

Skyline for the Soul: An Introduction to Jane Kelly Williams

Two of the most enduring images of faith for singer-songwriter Jane Kelly Williams were the altar call and baptism experienced in her church in hometown Newnan, Georgia. "I love the part of the service in the Baptist church that stops at the end and asks everyone to consider their relationship with their Maker. Do they have one? Will they accept or ask for one and make that known to others? Do they need to renew their relationship? I also love baptisms, the full immersion. I can't think of anything more hopeful than coming up from the water, makeup smeared, hair ruined, clothes drenched before family, friends, and strangers, and saying 'I do' to vulnerability, life, love, community, and change -- to the total commitment of being a new creature." As Williams describes it, she didn't so much come to faith herself as it came to her, "through my parents and church community, and then I embraced it and questioned it, and I continue to grow into it as I work toward sharing the love I found in Jesus." For Williams, life is navigated by values rooted in home and church - faith, hope, and love -- signposts for her journey of faith.

For most people, Williams's delicately crafted and luminous songs first came to them via her 1995 contemporary folk debut on Parachute/ Mercury Records, *Tapping the Wheel*. Produced by Ben Wisch (Bebo Norman, David Wilcox, Wes King) and backed by a crack band of New York City musicians, including Marc Shulman (Suzanne Vega, Patti Larkin), Shawn Pelton (Saturday Night Live, Joan Osborne), Dave Richards (Indigo Girls, Dana Kurtz), Everett Bradley, and Ilene Reid, *Tapping the Wheel* propelled Jane into a nationwide tour with October Project, a Top 20 Adult Contemporary hit with "Breaking Into the Past," and another single, "Show Me How to Catch a Fish," that was featured in the movie "Picture Perfect."

Critics took note. Billboard Magazine called Williams "one of the brightest lights in the booming alternative folk scene." The Associated Press imagined that "if the air skimming beneath the wings of a sparrow made some noise, it would sound like the voice of Jane Kelly Williams." "An endearing grace and charm," said the Washington Post. Nor did she escape the attention of the contemporary Christian music community. Dove Award Winner Bob Bennett says that Jane sings passionately and often quietly ... and therein is a power that all the yelling in the world could not compete with. Cornerstone Magazine said *Tapping the Wheel* was chock-full of brilliant songwriting and vocals that bring to mind sunny days and picture windows.

An auspicious and heady time for Williams, it came only after a musical journey that began humbly, amongst the shade trees and pines, marching bands, lazy Sunday afternoons, and historic homes of Newnan, Georgia (pop. 16,000) home, and roots where Williams practiced piano, sang in choirs, and began to teach herself guitar and write her first songs. In Newnan, there was the feeling that if you had to rush out of town, you might just miss the afternoon of your life or meeting the most genuine friend you'd ever find anywhere else in the world. Indeed, that expectant wonder, love of place, and desire to relate to others has never left Williams.

It's quite a journey from Newnan to Manhattan, from a small Southern town to a diversely peopled metropolis, from a smalltown Baptist church to a socially diverse Manhattan faith community. "Mom said once I brought Carole King's *Tapestry* into the kitchen and asked, 'Where is this?', and she said, 'New York City,' and I said, 'I want to live there one day.' So, encouraged by family, music teachers, and friends, she began the journey: summer voice study at the Aspen Music Festival, voice and piano at the University

of Georgia in Athens, and then on to New York, where she graduated from the Manhattan School of Music with a major in music theory.

In the City she was nourished by relationships with other musicians, playing at clubs in Greenwich Village, recording demos with engineer Lolly Grodner, and serving as an artist-in-residence at St. Paul St. Andrew Methodist Church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. As Williams recalls, "That church had to be one of the most socially diverse and active churches I've ever known, and in making a record amongst all of those crossroads religiously, economically, and culturally, I think I found their sounds and meanings on those tracks."

The demos Williams recorded with Grodner ended up in the hands of newly hired A&R Rep Tom Vickers, who quickly signed Williams to Mercury, brought in Producer/Engineer Ben Wisch, and secured a studio for the recording of *Tapping the Wheel*. Ben liked the old feel of the Sunday School rooms at St. Paul St. Andrew. They were largish and had these sort of mahogany type doors that pull down like a garage door that he could use for isolation when he needed it. He stood on a corner in the snow and talked about going out on a limb sometimes and not knowing whether something is out there until you go. In faith, they stepped out. Recorded in the church, *Tapping the Wheel* has an understated beauty, songs rich with particulars of people and place, complemented but not overshadowed by the instruments played, songs which seep into consciousness like a warm day or a cool breeze. From the hopeful Horizon (Everybody needs a horizon, everybody needs a skyline for their soul) to the biblical images provided by Show Me How To Catch a Fish, from the mundane and yet transcendent images of city life provided by 15 Seconds of Grace to a song dedicated to her mentally retarded brother, Walter, entitled Carry Him, Williams reaches for our soul and finds it.

When sub-label Parachute folded in the late 90s, and label Mercury moved on and veered into urban music, Williams stayed put. She continued writing, teaching music theory, and playing select dates, often with talented bassist and husband, Dave Richards. She helped start a band, River, at her church in Tenafly, New Jersey, where she assists in worship. "I love participating in worship in church. I love watching children come down front for the children's message and seeing their faces and hands go up with such wise answers. I love hearing the messages of the minister and, well, everyone. Even if there is something that is just family business and is repeated week after week and seems to get old, it becomes a new thing with the turning of the crystal of time. Sometimes in those moments we find the most beautiful kind of humor there is."

For the future Williams is looking forward to an outlet for new material (previewed on her as yet unreleased recording, *Patchwork of Lost and Found* (available at concerts only) as well as more regular touring more fruit from a life awake to God's working -- to faith, hope, and love. "The life of Jesus changed and reshaped the world because of his love. This gives me the greatest hope in life. Psalm 121 says 'I lift up my eyes to the hills -- where does my hope come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.' This hope shapes me."

What does she hope for her music? That my music will encourage people and bring more hope, that I will stay open to the wonder of Creation and the value of people, and that I will move forward with hope and enjoy the fact that life is a gift to be treasured and shared. Amen.