

Dar Williams, Performing Songwriter, March/April 2003

Folk singer-songwriter Dar Williams weathers change well. She left the familiar, cozy confines of Cambridge, Mass. for rural upstate New York, only to make a radical relocation to the most elaborate concrete jungle in the US, New York City. These transitory periods define Williams's latest album, *the Beauty of the Rain*, a record that shows a new level of maturity in Williams's songwriting, coupled with more relaxed, pop-oriented arrangements.

"Moving from a college town to a big city was a huge jump — from a very uncluttered place to a very overstimulating place, and also from a natural landscape to a more human, architectural landscape," says the sweet-voiced songwriter, who married shortly after moving to the Big Apple. "But I actually feel very much in touch with the natural world and really enjoy the challenges of living in the city."

Williams's current skyscraper-filled landscape colors songs such as "The World's Not Falling Apart," a song that talks about angry Gods, a loveless world and modern characters such as the "riot grrrls who print their 'zines." The title track explores common fears and challenges faced by couples in towns of all sizes. "It's watching everyday conversations, struggles and victories," the attentive guitarist-vocalist says. "It was something I saw in Cambridge-Northampton, but certainly you have vivid examples every time you walk out on the street in New York City."

Recorded in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood, Williams and producers Stewart Lerman and Rob Hyman were able to grab a number of special guests as they passed through town, including Alison Krauss, John Medeski, banjo virtuoso Bela Fleck, Blues Traveller frontman John Popper, Dave Matthews Band bassist Stefan Lessard, String Cheese Incident fiddler Michael Kang, trumpeter Chris Botti and backing vocalist Cliff Eberhardt.

Understated yet well played keyboard, harmonica, banjo, and horn solos, and haunting background vocals courtesy of Krauss and Eberhardt, weave in and out of the mostly-acoustic album, giving it a lush, sonically rich quality. Lerman and Hyman kept arrangements simple, leaving enough room in the mix for each instrument to flourish. "I think this is a more modest album in some ways," Williams says. "I stepped back and let the musicians do their thing more. I'm not a control freak to begin with, but it was fun to take off another layer of control in the unusual way that a process like this deserves."

Relationships that endure, despite personal upheavals and transformations, spawned subject matter for many of the album's 11 tracks. "If you feel stagnated in your life, that can be just as disruptive to relationships as abrupt change," the storyteller says of the song "Closer to Me." "Fishing in the Morning," an easygoing number featuring improvisational banjo work from Fleck, continues the transformational theme. "I realized that no matter how much I change, the basic tranquility of my relationships can remain constant."

Of course celebrity news can also make for good song material. The birth of country star Vince Gill and wife/Christian pop vocalist Amy Grant's first child motivated Williams to finish the poignant ballad, "The One Who Knows." "Everything I'd seen about their public lives showed that they had weathered good press, bad press, accusing press and still believed in love and in themselves," Williams says. "So I thought 'my gosh, I bet they're going to be really wise parents who...don't' become disillusioned by the world as one sees parents becoming sometimes'." Williams readily admits that her assumption could be off the mark, but nonetheless, it inspired a tune with such moving lines as "If I had the world to give/I'd give it all to you" and "I want to teach your heart to trust, as I will teach my own." "When you're a writer, it's such a solitary life that you basically take whatever you can as a sign of action," she laughs.

Williams certainly wasn't alone with her guitar while making *Beauty of the Rain*, and it's likely she'll keep equally good company for future projects. Williams likens the recording process to a get-together with old and new friends. "There is a kind of common ground with musicians that I sometimes doubt that I could or should experience because I come to this so much through words," she says. "And yet [these guest artists] completely moved down the bench and made space for me when I met them, and that was a privilege."

-- Heather Johnson