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## WHO I AM WITH M. TONITA AUSTIN

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FLARES



M. Tonita Austin had put her true love on the backburner for a long time. In being consumed by life and experiencing loss she found that the gifts within her were there all the time. Now in living her truth and her passions she knows exactly who she is.

**How did you first develop a love for writing and poetry?** I knew how to read before I started Kindergarten and I remember my teacher Ms. Sullivan making me read to the entire class. I also remember always being surrounded by books because my father loved to read. He taught himself how to speed read and he read constantly. He also wrote lyrics to songs and short essays so I think my love for words, lyrics and poetry was inherited. The first poem I remember writing was in third grade, titled The Colored Leaves. I

can still recite it to this day. My teacher was so impressed with the metaphors and imagery that she made me read it to the class as an example and I believe it also won in a poetry contest which is why I think it's committed to memory. I wrote off and on through my teenage years usually about whatever or whomever I was fascinated by at the time. It wasn't until I went to boarding school on scholarship that I really started exploring the [different styles](#) of poetry.



Photo by Zamani Feelings Photography

**What is your favorite type of writing or performance art?** My favorite type of performance art is anything that tells a story and allows the listener to feel engaged and pulled into the story or feeling connected to you through your words. I love the combination of storytelling or poetry and live music. I believe that one enhances the other and me personally, I am less nervous when I have an acoustic guitar, African drum or saxophone (or all three) playing behind me when I perform my [poems](#). I do also love blogging because I feel like I'm sharing a part of myself with someone and helping them with the information or stories I write.

**Tell us about your CD.** My CD (rather EP since there are only six tracks), is a labor of love. I started going out to open mics a little over three years ago and noticed that no one really took you seriously in the poet community unless you had a book or CD published which meant you were least likely to get a feature. So I approached a few musicians and they didn't seem as though they took me seriously either about getting into the studio. I work with my producer Rob McCall's wife and mentioned my goal of publishing my first EP and she revealed to me that her husband Rob could produce it, mix and master it. I saw them perform together and heard some of the music he produced and was very impressed and he was happy to take on my project. My CD was almost completely funded through a crowd funding campaign and I am eternally grateful to my friends and family who contributed generously!

I wanted my first project to be about love, and the poems I selected speak of lost love, renewed love, passionate love and self-love. I went into the studio with Robb and recorded the vocals in one visit and he married the music to my words so intuitively and I am thrilled with the result! It was important to me to have a project to represent my return to my authentic self, and that's why I named this project The Restoration. I feel I am finally restored to the writer that emerged in high school and bloomed in college. I am so proud of this piece of work and have even more in store for my next project!

**When you think back, when did you first start forgetting some parts of you and letting new roles set your true self off balance?** I think it was during the time that I was a caregiver for my mother. She was

diagnosed with Stage IV Lung cancer in December of 1999, a month after I had purchased a new home and 10 months before she took her last breath. I was a faithful daughter and caregiver and attended church regularly. When the cancer went to her brain I found out a month later that I was carrying my first born. As I watched her transition I think I lost my faith in God and I was unaware at the time but I fell into a depression. I clung to anything that I thought would distract me from the loss and the pain and immersed myself into planning a wedding and caring for my baby boy, my new husband and I lost myself in all of it.

**Did someone tell you that you couldn't do it all or did you see it happen to others and just assumed you couldn't or was it a crutch to give yourself an excuse to justify why you were not acting on your gifts and talents?** I am sure most of it was from watching my mother. She was a very loving, funny and devoted mother and like many wives in the sixties, didn't work outside the home. My father worked the night shift at the post office and when he wasn't working he was sleeping. I watched her put everything into raising the four of us and when my brother, the baby was old enough for school, she started volunteering in the elementary school we attended and later applied for a job as a teacher's assistant. I found out from an autobiographical project she wrote for her thesis, that she knew my father was unfaithful early in their marriage. She remained in a relationship and suffered mental and verbal abuse and infidelity and did not begin to pursue her passion for helping others until her youngest child graduated from high school. When she started to get a life, going out with friends and going back to school to get her GED, my father was visibly fearful, yet she still did not leave until he threatened her life. Once I read her story, it hit me like a brick wall that my life was heading down the same road.

