

**A Conversation with Jen Trynin**  
by Bill DeMain (4/2006, Puremusic.com)

In 1994, Jen Trynin was poised to become the Next Big Thing. She had it all--catchy songs, cool image, a kick-ass band. And after a *Destroy All Monsters*-style bidding war, she had a major label and manager behind her with all their star-making machinery cranked into high gear.

But something happened on the way to the top of the charts. As Trynin sums it up: "How do you go from having everything to having nothing?"

Nearly ten years after her exit from the music business, this Boston-based artist has returned to tell her tale in all its gory detail. *Everything I'm Cracked Up To Be: A Rock & Roll Fairy Tale* [Harcourt] is a must-read that perfectly captures the conundrums and clichés of the music business.

The story, though a familiar one, is told with keen insight and humor. After the usual dive bar apprenticeship and self-released record, Trynin suddenly finds herself the alt-rock It Girl. Everybody wants her. The book's sharp prose tosses you right in the shark tank of the label bidding war. It makes you squirm in the face of weirdo fans and clueless radio DJ's. It illuminates how fame warps your identity ("The extra-strength, super-deluxe me," Trynin calls it). It breaks your heart as her career starts to dissolve into disappointment and disillusion. And ultimately, it gives you hope that there is life beyond the biz.

We caught up with Jen Trynin for a chat upon her return from a national book tour.

**Puremusic:** How did the book tour go?

**Jen Trynin:** It was a lot of fun. Kind of short, which makes it that much more fun in a way. Lots of people came out. Some old friends, and people I worked with back in the day, who I hadn't seen in eight or ten years.

**PM:** Was writing this book a cathartic experience for you?

**JT:** I think that it ended up that it was. I stopped doing music in '98, and I started writing about my experiences a little bit the year after, just because I had all these really strong memories going through my head, day after day. It was kind of bugging me. I'd been a writing major in college, and had done a lot of writing in my life. Probably more writing than I did music, up until I decided to pursue music seriously. When I stopped doing music, I didn't create anything for a year, because I just couldn't stand the thought of creating anything.

But then when I started doing stuff, it ended up being prose writing. For about two years, I wrote when I felt like it. Then I started taking these writing workshops, and the teachers encouraged me to make my story into a book. So I did. It was very stream of

consciousness at the beginning, then it ended up being quite chronological. Boringly so, in a way. [laughs]

**PM:** The end of the book skips from your exit from the business to the present. When you first walked away, what was that like for you?

**JT:** I was so sick of the whole thing. I had been set up to supposedly have all this success, and it made absolutely no sense to me. It still doesn't, to tell you the truth. It's like, okay, so I wasn't the biggest star in the world, but I had no idea how it ended up that I had nothing. I didn't know how you went from having everything to nothing. So I felt like I had nowhere to go.

As I say in the book at the very end, I thought trying to scramble around and convince another major label to sign me would be worthless and humiliating. I didn't think any indie would have anything to do with me because I was who I was at the time. I'm sure they all just thought I was the biggest sell-out in the world. I could see why they'd think that, so I thought, "What do I do? Do I want to go back to just playing in my room?"

I'd gone through it all. I'd been doing music at that point since I was ten or eleven years old, and I really felt in a lot of ways that I had done as much as I could do. I wasn't sure what else to do after that. So I just stopped. It wasn't hard to stop. But it was very hard to figure out what else to do with my life. It was very empty.

**PM:** Did you go into a different line of work?

**JT:** I'd saved a lot of money from what I'd made in the music thing. Even though I didn't sell many records, I had advances that I didn't spend all the money of.

**PM:** Good for you.

**JT:** [laughs] It's the upside of being a real pessimist. I figured something bad was going to happen, and I might as well have a little bit of money. So that was good, because I didn't have to go find a job right away. I enrolled in Harvard's adult education program, and I did that full-time for a year. I took Intro To Economics, Intro To Philosophy, Calculus--all this stuff I hadn't taken in college. I really enjoyed it. That's how I kind of hid. I probably would've moved out of Boston, but my boyfriend at the time--who's now my husband [producer Mike Deneen]--owns a recording studio here, so he couldn't really move. So it was either break up with him and move, or disappear here.

**PM:** After the way it ended with the major label deal, coming back to Boston must've been hard. When you'd run into old friends, did you feel the need to explain what happened and justify yourself?

**JT:** It was awful. I just stopped going out for like two years. [laughs] That's another reason I wrote the book, because people were like, "What happened? Why did you quit?" I couldn't answer them, you know? So I wrote the book.

**PM:** The details and the dialogue put the reader right there with you. Was it written entirely from memory or were you keeping journals during those years?

