

The Front Page

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10 Years Later: Carnegie Hall!

by J.M. Lavelle

Women's music is one of the nice things lesbians do for each other. We write the songs, sing the songs, and record the songs as an album.

Then we distribute the album, buy the album and pass the album along hand-to-hand, as we help expand the market for women's music.

There are many small women's music labels. The largest and most financially successful, however, is Olivia. Two of the genre's top performers—Meg Christian and Cris Williamson—were among Olivia's founders, and performed on the label's first three recordings. Williamson's first Olivia album, *The Changer and the Changed*, is the genre's best seller (over 250,000 copies).

Like all of us, Olivia has grown up in the last decade. They have attempted to reach new listeners, and much of their new material is less blatantly lesbian than before, when such classics as Christian's "Ode to a Gym Teacher" were the main course of Olivia's fare.

But they have not forgotten the lesbian community. The ads bill Olivia's newest album, *Meg/Chris: Live at Carnegie Hall* as a "thank you" to all Olivia supporters.

Why did Olivia end up in a place like Carnegie Hall in the first place? It was a birthday party—Olivia was ten years old. It was also a birthday party for the vision which gave impetus to the Olivia success story—carve a place outside the mainstream for women to write, sing, engineer, distribute, buy and support their own music.

There were 5600 people at Carnegie Hall on Nov. 26, 1982. They heard concerts by Olivia's two biggest stars, Williamson and Christian, as well as a host of backup artists, many of them Olivia stars in their own right.

The concert marked both an end and a beginning. An end, in that it represented the culmination of a decade of work, sweat and triumph for the foremost women's music label.

A beginning, in that even as the artists celebrated the event they presented new arrangements, new songs, and a new sophistication about their performance.

Some member of the audience have said that the trappings of the evening almost overwhelmed the singers—that the audience, too, was slow to warm up to the surroundings.

Fortunately, none of this tightness was translated to the vinyl. *Carnegie Hall*

commemorates the 10th Olivia anniversary with new levels of engineering and artistic excellence.

Listening to *Carnegie Hall* is at least as good—and maybe even better—than being there.

The album is meticulously put together. Producers Betty Rowland and Tret Fur have worked with engineer Howard Lindeman to produce a "live" sound that does not sacrifice studio-level quality. The balance between voice and instruments is consistently top-notch.

The backup musicians add incalculably to the final product. Fure's electric guitar, Dianne Lindsay's bass and especially Ady Torf's keyboards all represent the best of women's musicianship.

The backup vocalists are just as fine. They add a soulful, dynamic presence that dramatically counterpoints Williamson's sweet and Christian's direct styles. The vocals of Shelby Flint, Vicki Randle and Linda Tillery soar above and through the lead artists' interpretations, adding diversity and power.

Williamson writes music unlike anyone else's, focussing on the spiritual dimension of the feminist lesbian struggle. All six of her Olivia albums are tight, emotional and very moving. Whether or not one shares her vision, Williamson makes any listener feel better. Her music is a source of renewal, buttressing our ability to hew individual paths.

Her songs on *Carnegie Hall* display the customary musical net of voice, back-up vocals and keyboard-dominated instrumentals. Two compositions, "Come Hell or High Water" and "Soaring" stand out on the album as Williamson at her best.

Christian is a much quirkier musical presence. She can attain a sweetness rivaling Williamson's on some ballads; but there is a special strength to her voice that adds grit to that sweetness.

The result is very personal, and very universal. It's hard to listen to any Christian song without feeling like she is documenting all our experiences as lesbians through her own musical prism.

One of the most moving points in the album is when Christian interprets a John Calvi song, "The Ones who Aren't Here," a bittersweet anthem to people who can't leave the closet:

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The latest hot item in Women's Music is *Lifeline: Holly Near and Ronnie Gilbert Together*, on Redwood Records. J.M. Lavelle has promised us a review in the near future.



PHOTOGRAPH BY IRENE YOUNG

Herstory of Women's Music

Article courtesy *Ladyshipper Music*.

Women's Music, which began on a small scale, open to all kinds of possibilities, has emerged as a network and a small industry. Diverse styles and influences...jazz, folk, traditional, country, rock, pop, rhythm and blues, classical, improvisational...are beginning to be represented more equally. Although this "industry" is not idyllic, and cannot provide all the opportunities needed, it has established an atmosphere of support and encouragement for women to excel in fields previously closed to them.

The single question to crop up over and over has been, "What is Women's Music?" The definitions and explanations have been as varied as the women involved. Most important perhaps is its message—it takes women seriously. It springs from a feminist consciousness, utilizing women's talent, intellect, emotion, energy and spirit. Its production, presentation and finances are controlled by women.

Beginnings

In the early 70's, encouraged by the Women's Liberation Movement, a variety of artistic expressions by women began to flower, reflecting their changing attitudes about the roles of women in society. Artists

performed anywhere they could be heard: bars, rallies, demonstrations, benefit fundraisers, university coffeehouses and concerts. Since music has always been a medium through which people's stories, protests and personal histories have been preserved, it was a natural step that women's movement would develop this cultural arm. Women hearing this music began to ask for recordings (other than their own cassette recording of live concerts), and performers wanted their music to be more widely available.

Historically and presently, women's attempts to enter the recording industry as engineers, technicians art directors, producers and studio musicians have been discouraged and dismissed with skepticism or ridicule. Female artists who have managed to get signed with major recording labels have often been presented in ways the industry has deemed most marketable: as passive and innocent little girls, or as abused, enslaved sexual objects. It became clear that women who wanted to record their own music, to work with other women, and to maintain control of the end products could not turn to the established music industry.

In 1972, Maxine Feldman recorded "Angry

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