The infidelity was replaced with self-medicating but most of the story was similar and I knew then that I needed to move to end the marriage before it reached a boiling point. I went to see a lawyer for advice and started saving money in preparation for separation. He was reluctant when I asked him to leave but the house was in my name alone and I refused to leave. I never thought about it that way, but she was fifty when she decided to go back to school and get an advanced degree and I was fifty when I released my first poetry CD. So I guess it was in watching her that I learned to set aside my life goals to be there 100% for my children and husband. Also I did love to write, but I didn't think that I was a good enough writer to produce a body of work. I remember submitting to a few poetry contests and never won.

**Was there ever a moment that you came up for air -before the encounter with your high school friend—that you thought, “I really should write about...” before you just blew it off?** About a year after my son was born, I started going to a grief therapist. I was starting to see the signs of depression for myself and my husband didn't understand how I could still be grieving after two years so I reached out to her. She was wonderful. One of the things she suggested was to write a letter to my mother, if she were here and I could talk to her about how I was feeling. It was one of the most difficult things I've written, but it opened up a door and I started thinking that I should write a memoir on how I survived losing my mother and best friend

in addition to everything else I've experienced in my life. I started writing in-between PTG meetings, nursing and late at night when the kids were asleep, but my husband resented it and saw it as time that I was taking away from him and us.

**While people may not outright stifle your dreams, do you feel that by not providing a strong and unwavering support system of encouragement that sometimes those who surround you do just that?**

Absolutely, I always felt that even going to church was annoying my husband and I can count on one hand that he attended church with the kids and I and I eventually stopped going because I could tell it bothered him. He reacted in a passive-aggressive way to anything that he feared would take my time and attention away from him. He complained if I was up late writing and didn't come right to bed or would huff and puff around me when I was writing or made it known that he was annoyed when I attended support groups or just went out to have lunch or a drink with a friend. Even when I wrote the essay that was published in The Black Body, edited by Meri Danquah, he never asked to see any draft of my work. When the book arrived, I was so excited about the project and he never cracked the spine to even read my essay. The only time he heard any part of my essay was during the book signing when I read an excerpt and he missed part of it because he arrived late with the kids. Everyone who came to our home asked to see the book and to read the essay, yet he never asked to read it. If he read it, he never made it known to me. I can't blame him; he was being true to himself. I was the one who wasn't being true to myself.

**How long have you been single and how was the “juggle” transition when you found yourself possible juggling even more than before? Did you ever want to give up and just “settle” for motherhood alone?** My ex and I separated in August of 2010. He refused to sit down with our children and talk about what was happening, so I took our children to the beach for my birthday with my dear friend and her children and asked him to take that time to start moving some of his things out. I knew I needed that time of rest to gather the energy I would need for the next part of my life's journey.

We came home to a half-empty house. He not only moved his belongings, but took every piece of furniture he had moved into the house which included my daughter's dresser. I'll never forget the image of her clothes in a suitcase on the floor of her room. I couldn't speak. The kids thought we were robbed and I was shocked and angry that he would traumatize them that way. I had to quickly get over my feelings and take care of theirs. It was the most difficult day I've ever had aside from the day my mother passed. I don't know that they have ever recovered from that day, but with lots of hugs and tears we all slowly healed and



*Photo by Zamani Feelings Photography*

adjusted to the new norm. I wish I had the option to just walk away from the responsibility and leave, but I couldn't do that to my flesh and blood. I didn't know how I was going to handle a household, a part time business and two children who were emotionally damaged and sometimes cried themselves to sleep. I could completely understand at that moment how some women walk away and leave their children or drive them into the river.

The overwhelming sadness and responsibility combined makes a bitter pill to swallow for one person. It's even difficult at that moment to reach out to friends because you don't want them to see you in a vulnerable state or feel judged because of the situation you have yourself in. I couldn't believe I went from Ivy League graduate to begging the electric company not to cut off my service. I felt ashamed, angry, overwhelmed and I again reached out to my therapist; and she and my friends and family carried me through. At her suggestion I started to turn my eyes to the things that bring me joy. I found an herbalist and took a natural amino acid for a short period of time that helped to bring me out of the depression.

I took as much time as I could to do yoga, meditation and I forgave God and my ex and got my behind back to church on a regular basis. I cried a lot, prayed a lot and learned how to ask for help when I needed a break. I was reminded by my brother how I would always take his sons and my other niece and nephew whenever anyone asked and that now it was okay for me to reach out and ask for help and for him to repay the favor. I was reminded by many that my children are love and that it's not a burden for others to have them in their homes, it's a blessing. They needed also to know that they have more than just me to rely on and to call on for help; even though their father is not consistent and not always reliable, there are others in our village who are.

