



Christian, Meg (b. 1946)

by Linda Rapp

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A pioneer in women's music, Meg Christian was among the first to address lesbian and feminist issues in her songs. Her commitment to the empowerment of women also led her to become a founding member of Olivia Records, a woman-oriented company.

Christian was born and grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia. After graduating from the University of North Carolina with a double major in English and music, she briefly returned to her hometown but moved to Washington, D. C. in 1969 to perform in the city's nightclubs.

While there she had an epiphany. Watching an appearance by feminists Ti Grace Atkinson and Robin Morgan on the *David Frost Show*, she was appalled by the host's disrespectful treatment of the women, which caused them to walk off the set. Christian was sufficiently incensed to write a letter to Frost, a move that she called "my first political act."

As a result of her newfound political consciousness Christian drastically changed her repertoire. She began to write her own music and to sing the songs of Cris Williamson in order to speak about women in "a loving, honest, positive way."

Her new focus made her show less commercially viable. Nightclub owners did not want a performer who attracted a mostly female audience, and especially not one that included a growing contingent of lesbian fans. Christian therefore took to appearing at alternative venues such as coffeehouses and spaces in women's centers.

Participating in the feminist movement gave a sense of empowerment and inclusion to Christian, who commented in a 1981 interview, "I certainly thought that I was 'the only one' in about 400 categories until I found the women's movement."

At that time Christian embraced the idea of separatism. She joined a women's collective and preferred to play concerts before women-only audiences.

In 1973 she met and befriended Cris Williamson. Together with a group of others they founded an all-woman business, Olivia Records. The company's first album was Christian's *I Know You Know* (1975). Over the next decade she put out three more, *Face the Music* (1977), *Turning It Over* (1981), and *From the Heart* (1984). Olivia also released a compilation album, *The Best of Meg Christian*, in 1990.

After several years of operation in Washington, D. C. the collective moved Olivia to Oakland, California. The company did so well that Stephen Holden of the *New York Times* wrote in 1983 that Olivia was "one of the record industry's most solid success stories of the last decade."

Christian played an important role in Olivia's success. Her early hits such as "Ode to a Gym Teacher," which affirmed the value of a role model "who taught me being female meant you could still be strong," quickly

won her fans, whose numbers just kept growing.

Other musicians were admirers as well, and many eagerly joined Christian on *Turning It Over*. In reviewing the album, Deborah Weiner commented on Christian's "impressive skills as a guitarist, singer, and songwriter" and also cited the "facility and expression of subtle shadings and dramatic textures" of her guitar technique. She praised Christian's contributions to lesbian music, writing, "we . . . need the intelligence, sensitivity, and humor" of Christian's work.

In addition to recording, Christian toured extensively, playing at music festivals and in concert. She sometimes appeared with Holly Near, with whom she had a three-year love affair in the late 1970s. She also performed with Cris Williamson, notably at a Carnegie Hall concert to celebrate Olivia's tenth anniversary.

Christian put tremendous energy into working for both professional success and political causes, but still felt that she "wasn't being good enough, that there was so much to be done." Under stress she turned to alcohol. Eventually she recognized the need to get help and enrolled in several recovery programs. At the same time she became interested in exploring spirituality and began studying Siddha Yoga.

In 1984 she decided to leave the music scene and devote herself entirely to the spiritual life. After traveling to ashrams (religious communities) throughout the world, Christian, who had adopted the first name Shambhavi, settled in one in upstate New York.

Through Siddha Yoga, Christian studied Indian music and instruments. As a result she produced two CDs, *Fire of My Love* (1986) and *Songs of Ecstasy* (1995). The collections include both traditional religious songs and compositions by Christian.

Christian's departure from Olivia had been completely amicable, and she remained on excellent terms with the women there. She was reunited with the organization in 2002, when she performed on a cruise ship for Olivia, which now offers vacation packages for lesbians and their families and friends. Her first public performance in almost twenty years was warmly received. She has returned in subsequent years, giving delighted fans the opportunity to enjoy her artistry and her affirming voice for women once again.

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