

**MUSIC**

In the early to mid-'70s, lesbians prominently placed their Holly Near and Chris Williamson albums in the living room as an unspoken message to other women. A well-known code was to ask another woman you suspected (or hoped) to be a lesbian, "Do you know Holly?"

Williamson and Near pioneered "women's music," and the very notion that the term might be outdated is due to their phenomenal success. The folk heroes have spent more than 25 years battering down industry walls that obstruct open lesbians from controlling, publishing and playing their own music.

On March 16, Williamson and Near will play Aladdin Theater as a benefit for the Hambleton Project, a direct services network for lesbians with cancer and other life-threatening diseases. On March 15, Near will speak at Portland Community College as part of Women's History Month festivities. *Just Out* spoke with the busy icons between performance dates throughout the United States.

**Kim Stephenson:** During my first gay march in 1975, I witnessed the savage beating of a gay man by a policeman with a billy club. I know it sounds obvious, but the environment today is so different. How was it that the both of you were so brave back then?

**Chris Williamson:** I didn't know I was brave. If someone is under the thumb of someone oppressive, you step up. You just do. It was just the right thing to do. I didn't think about my own safety. I thought about my voice—that I could put that to work.

Feminists at the time came right up to me, pointed their finger and said: "We need you. We need your music." Previous to that, people said, "That's nice music, but we don't know what it is." My music found a home in the feminist movement, and I found a home there.

**Holly Near:** I think there was a growing movement happening that created a cushion. The culture always serves the movement, and the movement always serves the culture. We see that in the civil rights movement. The music empowers the people doing the social change work, and the music is informed by [that] work.

I think it was much braver for someone to walk into a small-town grocery store with an "I'm gay!" button on or come out in a workplace than it was for us, because they were alone. A kind of support network surrounded us, and it was an unstoppable energy.



Chris Williamson (left) and Holly Near will harmonize March 16 at Aladdin Theatre

**Dynamic duo**

Chris Williamson and Holly Near bring women's music to Portland

BY KIM STEPHENSON

**KS:** In your 30 years as part of the lesbian culture, how have you seen it change, and how do you see your contributions?

**HN:** We wanted to lay the groundwork for women to be able to sing the songs they wanted to sing—songs about their real lives—rather than having to shave off the truth to get their music played. And that happened to such a degree that the next generation of women went sailing by us into the music industry and found themselves on the cover of *Time* magazine and doing big tours, etc. We didn't realize we would be that successful...

The other side of it is there is still not room for radical politics in the music industry, and we continue to carry that position. It doesn't matter if you are a lesbian or anti-imperialist; the chances are the mainstream corporate music industry will not subsidize or promote you. It's important to remember the cutting edge never makes it to the middle.

**CW:** Sometimes you become part of the culture, and you don't know it. "Song of the Soul," for example, is huge in churches all over the world, and it doesn't matter that a lesbian wrote it.

We fought really hard to become accessible and visible as lesbians. In the '60s you didn't hear the word "lesbian" much. It was a word to be said behind a hand. We became some of the visible signs of lesbian culture.

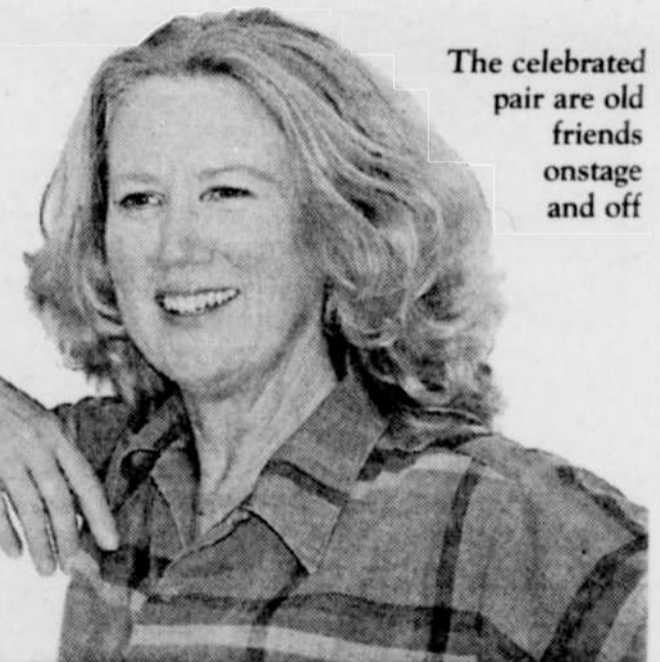
If you talk about mainstream—and I think of it metaphorically as a big mother river—there are lots of little feeder streams. I am one, as is Holly, but unless the water is a different color, you don't know we are in there.

**KS:** The concert in Portland is a benefit for the Hambleton Project. Has either one of you or anyone you're close to been touched by breast cancer?

**CW:** Yes. I have not been touched personally, thankfully, but it could happen. Every time I go get a mammogram or go

CHRIS WILLIAMSON AND HOLLY NEAR play 8 p.m. March 16 at Aladdin Theatre, 3017 SE Milwaukie Ave. Tickets—\$20 or \$50 for reserved seating and post-show reception with the artists—are available from the box office, It's My Pleasure or Ticketmaster. Near will speak about music's role in sociopolitical events at 1:30 p.m. March 15 in Room 122 at Terrell Hall on Portland Community College's Cascade Campus, 705 N. Killingsworth St. For more information call 503-978-5248.

KIM STEPHENSON is a Portland free-lance writer.



The celebrated pair are old friends onstage and off

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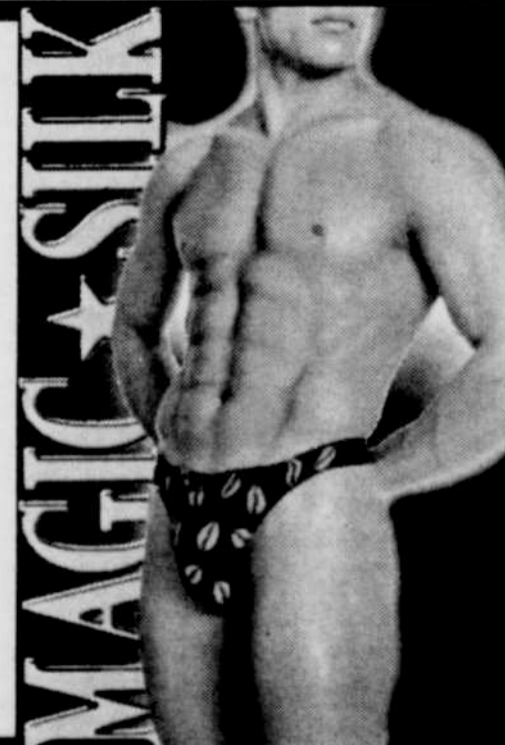
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