

## Cris Williamson Blazes Brightly in Two Vermont Concerts



Sage Russell

Cris Williamson recently made two concert appearances in Vermont, one at Middlebury College on September 20th to kick off a five-day festival, "Celebrating the Feminine", and one in Putney on October 6th, in a benefit for the Women's Crisis Center of Brattleboro.

Although both concerts were good, the Middlebury concert was truly special. It may well be the best Cris Williamson concert I've ever been to. Perhaps it was because she had a bad cold and therefore talked more than usual. Perhaps it was because she was appearing solo, accompanying herself on the piano and guitar, and had to rely on a more intimate repertoire. Perhaps it was because the audience responded so strongly to her music and she responded back.

In her mid-forties, after practically a lifetime of making music, Cris Williamson is at the top of her form. She says herself that she is better than ever, and it's true. Williamson brings the passion and poetry of her whole life to the music

she is making now. The music from **The Changer and the Changed** is still as fresh as when we first heard it fifteen years ago. But back then she simply hadn't done enough living to summon the power with which she sang James Taylor's "Millworker", or the depth of feeling she brought to Leonard Cohen's "Sisters of Mercy."

Anyone can listen to her albums and get something from them. What you can't get except in a live concert is Cris herself; the stories she tells, the spell she weaves. The two most moving stories she told in Middlebury had similar themes. The first was the introduction to her song "Mother, Mother" about a man with AIDS who has been estranged from his mother for years and is seeking reconciliation before he dies. The second introduced a new song "Ongoing," about a former lover.

The Middlebury concert was a solo performance which allowed Williamson to set a mood in the first set and build on its

intensity in the second. She had the audience completely with her throughout. This was one of the most varied audiences I have seen at a Williamson concert. There were lots of men, lots of straight people, and lots of college students, all unfamiliar with her music. Their excitement as they discovered this music was palpable. I have known and loved Cris Williamson's music for years and it meant a lot to me to have men, straight people and students participate in something that has been so central to lesbian culture (our music) and find it equally moving.

The concert in Putney was also very good, but followed a more familiar format. Cris shared the stage with Tret Fure, whose music was the focus of the first set. Cris took center stage for the second set. I like Tret's music and I find her stage presence down to earth, warm and funny; a refreshing contrast to some of Cris' more rarified flights of fancy. Nevertheless, their styles are very different, and when they share the stage, the concert loses some of its coherence.

Much of Tret's music is rock and roll oriented, and she has greater need of drums and other back-up instruments than Cris does. (Cris doesn't need them at all). since touring with a band is prohibitively expensive, the solution they have devised is to take a computerized keyboard and program it to reproduce the backup instruments. Tret pops in a diskette, flips a switch with her foot, and voilà, it's Tret Fure and her All-Girl band, sounding just like the albums. While I appreciate their dilemma, I find this solution distancing. It's disconcerting to be in a room filled with music made by invisible people. Although Tret played her guitar, I usually couldn't hear it. And it did occur to me to wonder why, having gone that far, they didn't program the vocals as well.

Having said all this, why do I think it was a good concert? Because Cris Williamson doesn't simply make music. She makes magic. ▼