Ocean to Ocean tour (Fig. 1) Across 53 shows, Tori performed a total of 146 songs, with each night's performance typically featuring a 15 to 16 song set. This averages out to nearly 3 new songs introduced at each show.

As an attendee at Tori Amos concerts, we often hear an introduction to a song and immediately recognize it but, at times, there is anticipation of a band jam lasting approximately 3 to 5 minutes, characterized by complete improvisation before unveiling the next song in the set. This has become a customary feature of Tori's performances. Instead of engaging in traditional interactions and talking with the audience between songs, Tori frequently integrates musical improvisations instead into her shows. As highlighted by Ann Powers in the book *Piece by Piece*, "Sensitivity to her environment feeds the improvisations Amos explores in performance, as she translates the mood of her locale into music" (pg. 259). The improvisations often delve

into deeply personal themes. Tori Amos may address global events, respond to letters from fans, or simply acknowledge and pay homage to the specific town in which she is performing.

The composition of the set list also proved to be a noteworthy element in this tour. Traditionally, Tori Amos would initiate each set with a consistent opener. However, for this leg of the tour, she introduced a change by alternating between 2 or 3 song choices each night. Attendees would eagerly arrive at the venue, engaging in speculation and anticipation regarding the opening song of the set.

The second song in the set was consistently the title track “Ocean to Ocean” from her latest album. However, each night brought a distinctive rendition as Tori engaged in an improvisational jam with the band, setting a unique tone for the song. Mid-set, Tori's band would step away, allowing her to deliver two solo piano performances. These segments often fulfilled audience requests, creating an exclusive experience for each show. Out of the 53 performances, Tori showcased 50 different songs during this solo segment, with 21 of them played only twice.

Upon the band's return, the remainder of the setlist became unpredictable. Tori frequently reworked a song with the band, transforming pieces that were initially performed solo and presenting them as debuts during the live performance. The encore typically featured one of her most celebrated hits, *Cornflake Girl*, performed in 47 out of the 53 shows, alongside another song, adding an extra layer of excitement and familiarity to the conclusion of each performance.

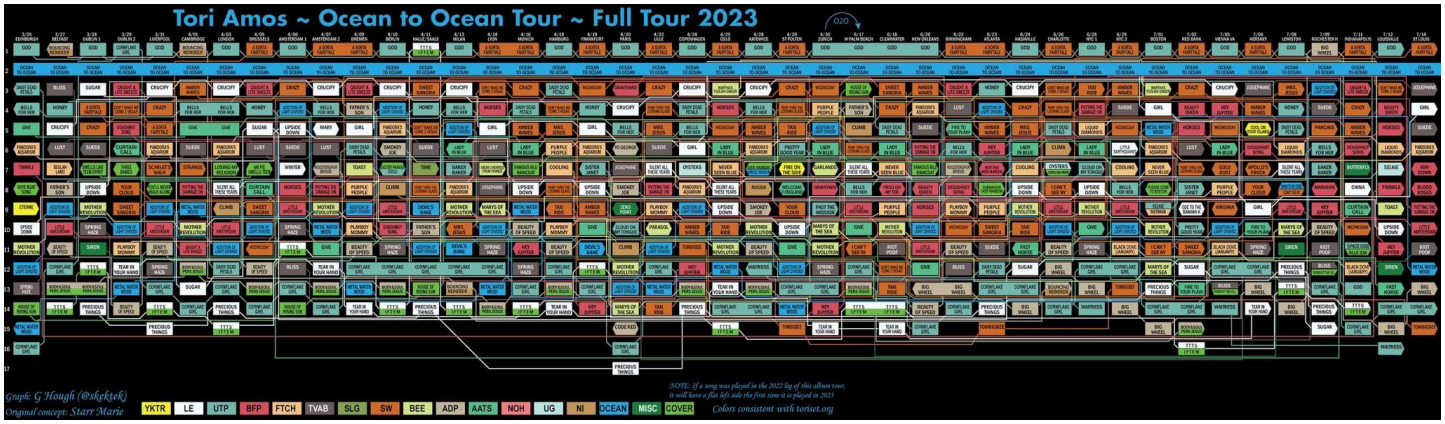


Fig. 1Gerald E. Hough. Tori Amos Ocean to Ocean 2023 Tour Setlist Graph

Fans eagerly anticipate each show, speculating on themes, pondering the contents of the solo section, and questioning whether a new collaboration with the band or a rendition of our requested song might unfold. Tori always incorporates one or two surprises into each show, and in the survey, a handful of fans mentioned the fear of missing out (FOMO), which becomes palpable if they are not present to witness these special moments.

