

arts

BY EUAN BEAR

It's no "Ordinary Day" when Wishing Chair comes to town – it's a celebration of acoustic roots-country-folk. And when the dynamic duo joins forces with Lucie Blue Tremblay and comedian Vickie Shaw for the Women's Extravaganza Pride benefit, it'll be a folkie's delight. You'll have at least four opportunities to see these women in full voice this month.

Kiya Heartwood and Miriam Davidson, recipients of two Outmusic Awards this summer (best cd/duo; best songwriter), have been playing together since 1995. Their own characterization of themselves as a "songwriting, string dancing, accordion playing, harmony singing, storytelling, hand drumming, banjo strumming, soul stirring, two-woman tour-de-force" is just about right on.

Heartwood, with roots in Kentucky and Oklahoma – and a master's degree from Vermont College – does most of the songwriting. She provides the hint of country in the duo's mostly folk performance and is the primary guitarist. She's opened for Holly Near, fronted with the folk-rock band Stealin Horses and played with Neil Young.

Dark-haired Davidson makes an accordion call like the sea birds and dance like the waves without ever falling into "Lady of Spain" chord progressions. Her roots are in Long Island and Philadelphia, and on the 2002 CD *Crow*, she honors the immigrant experience with "3 Doors." She also takes licks on banjo, guitar, keyboard and percussion.

The harmonies they achieve are tight and luscious, the lyrics heartfelt and poignant – think very early Indigo Girls. From *Crow*, "Ordinary Day" is a bittersweet snapshot of a love lost through "a string of choices, different roads and different voices," while "the also rans"



Tight Harmonies and Good Stories

Wishing Chair returns to the NE.

and the "don't give a damns ... call the tunes we play." But there's hope: "After all we've been through/ I mean how could you not know that I love you ..."

Most of the love songs on *Crow* have no explicit genders, but the outsider stories are there for those who pay attention. "We are Out performers," Heartwood wrote in response to emailed questions. "The great thing about telling stories in songs is that the gender issue is resolved by the characters involved. In 'Goody Hallett,' it's a straight 15-year-old who falls in love with a pirate; in 'She's Everything' it's me writing a love song to Miriam.

"But straight, gay, bi or trans, there's a human resonance that we believe we can tap into regardless of our sexual preference. The song either touches you or it doesn't."

When I say "folk," it doesn't mean only meditations on life or only protest songs, but both sub-genres are reflected in Wishing Chair's repertoire. Their brand of folk is really about story telling, paying attention to the small events that carry important lessons. They notice both sides, the brother who is the father's "sun" and the daughter who lights a candle ("Copernicus"); the false prophet aiming airplanes to make "a hole in the sky" and the "flags in the

air" and "on the graves/of the bright young soldiers" ("September").

"September" is definitely not a pro-war tune," wrote Heartwood when I asked about it. "It's a response to the emotions of anger and frustration after 9/11. It doesn't excuse Bin Laden's actions anymore than George W's. War is never a good answer. I wrote it within a week of the event and I was a mess of anger, confusion and despair. I remain very angry that such an act could ever be excused no matter who it was done by or to. ... I would probably have more respect for leaders like George W. if they did their own fighting and dying."

Their most recent CD, *Dishpan Brigade*, containing a paean to labor organizer Mary Harris ("Mother Jones"), has just been released, with the added depth of mandolin maven Kara Barnard, who also performs on *Crow*.

"The photo on the cover [of *Dishpan Brigade*] is a Russell Lee photo from the National Archives. Kara, Miriam and I hope we will look that formidable in our 80s. I was searching the archives for pictures of women protesting. These women are actually at a 4-H meeting in Kansas in 1939," Heartwood wrote.

"The story of the 'Dishpan Brigade' song is that Mother Jones got the women involved in the Arnot, PA strike in 1900," she explained in her email. "They basically chased off the scabs [non-union workers] with their mops and brooms. Women have been vital in union organizing ever since. It's a very heartening story about how much change one woman could create. Mother Jones is a good response to anyone who says one person can't make a difference."

Heartwood and Davidson have a passion about the truth, about being emotionally available to tell it, that reminds me of early Indigo Girls and is, for me, the essence of folk music, of women's music. "We fell in love with each other's voices the first time we sang together," Heartwood wrote. "It just felt right – as if we were one entity."

Whichever venue you choose to see them in, Wishing Chair's music will be worth the price of admission. ▼

Tickets for the Women's Extravaganza featuring Wishing Chair, Lucie Blue Tremblay, and Vicki Shaw are available at The Peace & Justice Store or through Lavender Visions Productions at 802-849-2739.

Highlands Inn, Bethlehem, NH
 Burlington Coffeehouse, Burlington, VT
 Pride Benefit with Lucie Blue Tremblay and Vickie Shaw
 First Congregational Church, Burlington, VT
 Easthampton, MA

Sept. 4
 Sept. 8

Sept. 18
 Sept. 19