

Rolling Stone

October 17, 2017

How Tegan and Sara Made 'The Con' New Again With Help From a Few Friends

Sara Quin and allies such as Shamir and Mykki Blanco discuss a new reinvention of the duo's beloved 2007 LP



Tegan and Sara's Sara Quin, and artists on their new 10th-anniversary covers album, 'The Con X,' discuss putting a new spin on that beloved 2007 LP. *Credit: Autumn de Wilde*

By Maura Johnston

A decade ago, **Tegan and Sara** released *The Con*, a vibrant, heavily emotional album that showcased the Quin sisters' knack for pairing left-field hooks with spiky harmonies and crisp songwriting. The album represented an artistic breakthrough for the pair, who had pushed into the mainstream with the jangly 2005 hit "Walking With a Ghost."

Indie-pop duo researched where funding was needed during fall tour

Starting this week, Tegan and Sara will take *The Con* on the road for a full-album tour. The pair also decided to reach out to the "diverse ecosystem" of musicians around them and put together *The Con X: Covers*, a new compilation that gives over each of the album's songs to a different artist (including Ryan Adams, Paramore's Hayley Williams, synth-pop outfit Chvrches, and MC and performance artist Mykki Blanco) for reinvention, sometimes to dramatic effect. All proceeds from the release will go to the **Tegan and Sara Foundation**, which raises funds to help LGBTQ girls and women.

"We knew we were going to do the tour," says Sara Quin via phone from Los Angeles, where she is prepping for the monthlong jaunt. "It started to evolve from 'Maybe we'll do four shows' or 'Maybe we'll do a residency in New York and a residency in L.A.' into a full North America thing. We were talking about how to raise extra funds for the foundation, and we were like, 'Well, maybe we just have other artists cover the songs and package it that way.'"

The resulting album reshapes *The Con's* songs in compelling ways, due in part to the Quins deciding which tracks would best fit each artist. "We would say, 'Who would be interesting to cover 'Back in Your Head'?" Sara recalls. "Then we would make a list, and then we would go out to people and see if they were available or interested." Adams' take on the punchy "Back in Your Head" transforms the simmering portrait of alienation into a "My Sharona"-esque rave-up. Other covers showcase the close relationship between the artists and Tegan and Sara's music – particularly the musical polymath Shamir's stripped-down version of "Like O, Like H."

"I was like, 'We cannot ask anyone to do 'Like O, Like H,' because Shamir had the 'Like O, Like H' tattoo on his body,'" Sara says. "I was like, 'It's gotta be Shamir.'"

"'Like O, Like H' has always been my favorite song," says Shamir via phone from Philadelphia. The 22-year-old singer-songwriter first heard Tegan and Sara when he was in middle school, and he named his personal Tumblr after the track. "It's a really great coming of age song – I'm always the person who likes to learn from the situations that happen to me in life, and I feel like I've learned so much this year, and so much has happened to me this year. I'm so, so honored to have been asked to do it, because I've been covering that song to myself for years."



"I'm so, so honored to have been asked to do it," Shamir says of appearing on 'The Con X: The Covers.' Carl Timpone/BFA/REX Shutterstock

Shamir's version of "Like O, Like H" is one of *The Con X's* most jarringly intimate moments. "I wanted to keep it very raw, and very lo-fi," he says. "When I found out they wanted me to do, I just got super excited and just started singing [the song] to myself, and I set up a one-mic situation, and just played it through – one mic, one take, one guitar. I added the harmonies, and the drums, and the bass, but it's all built around that one take, which felt so perfect and so real to me."

"I loved that he was like, 'Yeah,' then did it in the next two days," says Sara with a laugh. Shamir's spontaneous approach to the cover also echoes some of the homegrown studio techniques Tegan and Sara used on the original *Con*. "To [producer] Chris Walla, we said, 'When we're at home and we're fooling around and demoing – *this* is the spirit we want in a record. This is what we want to go into the studio and make,'" Sara recalls. "Back then, especially, where we were making records on a shoestring budget, we couldn't go into the studio and fuck around."

"Working with Chris in his basement and his own studio was like, 'Oh, my God, we could give ourselves the luxury of working five or six days a week, for months on end.' It was full immersion, and there was no pressure that we were taking up too much time, or spending too much money. Even little tiny details like Chris saying, 'Let's sequence the album before we start making it, and let's work in sequence,' or, 'Fuck drums and bass, let's do it how you guys do it at home in your own studios. Let's put your parts down and then have the band play to your feel.'"

Another one of the album's striking reinventions comes courtesy of Blanco, who transformed the off-kilter pop of "Knife Going In" into a sludgy, bass-heavy stomp that places his pitch-shifted vocals high up in the mix. "I was like, 'How in the heck am I gonna cover one of [the songs off *The Con*]?' " Blanco recalls via Skype from Norway. "But I just brainstormed with a producer friend of mine and I thought, 'Well, since I'm not a singer, maybe the best thing for me to do was maybe go gothy with it, [and have the lyrics] be more spoken than sung.'"



"I thought, 'Well, since I'm not a singer, maybe the best thing for me to do was maybe go gothy with it,'" Mykki Blanco says of his Tegan and Sara cover. Felix Clay/eyevine/Redux

Other artists tweaked the original tracks slightly, retrofitting Tegan and Sara's aesthetic into their own. Pvrís' version of "Are You Ten Years Ago" slows down the tempo just enough to jibe with the group's own menacingly dark pop. "I was really happy that they picked us for that one, because it just has this brooding energy to it – it's almost chaotic in a way," says lead singer Lynn Gunn via phone. "The chord progression itself is pretty dark, and I always gravitate to that anyway, so it was really easy to take that and iron it out a bit."

Beyond the covers themselves, Sara is excited about the future growth of the duo's foundation, which has expanded its ambitions into the tech world. "We partnered with an organization called Lesbians Who Tech," she says, "and we went to their big hackathon and pitched two ideas that addressed a couple of the foundation's pillars: [A way to find] culturally competent healthcare for self-identified queer women and girls, and a mentorship app as a way to acknowledge how difficult it is for women in general, but especially queer women, to be paired with mentors."

Tegan will work on the mentorship app, while Sara is heading up the healthcare team. "We are essentially working on products that address those inequities and barriers that queer women face in healthcare and in mentorship," says Sara. "It's a volunteer process, and these amazing, amazing volunteers also have jobs and children and lives. But I'm very excited, and we actually have a prototype for the mentorship app and a website that we launched, Queer Health Access, that essentially aggregates awesome organizations and databases that do exist already in the marketplace, that help pair queer people with awesome healthcare resources. But that we want to expand that idea by tenfold."



"I was really happy they picked us for that one," says Pvriss' Lynn Gunn of covering "Are You Ten Years Ago." RMV/REX Shutterstock

Beyond savoring the chance to rework the songs themselves, the musicians on the comp clearly recognize Tegan and Sara's greater importance. "They're incredible people and an incredible band – they do so much for the LGBT community, and for humans in general," says Gunn.

"One of the things I really like about the album as a whole is just, like, the different approaches that everybody took to the raw material," says Blanco. "That's one of the great things about pop music, and music in general – you can have the basic building blocks of a song, but the artistry and the inspiration of each individual artist can take them in really exciting directions."

"Our biggest fear was it seeming like a vanity project," says Quin. "I didn't want it to be like, 'Oh, guys, check out these artists playing our songs' – that felt douche-y to me somehow. But these are artists and bands who are either queer themselves or are great queer allies or, to us, feel like part of the same spirit or community that we're a part of."