The Magic of the Show

In a society increasingly shaped by online interactions, the tangible, shared experience of a live concert cultivates a community that goes beyond virtual confines. While digital media can sometimes contribute to feelings of isolation, the shared experience of live music becomes a powerful tool for bridging gaps, fostering unity, and creating a sense of belonging.

> "With Tori's live shows, experiencing her music is often connected with the need to have an innocuous place to encounter emotions. Attending live show after show, for many, was as much about finding a safe space to experience emotions as it was about following their favorite performer. Tori's songs which fuse emotionally charged lyrics with rock and alternative musical arrangements, was the perfect outlet for these needs. When combined with the atmosphere Tori creates at her live concerts and her willingness to place the experiences of not only herself but her fans at the center of her live shows, a perfect storm of performance, emotions, and healing is created." (Trier-Bieniek)

Tori has the ability to make eye contact with an entire audience when performing. During a show, there is a sense of connection, at times making it feel as though you are the only one in the room, regardless of the venue's size. Joel Hopkins, her former bodyguard, states "The feeling with every kid out there is that it's one-on-one. And they're always tuned in. Every single one of them. The respect for her while she's on stage, you don't see that with the majority of artists." (Piece by Piece, pg. 258) This unique dynamic can make the concert experience truly magical.

Lynn McMahon stated in the survey "[Tori] may not play what I want to hear, but she somehow understands what I need to hear … You never know what you are going to get, but at some point, something will hit you and suddenly it will feel like you are defying gravity!" Many survey responses also highlighted not only the magic but spiritual side of a Tori Amos concert, with one fan referring to the overall experience as "worshipping in the house of Tori" while another called it the "Church of Tori".

Within this community, Tori is sometimes regarded as a spiritual guide. "I was looking for some sort of healing, whether it was catharsis, closure or a cleansing ritual — whatever the songs wanted to be … As I sat transfixed in my seat at the City Recital Hall that night, it felt like my demons had been put to rest" (Ting). Some fans express a similar desire for healing, and attending live shows perhaps serves as a means to confront and release emotional challenges. In return, the concert can provide a therapeutic space where the live performance works to alleviate inner struggles, offering a sense of spiritual peace and resolution.

Tori's Connection with Fans

In the book *Resistance* Tori says "The set list of each show would reflect and synthesize what I had learned from my one-on-one conversations with my main source of intel: the audience" (pg. 169). As fans provided insights into their connection with Tori, respondents of the survey emphasize Tori's practice of calling them by name, listening intently, and responding genuinely when meeting her. In 1998 MTV aired a special called *The Tori Philes* (1998) where a handful of fans were interviewed. "Sometimes it's easier to go to Tori with one of your problems than one of your friends" says Christian. Lisa added "She really takes time out to talk to fans and get to know them, so she has a really intimate relationship with everyone." Then Matt stated, "Tori treats her fans better than any other artist I can think of." Lisa continued "She knows certain people that follow her around the different places. She really cares about them,

she's very genuine. Not flaky at all. She really takes time and that's something that's amazing about her." Tori herself states later in the program "The most exciting thing I can do is connect with someone who has something intelligent to say" adding "It's not exhausting to connect with another human being". From the start of her very first tour in 1992, Tori has held meet-and-greets before and/or after shows. At these completely free events she signs autographs, takes photos, but more importantly genuinely engages with fans, listening to their stories and ensuring each individual feel acknowledged and heard.

Chelsea Laird, Tori's former manager says "There is a posse of fans who travel to every show, and she knows them … She goes out of her way to make sure these people feel as though there's somebody that cares, that someone is indeed listening. They feel that connection with her, so they continue to come back" (Piece by Piece, pg. 255). I challenge you to identify another artist who invests the time to engage with their fans before and after nearly every performance. In my research, I have not been able to find one.

The moment Tori Amos calls you by name feels extremely special. I experienced this firsthand in 2005 when I attended a live performance on XM Radio. As Tori made her way down the aisle to reach her piano, she spotted me, stopped, offered a hug, and whispered in my ear, "Thank you for coming, Phyllis." This was the first show I attended on this particular tour, and I hadn't been to a meet and greet since 2003. The recognition from someone I admire remains an unforgettable experience and nurtures a strong desire to continue attending her shows.

