



Williamson, Cris (b. 1947)

by Teresa Theophano

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Pioneering singer, songwriter, activist, and teacher, Cris Williamson has been at the forefront of the women's music movement--and a major presence in the lesbian community--for decades.

Like other women's music innovators in a time when such a genre was truly "alternative," Williamson, while not widely recognized by the mainstream, has met with large and appreciative audiences since the 1970s. Her fans admire her honesty; while her lyrics cross lines of gender, age, and sexual preference, they are also intensely personal, and she has been out as a lesbian throughout her career.

Born in South Dakota and raised in Colorado and Wyoming, Williamson released her first album, *The Artistry of Cris Williamson* (1964), at the tender age of sixteen. That record, along with two more LPs she recorded in the following two years, became a hit in her hometown. She later attended the University of Denver and began to foster a musical style very similar to that of her idol Judy Collins.

Knowing that it would be difficult to get a record deal because she was female--and also because she was commonly regarded as a "Judy Junior"--Williamson began networking with other women artists such as Meg Christian, Margie Adams, and Holly Near. Shortly thereafter, in 1973, she co-founded Olivia Records.

Olivia, the first record label created and run entirely by women--mostly lesbians--in a time when independent labels were scarce and women's labels were unheard of, released Williamson's landmark 1975 album *The Changer and the Changed*. That album, only the label's second release, openly explored themes of love among women, making it a breakthrough and instant classic for both Williamson and the women's music genre.

Even with no hit single and zero radio airplay, approximately 100,000 copies of the record were sold in its first year of circulation, through mail order and word of mouth alone.

The Changer and the Changed has subsequently sold more than 500,000 copies, making it one of the best-selling independent albums ever. Williamson went on to release two more albums in 1978.

Williamson's life began to take a new turn when she started recording *Lumière*, a children's album that won a 1982 Parent's Choice Award, with the help of performer and recording engineer Tret Fure. The two women went on to form a professional and personal relationship that would last for almost twenty years.

Fure had signed onto Olivia as well, and when Olivia changed from a record label to a women's travel company, Williamson and Fure founded another label, called Wolf Moon, in 1996.

Williamson and Fure each recorded their own albums on Olivia and then on Wolf Moon, collaborating on duet records such as *Postcards from Paradise* (1993) and *A Peek between the Covers* (1997). Their relationship was nearly as important as their music itself to their devoted fans, many of whom recall



Cris Williamson.
Photograph by Irene Young courtesy Wolf Moon, Inc.

coming out to the sounds of Williamson's records. When the duo broke up in early 2000, many fans reported feeling a sense of loss and near abandonment.

Despite the setback, Williamson continues to record on her own; *Ashes*, her latest album, was released on Wolf Moon in September 2001.

In 1995 she received the first annual Michael Callen Award, at the Gay and Lesbian American Music Awards, for her services to the gay and lesbian community.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).