**JT:** Mostly it was memory. Obviously, when you write a book like this, there's the question of, "Did the character of Big Wig say every single thing that I said he said?" I don't know. But it was a very vivid and memorable kind of experience, so once it happened, it was burned into my head. I remember being at Columbia Records, in the president's office, and what he looked like, and where I was sitting, and him telling me about Toad The Wet Sprocket, and him saying, "Hit, hit, hit!" Back then, I had an answering machine, and people would call in to leave messages, and I kept all of them. So I went back to listen to them, and I could remember the speech patterns of a lot of the people who ended up in the book because of the phone messages.

**PM:** While I was reading, I Googled a few names of characters and didn't find them. I assume all the names were changed.

**JT:** All the names were changed except for people in the common domain, basically. Courtney Love or David Geffen, for example. People who were famous and who anyone would know. I left those names the same, and I changed the other ones because it doesn't really matter who they were. Their position mattered, but not their names.

**PM:** Have any of these music business people come out of the woodwork to complain about how they're portrayed in the book?

**JT:** No one has complained yet. I sent the book to just about every main character. Some of the people I lost track of, sadly. The Burns guy who was the tour manager, I really liked him, and I tried to find him but couldn't. The sound guy wasn't in the book that much. I know what state he lives in, but I couldn't find him. But of the other people I could find, I sent it to them, and everyone seemed pretty cool about it. Almost all of them came to my readings in New York and L.A. That was kind of wonderful for me. Everyone has been such a good sport, and they realized why I wrote the book. Now we're all seeing each other again, and these are people who haven't seen me or each other in many years. We'd all left each other's company with such a bad taste in our mouths, it was kind of a way to reestablish a nicer feeling among everybody. That really meant a lot to me.

**PM:** It probably made these people nostalgic for a time when they were a little bit more in control and weren't fearful for their jobs.

**JT:** I think you're right. The character of Head Honcho, who was the general manager of Warner Brothers Records at the time, was let go right around the time I was. He's no longer in the music business. The character of Lola, who was my A & R person, and is a very well-known A & R person in the community, also left the music business, a few years after I did. A lot of the people are no longer in the music business. Some of them are much higher up in the music business. My first manager, who quit in the middle of

my record, ended up, as of two years ago, being the president of Columbia. But he has since been let go and he is now drifting around. It's just a crazy business. [laughs]

**PM:** You capture the conversations with clueless disc jockeys really well. When you first started to meet these people were you surprised that they lived up to the cliché?

**JT:** Yes--that's a great question. [laughs] It was tough to be writing about these characters who do seem like a cliché. But the point is, clichés are clichés for a reason. Some of the DJs and some of the high-up execs *really do act like that*. You're sitting there in reality, thinking, "Oh my god, people really act like this!" [laughs] Only one person has complained about it so far, saying that some of the characters seem like clichés. It's hard to say, "Well, that's really the point about some of these people. They are like that." It's hard to write about stuff like that when it comes out like a cliché. I was hoping I put it in the right context so that the reader would understand that you as the reader see it as a cliché and so am I. [laughs]

**PM:** I was squirming right along with you when you'd meet a DJ who had no idea who you were and obviously hadn't listened to your record.

**JT:** That happened much more often than I ever care to admit. It's embarrassing. It's already happened with my book, too. Somebody had me on his radio show, and said to me, during a commercial break, "I don't know who you are. I don't know what you're doing here." I was like, "That's cool. Great." [laughs]

**PM:** Has the book been optioned for a movie yet?

**JT:** There's been some interest. To me, it's a no-brainer. It looks like an obvious movie. Maybe an indie movie or small arthouse movie, but a movie nonetheless.

**PM:** Who would you like to see play you?

**JT:** [laughs] Frank Sinatra.

**PM:** Junior.

**JT:** [laughs] Right, Frank Sinatra, Jr. I have no idea. Who do you think could play me?

**PM:** Let me think... Chloe Sevigny, Mandy Moore, maybe.

**JT:** Mandy Moore. She's funny. It's a sad comment on show business, not just today, but always, that when I was first in the heart of writing this book a few years ago, my friends and I would joke around and say, "Who's going to play Jen in the movie version?" It was kind of embarrassing. So people would mention different actresses, but Hollywood goes through actresses so quickly and tosses them out, that we've gone through three levels already. Three phases of different actresses. The second they hit thirty or whatever, for

most of them, they're out the door. People who I thought of a few years ago aren't even acting anymore.

**PM:** Even if it doesn't get made into a movie, I think the book will stand as one of the important cautionary tales for people getting into the music business.

**JT:** Yeah, maybe. But I don't want to dissuade people from trying to pursue their dreams, because that's the most fun thing there is to do in life. Regardless of whether you get it or not. In fact, it's usually better if you don't get it, because then you keep trying for it.

