



Dar Williams **"My Better Self"** Razor & Tie Records

"My Better Self" marks the first occasion that Dar Williams has recorded a studio album supported by her four-piece road band. In fact, Dar indulged in a deal more tightrope walking while creating this collection! That apart, the quartet of Ben Butler [guitar], Steve Holley [percussion], Mike Visceglia [bass] and Julie Wolf [keyboards] are augmented by Washington D.C. bred guitar magician Stuart Smith [\$] and keyboard man for The Hooters, Rob Hyman. Plus, there are a few guest vocalists that I'll mention in the review.

Recorded in upstate New York in Woodstock's Allaire Studios, the disc opens with the social commentary, "Teen For God," and features a guest vocal from local resident Marshall Crenshaw [and Razor & Tie label-mate]. The lyric comes across as equal part irony and innocence, concerning one of those rites of passage we undertake from birth to adult maturity. There's wickedly intentional humour in the line that references horses and swearing, and the narrator goes on to seek heavenly guidance concerning her future with *"Help me know four years from now, I won't believe in you anyhow"* and a few lines later adds *"Then I'll laugh that I fell for the lure."* The title of this album appears in the bridge to "I'll Miss You Till I Meet You," in which the narrator is searching for *that certain special someone*. Rhetorically speaking, who would have believed that one day Dar Williams would pen, tantamount to, a conventional love song! The short repeating keyboard riff that appears throughout the chorus to "Echoes," a tune penned by solo artist Jules Shear, Hyman [+] and **"My Better Self"** producer Stewart Lerman, is straight out of the OMD [#] songbook. As for the message embraced in the lyric of this melodic chunk of pop, it amounts to the "perform a good deed" adage that lay at the heart of the Y2K movie **"Pay It Forward."** And in that chorus, Dar also delivers oodles and oodles of angelic *"Aah's."*

Hyman stepped up to the plate once again [with his pen] to assist Williams with "Blue Light Of The Flame," and their lyric references environmental catastrophes and man's mortality. In the liner booklet, below the lyric, there's a simple dedication to the late Vermont bred singer/songwriter Rachel Bissex, who passed away earlier this year. Like Dar [and unlike those possessing the power to exercise change], Bissex possessed an awareness that our planet's environment is currently in a state of flux [%]. Neil Young's "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere" is now three and a half decades old, and features another support vocal from Crenshaw, while I'd judge that Dar included it on **"My Better Self"** as commentary on the slippery slope her homeland is currently descending. The Woodstock based trio Soulive and Dar's guitarist Ben Butler provide the slow bluesy backdrop to "Two Sides Of The River." Another "journey of discovery" lyric, the closing verse alludes to a nuptial event.

Subjectively speaking "Empire" is, a barbed exposition of American foreign policy post 9/11. Enough said, no names or events mentioned. The forty-second long outro to this cut find Dars' road band paint an appropriately dense sonic maelstrom. "Comfortably Numb" first appeared on the thematic Pink Floyd recording **"The Wall"** [1979]. In that setting this David Gilmour/Roger Waters co-write saw Pink's [*] medical advisor make a house call and dispense *"the little pinprick"* that allows his patient to get by. Later in the lyric, Pink voices feelings of alienation. This cover deliberately follows "Empire," not to directly add weight to it, but as a "cause and effect" twist to 11/2 – 2004, that is. Supporting Dar's vocal on "Comfortably Numb" is, the seemingly ghostly voice of Ani DiFranco. "So Close To My Heart" is a mother's highly personal reflection on pregnancy and the eventual arrival of her, now, one-year old son. Once again, enough said.

While you might be magnanimous enough to acknowledge that a person possesses some talent or skill, it's part of our nature as humans, to exercise the choice of "*liking*" or "*disliking*" that person, with vastly varying degrees of intensity. The words to "Beautiful Enemy" are so cleverly constructed that the emotion be judged locally, nationally or internationally, as can the recipient[s]. And if we're really lucky, and where there is no possibility of a combative situation arising, we can simply ignore them! What a concept! A world of privilege is painted in opening verses of "Liar," but there's also an air of mystery evidenced by the [repeated] line "*And they want to know where the kid came from.*" "You Rise And Meet The Day" is a positive invocation to live life to its fullest extent. Dar was raised in Chappaqua, New York and later spent time in Middletown, Connecticut and Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley before moving to New York City, so the "The Hudson," as in the river, has been a significant presence in her life and the closing cut is by way of a eulogy. Folksinger Patty Larkin shares vocal duties with Dar on this cut.

Thinking back, having delighted in repeatedly listening to her debut and sophomore discs, I never had the courage to submit my original review of Dar's third solo release "**End Of The Summer**," which, in my mind at least, ran to the seasonal, yet concise "*Comes the fall!*" From the latter collection onward I have struggled with the contents of Williams' recordings. There's no doubting that she's a talent of genuine depth and ability, and thankfully "**My Better Self**" reopens a door that closed, at least for me, following "**Mortal City**." If there is a reservation I have with the contents of "**My Better Self**" it's that I would have preferred all the songs to be Williams' originals – hence the 8/10. That said, in terms of her intentional statements, I understand – nay applaud - the reason[s] for two of the cover songs. Being the astute cookie that she is, why pen a *retread* when there's a song already out there that says it all – and with pinpoint precision. Finally, let's all agree that the girl with the acoustic guitar that exploded on to the folk music scene just over a decade ago, nowadays trades in pop songs albeit that a goodly number retain Williams' lyrical sting. For instance, listen to "Beautiful Enemy" and convince me that it's not a pop song.....

Notes.

[\$] – Currently a moonlighting road warrior with those twilight country-rock gods, The Eagles, in his time Smith has picked guitar for some of the best singer/songwriters on the planet including Rodney Crowell, Shawn Colvin, Rosanne Cash, Suzy Roche and Mary Chapin Carpenter.

[+] – Hyman and Lerman co-produced William's previous studio effort "**The Beauty Of The Rain**."

[#] – For the uninitiated OMD is Liverpool, England bred 1980's combo Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark.

[%] – This album review was written one week after Katrina made landfall in Louisiana. Dar contributed to a 2CD Rachel Bissex tribute album details of which can be found at <http://www.rachelbissex.com/>

[*] – Pink, a musician, is the main character in "**The Wall**," and the story charts his descent into madness and his subsequent resurrection.

Folkwax Score 8 out of 10

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 08/05 & 09/05.