"They want this person that will be someone they have a relationship with. I can do that … You really learn from people's stories and can see, wow, these are the people relating to these songs" (Piece by Piece, 255). Although you might only have a few minutes with her in a meet and greet, those brief moments become exclusively yours. In those fleeting minutes, a connection is formed, and she transforms from an artist to a friend.

In the post-COVID era, meet and greets became a thing of the past. However, Tori was keen on maintaining a connection with her fans. To facilitate this, her management devised a plan where fans could visit the venue earlier in the day and drop off a letter for her. Remarkably, Tori made it a point to read every letter she received. Even though she received stacks and stacks of letters from these drops daily, her tour manager informed us that she was diligently reading them. While she might not read all of them in one day, the longer road trips were often spent going through the letters. Additionally, from these letter drops, Tori would request her management to reach out to specific fans and upgrade them to the front row for one of the shows they were attending.

A remarkable moment from the latest tour unfolded in London at the Royal Albert Hall when Tori took a moment to share a touching story from a letter she had received earlier in the day. The letter detailed a fan's experience at their first live show, and Tori extended her wishes for their 50th show, performing the requested song. Another memorable incident unfolded in Omaha, Nebraska, where Tori pleasantly surprised a fan on their birthday with a rarely played song and subsequently invited them backstage. Survey respondents echoed similar narratives, highlighting the prevalence of these unique moments throughout the tour.

Reflecting on my own experience, I would regret not sharing the significance of the Paris show in 2023. It marked my 100th show, with the added significance of having my mom and sister in attendance—just as they were in Richmond, Virginia in 1998. I wrote a letter to Tori, recounting my 1998 experience and explaining how my family would be with me for this milestone. I emphasized that, had it not been for my mom's encouragement to attend the Knoxville show, I might not have reached this point. To my surprise, Tori's management contacted me and told me Tori had read my letter and wanted to upgrade my entire family to the

front row. It turned out to be the perfect occasion to commemorate my 100th show, surrounded by my family on the left and my chosen family on the right.

3 The author with her family at the Paris show, 2023

The Fan Community

> "I join a new Tori group for the Maryland/DC/Virginia area and connect with other Tori fans both online and off …We talked about a lot of things, not just Tori. We shared music recs … We discussed Napster and its eventual shutdown; we discussed the new Borders opening in Hagerstown, Maryland… Periodically we circulated long, intensive "getting to know you" questionnaires … Meetups were planned, held, and chronicled later for the group" (Milks)

Being a founding member of this DC area group named Purple People[3], which originated in 1997, I played a vital role in sustaining the group's activity via the mailing list we created. I took on the role of a membership liaison, actively searching for and recruiting new members

[3] *Purple People* is a B-side on the *Spark* single. The second verse starts "I watch me be this other thing and never know / If I'm marooned or where the purple people go." Megan Milks explains "we were each in our own way marooned, I suppose was our logic. We were trying to find one another, our purple kin (aka "Purpleys," as we would soon come to know ourselves)."

regularly. After being involved for a significant period, I was entrusted with organizing our inaugural in-person meet-up. This event turned into a lively party hosted in the basement of one of our members' houses. We shared a meal, exchanged Tori stories, danced, and sang together—it felt as if we had known each other for years.

4 The first Purple People gathering, 1998

Even now, I maintain friendships with several members of the Purple People. I have been present at graduations, weddings, baby showers, and have shared vacations with many of them. We exchange gifts during the holidays and send birthday presents to each other. "We became who we are now because of Tori. We became family because of Tori. After all these years, we're still family." (Michelson) Many of us live quite a distance from each other. Therefore, Tori Tour serves as a compelling reason for us to reunite and spend time together once again. Even during the most recent tour, I formed new friendships that resonate as if we've known each other for a lifetime. In the survey, one participant expressed "I attend shows to see you Phyllis!"

The phenomenon of Tori Amos' appeal lies in the connections she makes with her audience and the unique bond within the Tori fan community. As showcased in the varied set lists, each performance becomes a tapestry woven with improvisation, personal reflections, and the heartbeat of the locale. Tori's connection with fans goes beyond the stage, echoing in the

memories of intimate encounters and recognition. The fanbase is a global family, sharing not just in the love for Tori's music but also in the enduring friendships made through the years. Tori Amos' legacy extends far beyond her music; it resonates in the hearts of those who have found solace, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging within the magical world she creates.

5 The author with Tori and friends, 2017

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