

Dear Joni Mitchell:

Please don't be startled by what I'm about to tell you. Sit down and take some deep breaths—maybe strum some chords—but I need to get this off my chest. As many times as I've gotten choked up listening to "Both Sides Now," as many times as I've tried to hit all the notes on *Blue*, as many times as I've read your interviews and identified with every wise word you've ever professed, I have to let you know: You're no longer my No. 1.

Cris Williamson has introduced me to new horizons.

Then again, I got to talk with her on the phone for 30 blissfully enlightened minutes, and I've never come within true earshot of you.

Two months ago, all I'd heard about Williamson was she was one of those old, folksy, Michigan-festival mainstays. I knew her as one of the founders of "womyn's music," a foremother to the influx of folkies after her—you know, kind of like you, but with granola-dyke flavor.

But that's just what I heard.

After doing a bit of research, I learned the first record she ever released, *The Changer and the Changed*, is considered a classic in folk circles because of its soaring vocals and poignant, universal lyrics. She wrote and recorded it in 1975 after her father died. She was in her 20s. It went on to become one of the best-selling independent releases ever.

Needless to say, this intrigued me.

I learned that she co-founded the first women-only record label, Olivia Records, and that her pioneering eventually led to the formation of a new musical genre, women's music. By the end of the 1970s, women songwriters—lesbians in particular—were writing, recording and releasing their own music, largely because of Williamson's efforts.

This intrigued me some more.

However, I learned the most wonderful things about Williamson during our phone conversation—how she links life and music, how she grieves, how she feels about the Beatles.

Now Joni, I recognize your ability to write empathetically and all, but believe me when I tell you Williamson's greatest trait is to relate well with other humans, to establish a connection by comparing experiences. She does it tirelessly through both music and conversation.

"I broke up with Tret," she told me right off

Cris crossover

You don't know what you got 'til it's gone

BY KATY DAVIDSON

the bat. "That's what's on my plate right now."

Tret Fure was her partner and musical companion of 20 years. As a duo, they were the Sonny and Cher of women's music—"a daily experience," as Williamson put it. She likened the breakup to the death of her father; she's grieving the same way: by writing songs.

"As hard as heartbreak is, it forces you to grow," she said. "Loss is the only thing that reminds you of gifts."

Currently touring around the nation, Williamson is on her first solo jaunt in 15 years, playing songs spurred by the separation, songs that poured out of her wounds. "Is this the tradeoff for art?" she asked.

It's weird, but it seems like every time Williamson speaks, she's reciting poetry. Every phrase works in several dimensions, every pause is perfectly dramatic.

And getting her to talk is certainly not a chore. She's opinionated, confident and well-read, so she has something to say on every subject. When I asked her what role sexual orientation plays in her songwriting, she replied:

"My goal is to shed light on the human condition, not the gay condition. But being a lesbian and a woman has influenced me, of course."

The theme of universality seems to run through her veins. She said the greatest music is timeless music, melodic music, music that weathers the ages and remains as relevant as the day it was written. This is what she strives for as a songstress.

"People's musical tastes swing like a pendulum," she said. "The middle is where most of the classics are. I think I'm in the middle; I hope I'm part of what lasts."

She cited Bob Dylan, the Band, Carol King, Janis Joplin, George Gershwin, the Beatles, and you, Joni, as other "middle" artists. According to Williamson, the link they share is their ability to write simply, have a good sense of melody and use their

Chris Williamson visits Portland on her first solo tour in 15 years



brains. She said the most effective tunes are the ones that haunt us, the ones we can't get out of our heads.

"The Beatles changed my life," she said.

"Wherever they went, we went. They brought the mind and the body together—then the soul."

She reminisced about listening to Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band with her college band, the Crystal Palace Guard. It was the first recording she had ever heard in stereo. "It traveled right through your head!" she said.

Despite her appreciation for melody, Williamson said her own songwriting style is lyric-intensive. "I'm a very lyrical person—I'm a wordsmith," she said. "I'm a scholar. That's really my first love."

She groaned, however, when I asked her to name her favorite songs of her own, comparing the process to picking a favorite child. She relented, however, and named "Colorado Dust-

ball Days" and "Pieces of Pangea." She said she still closes every show with "Waterfall," from *The Changer and the Changed*.

When Williamson isn't touring, she lives outside Eugene and is a tireless activist. She lives a model life as an assertive yet empathetic human. She is a wonder woman. "My life isn't more interesting than anyone else's, maybe just more visible," she told me.

I'm sorry, Joni, but Cris Williamson has won my heart.

Please forgive me, Katy jn

CRIS WILLIAMSON plays at the Aladdin Theatre, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave. in Portland, at 8 p.m. Sept. 22. For tickets call the box office, (503) 233-1994, or Ticketmaster.

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OFFICE (503) 281-4040
VOICE MAIL (503) 301-4283
E-MAIL Jewel2U@teleport.com

1730 N.E. 10th Avenue
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