**PM:** Kids going in to the music business today have access to a whole history of cautionary tales, ranging from things like your book, to biographies of everyone from Little Richard to Kurt Cobain, to movies like *That Thing You Do*. When you were a teenager, were there music biz stories that resonated with you?

**JT:** I never thought about the music business with any seriousness until I graduated college, which is too bad. I wish that I had taken it more seriously much earlier, then I might have had better luck. The only books I ever read about the music business, I read between making my first and second records. I read Donald Passman's *All You Need To Know About The Music Business*. That was a valuable book and taught me a lot. The other books I read were *Hit Men* by Frederic Dannen and *Mansion On The Hill* by Fred Goodman. Both of those were interesting. Something that made me really happy is that Fred Goodman read my book and called me up a few months ago, and I got to talk to him. He was really nice and funny. I was very flattered, because he loved the book. That meant a lot.

**PM:** Aimee Mann is a recurring figure in the book. I remember interviewing her back around '94, just when Imago had gone under and her troubles were beginning. Did having her as a friend make you more cautious about signing contracts? Could you bounce things off her?

**JT:** She's not the best person to bounce things off of. [laughs] She's the kind of person where you have a conversation, and she kind of sucks it in and takes it for herself. Which is a whole other story. [laughs] I would definitely listen to her tales, and she talked about that stuff a lot. She's one of the primary examples of the bad stuff that can happen in the business. I respect her, and she's kind of my hero, which is why she is who she is in the book. By the last scene, where the two of us are sitting there talking, she's on her total upswing and is doing great and putting out her own records. She never quit and she never allowed other people to tell her that she sucked. If you really have that inside of you, and you really believe in yourself, I think that's the number one most important thing to success. I don't have it. I'm regular layman's conceited. [laughs] I'm not full of myself. I don't have that extra something that makes you really, *really* believe in yourself. I think Aimee does. And she should. She's immensely talented. I love her music.

**PM:** Were there stories that you wanted to put in the book but didn't?

**JT:** I'll answer that by saying that the book, as it is, is just under 400 pages. The original draft was 800. So I guess the answer is yes. At first, it was a quite a different book. It was really two books. It was much more about me and more psychological and philosophical. The music was only half of it. My editor and I decided to streamline it more and focus on what we thought people would be most interested in, which was the music part. The psychological stuff is in there, but I don't elaborate on it.

**PM:** Has the book resulted in new interest in your old records?

**JT:** Yes, and it's very confusing. [laughs] I have some copies of the records, and I have a friend who scours the internet and buys them up, if there's a bunch sitting in a warehouse or whatever. I own *Cockamamie*, which is the first record. So I can print up more of those and if things keep going the way they're going, I will print up more of them. The *Gun Shy* record I don't own, and Warner Bros. stopped making them. If interest continues, I'll probably call them and say, "What do you want to do?"

**PM:** What kind of place does music hold in your life now?

**JT:** In the past two months, I've been playing a lot, because in my readings I do a few different scenes and they have moments where I play a song. It's really fun. When I did the reading here a few weeks ago, I did the reading, then played a set of my music afterwards. It was the first time I'd done that in eight years. But in general, I haven't been playing much. But I hope to, because I still enjoy it.

**PM:** Do you still write songs?

**JT:** I haven't been, but I've been feeling slightly inspired for the first time in eight years.

**PM:** Are there things you wish you could've done differently in your career?

**JT:** It's always hard to look at things that way. Hindsight is 20-20, you know? I could venture to say, "I'd have done this or that differently," but the fact is, given the same set of circumstances, I would do the same thing again and again. To turn down anything that happened would've been impossible. I'd been working too hard for too long for nothing.

The smartest thing I could've done was to not to take the big record deal and went with an indie, then tried to build up my reputation slowly. It was very stupid of me to go after the brass ring right out of the box, because of what can happen, which is what did happen. I'd like to say if I had to do it again, I'd go with the little label and turn down the money and blah blah blah. But in reality, every time I show up there, I'm going to do the same thing.

**PM:** Aside from the cautionary tale aspect of the book, I think it does something even more important, in letting people who get out of the business feel like there's a life beyond it. That's very affirming.

**JT:** Thanks. Some people are totally missing that aspect of it. The reviews have been pretty great, so I can't complain. But every once in a while, somebody will write a review that says, "This book is pointless. It's a waste of time." I appreciate that you got it.

**PM:** What's next?

**JT:** I'm trying to figure that out. I'd like to do a longer book tour. But I'm also thinking about trying to do a one-woman show, in a more theatrical sense, mixing the stories from the book with my songs. I don't really know much about that world, so I'll have to look into more.

**PM:** Final words?

**JT:** Tell all your friends so that people will buy it and I don't disappear back into the ether. [laughs] I have a talent for that.

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