

WOMEN'S MUSIC - 'ANOTHER VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS'

If blame is to be meted out for this article, then surely it rests on John Walters' shoulders. His Saturday afternoon radio show, 'Walter's Weekly' is a happy-go-lucky romp through minority subjects, not normally aired on radio. His, 'Hail fellow well met' attitude is a tonic to the ears in these troubled times.

Of course, my insatiable appetite for consuming vinyl is a contributing factor in this tale of discovery, but if that was the ammunition, then Walters was most surely the trigger. Having returned to my car after a visit to one of the local vinyl emporiums, the radio came on with the ignition and Walter's voice, jolly and rotund, just like his frame, simply said, 'This is a track titled, 'Ship of fools' from Chris Williamson's latest album 'Strange Paradise'. She's playing a show at the Collegiate Theatre in London tonight'.

There are times when new lyrics, new music, new singers appear like a blinding sunrise on a clear new day. Moments like that are precious, and you wish they would last a lifetime. On record, 'Ship of fools' lasts for four minutes and five seconds <sup>- for some that is a lifetime. After four minutes & five seconds</sup> I needed little convincing that Williamson was one of the best lady singers I had heard in ages.

The fact that currently I am an adopted Brummie is of little pertinence, other than, about a week later, I discovered I had missed seeing Cris, 'in the flesh', by a mere two weeks.

They say that ignorance is bliss, knowledge is a curse sometimes. In that week, I also discovered that Cris had four albums available, that a couple of shops in town stocked her albums and that the British distributor for the 'Olivia' label lived in our second city. It also appeared that there was something called, 'Womens Music'. Last time I checked, I was a male and here I was, as usual, <sup>in</sup> over my head.

'Women's Revolutions per minute', the British distributing <sup>for 'Womens Music'</sup> organisation is run by Caroline Hutton, from a large, old Victorian house in the back streets of Moseley Birmingham. Ms Hutton is a feminist....



Olivia Records is a company founded by women, (at Cris Williamson's instigation), run by women, which has only female recording artists. The albums are produced, engineered etc, by women. Olivia Records is only one, albeit the largest, of an absolute myriad of women's record labels.

All the albums which Ms Hutton distributed come under the banner of 'Women's music'. Just about every conceivable musical field is covered, (pop, jazz, rock, folk, country, you name it), with the records performed either by solo artists, duos or groups.

'Prejudice' is defined by the dictionary as 'a preconceived opinion or bias'. Most record labels issue what is known as a 'sampler' album, featuring the work of the artists who record for the label. The Olivia Sampler is titled, 'Lesbian Concentrate'. Some days you use a sledge hammer, others a feather ~~was~~ sufficient.

The being who put us on dear old mother earth, gave us certain gifts. Music is one of those gifts. A thing of beauty which is there to enrich every human soul, (hopefully) irrespective of prejudice. To be honest, I'm not interested in delving into an, 'Are they or aren't they' discussion about the sexual proclivities of the women involved. The fact that they call it 'Women's Music', I find irritating, but I think I've already made my point about the gift of music.

Possibly a potted history would be in order at this juncture. In the late Sixties and early Seventies there was a resurgence of interest in woman's place in society, Since highly effective methods of contraception had been developed, women were no longer tied to their traditional domestic role. Women therefore sought, and have had limited success in the elimination of wage and job discrimination. In America, the movement, with women of all ages and walks of life, has attained a firm foothold.

In the field of music, the movement has manifested itself in forms both radical and mainstream. To paraphrase Ms Hutton, 'The music is politically based, in as much as women have a lot to give our society,



and up till now they haven't been given the opportunity. There are very few women musicians, producers, engineers - there are lots of singers. Similarly, women don't tend to be prevalent in controlling record labels, and because of this, the women's music movement was born'.

Women's music festivals became prevalent in America during the Seventies. One of the first was the National Women's Music Festival which took place on the University of Illinois campus at Champaign, near Urbana. The first Festival was in 1972 and encouraged the development of others, such as the Michigan and West Coast Women's Music Festivals. The most recent festival in Michigan, had an attendance of some 8,000 women.

Most of the early performers in women's music came from a traditional folk music background. Of course, in the late Sixties, protest songs, as performed by Joan Baez, Judy Henske, Buffy St. Marie etc, (notwithstanding artists such as Bob Dylan, Phil Ochs and Tom Paxton), were the vogue. It was not unnatural therefore, that some of the material performed in those early days should have a highly political content. Through the years, however, the lyrics have become more subtle, while retaining the original visions and aims of the movement.

At one end of the spectrum there are solo performers like Alix Dobkin, who is an extremely radical-lesbian-feminist-separist, whose albums are extremely political in content. Meg Christian, a member of the collective, responsible for the development of the Olivia label, is also a performer, and is viewed to take the middle field.

Although Oris embraces feminism as a movement, she is not politically active in that field. Rather, her efforts are concentrated on the campaign for the development and use of safe forms of energy and Williamson records for Olivia Records because she is able to retain artistic control over the recording, production and subsequent presentation of her work.

For most small record companies, sales of about 5,000 units are usually required for an album to break even. In such circumstances; ...

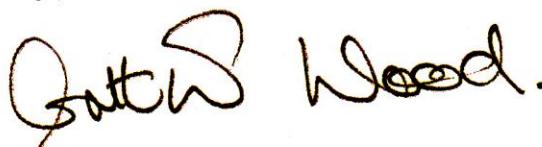
the sale of 10,000 units would be considered a 'Gold' album. Cris Williamson's first album for Olivia, 'The Changer and the Changed', was released in 1975 and amassed sales of 100,000 units. It may be pertinent to consider that this was attained, not by a national advertising campaign, but purely by word of mouth recommendation. 'Changer' is without doubt, the major seller to date in Womens Music, and if the movement had a potential 'superstar', then it would surely be Cris Williamson. Because of 'Changer' there has undoubtedly been a vast amount of pressure exerted on Cris to become a 'figure-head' for the womens movement, but it is something she has successfully resisted.

If her music is to be categorised, then it is best defined as, 'California soft rock', similar to that purveyed by artists like, Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, Leah Munkel etc. Her lyrics were succinctly defined as, 'non-gender-specific' by Ms Hutton, and I would agree with that analysis. After all, when I first heard 'Ship of Fools', I'd never heard of Women's Music, and in retrospect, I reckon good music says it all.

All I can say in closing is, that I would recommend everyone to investigate Women's Music as it is a rich and rewarding experience. Cris Williamson is only the tip of the iceberg, and once you've convinced yourself about the beauty of her work, then there's Holly Near, Willie Tyson and so on. And that as they say, is another story for another day.

'Women's Revolution per minute' can be contacted at; 62, Woodstock Road, Moseley, Birmingham, B13 9BN. A SAE will bring their latest catalogue post haste.

written by,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Arthur Wood', with a stylized, cursive script.

Arthur Wood.

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