**Who is your circle of love now and how do they motivate, push and encourage you now to keep going?** I love that term, circle of love! I believe God is at the top, with my ancestors including my parents and grandparents who have transitioned. There are small miracles that happen in my life from getting a parking space in front of the doctor's office when my child is sick with fever to having money show up in my mailbox that a friend sent me "just because" at a time when I was struggling financially. I know that they are angels watching over me and stepping in to provide the assistance and love only a parent can give. My mother's best friend Ms. Louella who I call my God mom and has known me since I was a year old is someone I can always count on to give me motherly wisdom and advice.

There are times I am unsure about what direction to take and she will always give me clarity and always tells me that I am doing a great job as a mother and that she's proud of me; I need to hear that from time to time. My mother's sister Daisy always calls when I am at a crossroads, and shows up at every family function that she can to represent as my mother would. She laughs like her and looks like her and there's nothing better than family. My best friend Janet who always comes through when I'm in a bind and I've

known thirty plus years, was the first person to tell me that I should start performing my poetry and was in the audience when I first took the stage a few years ago. She is also my ride or die and party partner. My brothers who may not be able to give me motherly advice (ha-ha) but I am so blessed to have their support; their male presence in my children's lives is priceless.

I also have beloved long time friends like Jemal and TAHIRA who are both incredible performers and give me priceless support and advice from their decades of experience that continues to shape the artist that I am today.

I am also blessed to have reconnected through social media and reunions with a number of sorority sisters and high school friends who have come to my side and almost singlehandedly funded the release of my debut poetry EP and for that I am eternally grateful!

**What advice would you give moms and career women who have let their gifts fall to the wayside and losing a part of themselves in the process?** I would first tell them not to beat themselves up about leaving their gifts behind or losing their authentic self. Then I would ask them what they would be doing with their gifts/career if they knew they only had a few months to live, and then start to make a plan to do just that. I believe that we were born with a special gift to give to others to make this world a better place and that you're doing a disservice not only to yourself but to your family and the world by choosing to suppress your gift. Essentially it's not loving but selfish to withhold it. You want your children to remember a whole person, not a fraction of who you should have been. Don't allow fear to run your life and make your choices for you.

**How does it feel now knowing, I GOT THIS?** I don't always feel that I've "got this". I always feel I have room for improvement as a mother, as a business woman and in all my relationships, but it does feel wonderful to know that I have survived and thrived after so many setbacks and disappointments and that more days than not I am standing on solid ground and have much more confidence and self-esteem than I had ten years ago. When I stood on the stage at my CD release party looking out into the sea of friends and family, thinking of how far I've come, I felt accomplished and at peace to the extent that I have never felt in my entire life. It feels like I shed old skin and I have more joy in my life.

**What was the last thing you wrote?** I started writing a poem about my dad a few weeks ago. I haven't finished it yet and I don't have a title yet. I started seeing men around town that looked like him or walked like him and the poem is about the feelings these meetings invoke.

**You mentioned your friend mentioning to you that "your children are watching?" What do you want your kids to see when they look at you and what would you say to your younger self as a new wife,**

**mom and entrepreneur who thought she couldn't do it all?** I want my children to see a mother who loves them unconditionally, who always shows up for them, supports their dreams and fights for their welfare. I want them to see a great mom who puts her children first, but also takes time for herself, nourishes her close friendships and pursues her passion.

I would tell my younger self that she was doing a wonderful job as a mother. I would tell her that loving herself is the best way to transfer love to her children. I would tell her to spend more time talking to her husband so that she would really know who she was living with. I would tell her that her mother would not want her to live in a sad space for so long. I would tell her to get back to writing, go back to church and not to let anyone, not even her children be an excuse to live a life void of passion or inner peace and joy. I would tell her to stay in the moment and that even though it may seem difficult, that she is doing the best thing for her children and herself by working for herself and that I am proud of her.

Lastly I would tell her that she can do it all, but she can't do it alone. Ask for help. It doesn't mean that you are weak or incapable, it simply means that you are human. You don't have to be perfect. Those that love you will love you unconditionally and those that don't, won't matter.

**Are you being your authentic self? What gifts are you letting lie dormant? Share your thoughts in the comments below.**

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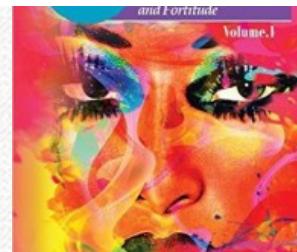




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