

DARE TO DREAM (Relix Records)

www.ToniBrownBand.com

Organic approach

For Toni Brown, publisher and editorial director of Relix magazine, making music is all part of a natural progression

By LEE ABRAHAM

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Turning dreams into reality is a tricky business. Part of the deal is being in the right place at the right time. Then there's good old talent and hard work. Both have a lot to do with any type of success. In fact, what it takes to come out on top seems simple, yet no one has ever developed a one-size-fits-all formula for insuring prosperity. Sure there are countless books, self-help tapes and seminars on the subject, but for most of us, life happens, regardless of which motivational guru's propaganda we buy into. Then there are those other people. That rare breed of passionate visionary who approaches life as an artist does a canvass, and in the process, orchestrates the winds of fate to create her own world.

"Usually, by not planning too much, things just naturally seem to come together," says singer/songwriter Toni Brown. "I call it the 'organic approach,' that's the story of my life." And it's a story that continues to unfold. Best known as the publisher and editorial director of *Relix* magazine, a post she's held for the past 20 years, Brown has evolved from a wide-eyed, music-loving flower child, to a world-wise, new-millennium media mogul. During her tenure at *Relix*, a bimonthly music magazine based in Brooklyn, New York, the publication has grown beyond its roots as a Grateful Dead fanzine into an internationally distributed and highly regarded voice on anything that qualifies as "music for the mind," a broad category that includes psychedelic rock/jam band, reggae, jazz,

The answer came gradually. "About 15 years ago, Robert Hunter gave me a guitar," says Brown. "He said, 'If I give this to you, you have to play it,' and I respected that." What started as a little strummin' and singin' in the living room morphed into the Toni Brown Band, a top-notch rock 'n' roll ensemble that has just released its second album. "I've always written songs," says Brown. "I've been doing that since I was a kid. I was in a band when I was a teenager, but I sort of took 20 years off," she says with a laugh. "I was always interested in pursuing music, but I just never really, consciously, thought it would happen ... Amazingly though, I still feel the same way about a lot of things."

Example: the title track of the new album, *Dare To Dream*. "A lot of my songs have references to dreams," says Brown. "I've always felt there's a very fine line between dreams and reality. It's just that in dreams you don't get in trouble." *Dare to Dream* is chock-full of Brown's original compositions. From the rockin' blues shuffle, "Bad News," and "Broken Record," a self-described "wide open jam vehicle," to the soft, ethereal soundscapes of "The Way You Talk," featuring Vassar Clements on violin, Brown and her band explore a variety of moods and styles. One constant: Brown's sultry vocal stylings. Rounding out the record are a couple of tunes Deadheads will recognize: "New Speedway Boogie," a classic Garcia/Hunter composition, and "We Can Run," written by the late keyboard player, Brent Mydland. "He was a great songwriter and that song really deserves a lot more attention. It's a very environmental song," says Brown.

With the release of the new album, Brown is able to focus on her dual career. She's put an all-star band together to support the record, featuring multi-instrumentalist John Beland of the Flying Burrito Brothers (who also produced *Dare to Dream*) and former Grateful Dead keyboard player Tom Constanten. And when she's not performing, Brown is successfully navigating *Relix* through what many observers mistakenly thought would be the magazine's death knell: the demise of the Grateful Dead.

"I'm happy to say that the scene is alive and well, as is witnessed by the many, many festivals that are taking place every summer," says Brown. "It's just a burgeoning live music scene that really couldn't have existed when the Grateful Dead were out there touring. There's still a lot going on within the Grateful Dead's camp, as well as its community of fans. The Grateful Dead have influenced so many people, Phish included, that there's this whole trickling down effect to the newer bands ... That spirit is still very much alive in the new music. The situation is very dynamic and *Relix* is thriving ... organically of course!" **LVM**

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—Toni Brown, publisher and editorial director of *Relix* magazine

blues and other related musical styles. Although Brown didn't originally set out to be the magazine's driving force, she's flourished in that role.

Back in the mid-'70s, Brown's long, strange trip took a major turn toward the stars when she met Les Kippel, founder of *Relix*, backstage at a concert. The two traveled in similar social circles and continued to cross paths at shows and parties. Before long, Brown was helping out at *Relix* as a proofreader. When then-editor Jeff Tamarkin decided to leave, "Les said, 'Here, you do it!'" she recalls with a laugh. "Everything happened really quickly. And before I knew it, I was the editor."

Things continued to happen quickly. Time flew. Learning with each issue, Brown guided *Relix* with an intuitive hand. In addition to covering new and emerging bands before anyone else in the national media, as was the case with Phish way back when the jam-happy quartet from Burlington was still playing bar gigs, *Relix* ventured into related, yet decidedly non-musical topics. From a regular column on environmental issues to leading a campaign to raise awareness that the DEA was specifically targeting Grateful Dead concerts for massive undercover drug busts, *Relix* has provided a forum for the tie-dyed faithful on an array of issues that were otherwise overlooked.

From the beginning, Brown completely immersed herself in *Relix*'s world. For a Deadhead, it was the perfect gig. Then, a few years ago, she began to yearn for a new challenge. "Even before Jerry died, the Grateful Dead were starting to be less inspiring," reflects Brown. "After Jerry died, I just had this empty feeling. I knew that I still had to put out the magazine, which is no small feat. You need some inspiration to make that happen. And without the Grateful Dead, which was my life since basically 1969, it was like, 'OK, what's next?'"



The Toni Brown Band

What: *Relix* Halloween costume

Where: Legends

When: Sat., Oct. 30, 10 p.m.

Tickets: \$10

Info: 437-9674