

A Conversation with Holly Williams
by Frank Goodman (6/2006, Puremusic.com)

During the AMA Conference last year, I was very impressed by a performance of Holly Williams. She's not at all what one would expect from the daughter of Hank Williams Jr. and the granddaughter of Hank Sr. In fact, she is a very interesting counterpart to Hank III.

She's more influenced by Laura Nyro, and by Leonard Cohen, which, for a 25-year-old knockout who went to Brentwood Academy, are unusual influences, much less for someone who grew up a product of that lineage. But, as the artist points up in the conversation to come, she was not raised in the music business, and was more encouraged to be apart from it than a part of it.

She started late, but got right to it once she began. She caught the eye and ear of influential people and was on the road long before a deal coalesced, with idols in faraway places. She signed to Universal Records ultimately, and made a serious, beautiful record with Monroe Jones producing that centered around relationships of different kinds, and people in her life.

She's very earthy, and was very easy to talk to. Her forthcoming way might be disarming if she wasn't so friendly, but she is. She's got a lot going for her, and it will be very interesting to see, as she parts from Universal and seeks a new home and develops as a writer, who it is she becomes. She just had a bad car accident in March that still has her sister Hilary recovering in Memphis, so it is on that subject that our conversation begins. I think you'll be as taken with her as I am.

Holly Williams: Sorry we've been playing phone tag. But I just dropped my dad and them off at the airport, so I'm good to go now.

Puremusic: Oh, good. My first question, really, is how are you, you know, after your recent accident? When was it, March?

HW: It was March 15th. I'm doing much better. I got my cast off my right arm and right wrist two weeks ago--no, three weeks ago. And I went through probably a week and a half of therapy. But I've just been working out on my own. And I feel great. I started playing again about a week ago, where I can play normally now, you know, playing guitar and playing piano again. And my range of motion is back. And my biggest worry was the staples in my head, but it's great--that's the fastest healing thing, they said. I was released in five days. We were in Memphis at the hospital down there for about a month. So it's really nice to be back home. And my sister is doing better. She'll start walking in about a month. She's still lying down, but she's in a hospital bed at my mom's house.

PM: Wow. So what was the accident? What happened?

HW: We were driving down Highway 61 to my grandfather's funeral, on my mom's side, headed to Louisiana.

PM: Oh, my God!

HW: And she was driving, I was in the passenger. And we just drifted, just a little bit, and there was a ton of gravel on the side of the road.

PM: Oh, and it pulled you right off.

HW: Yeah, when we hit the gravel it just--we lost control and started flipping. But yeah, there have been a lot of wrecks down there. And I didn't really notice until I went on a gravel road recently, how much it can--and right when you hit it--man, it just pulled us right off.

PM: And so what happened to you, you broke your arm and your wrist, and Hillary, what happened to her?

HW: My right wrist and arm, yeah. And she broke pretty much everything from the stomach down--hips, tailbone, pelvis, femur, right. Did she break both legs? Right ankle, left--literally--she just--a lot of broken bones from the hips down. And she had a pretty big ankle injury where the bone broke from the inside out, and so she had a big spot there where they had to do skin grafts and stuff like that. I mean, it is broken bones. They said had her tailbone not broken, she would have been paralyzed forever.

PM: Oh my god.

HW: So that was kind of a blessing that her tailbone broke. I guess the break in the tailbone prevented it from being a spinal cord injury.

PM: How scary.

HW: I guess when she first went in, they thought it was going to be a lot more permanent. And they are just broken bones. But you know, they said that the hips are the worst thing you can break. So one of them was really more shattered than the other one. But she went through three hip surgeries on the one side.

They said she's doing great now--I mean, she's ahead of schedule as far as recovery time. And she's rehab-ing her upper body and everything. I was out of the hospital after, I think, five days. But she was in the hospital for about a month, a month and a half, something like that.

PM: Oh, jeez.

HW: Because I didn't actually have surgery. She had a good bit of surgery.

PM: Wow. But she's on the road to recovery now.

HW: Yeah.

PM: Wow. And are you guys tight? You're close in age, right?

HW: Yes. She's 27, I'm 25.

PM: Wow. Is she musically inclined as well?

HW: She does a little bit. She's writing songs, and she sings. I'm kind of the loud outgoing personality, and she's shy. So she won't do it as much in front of people. But she will sometimes. She has a very high really just beautiful tone to her voice, almost like a bluegrass sounding tone.

PM: I'm always interested in how records begin. And in this case, yours begins with a finger picked guitar and the words, "I wish I were a little girl." That's an interesting first impression to make with a record.

HW: Uh-huh.

PM: It kind of takes it all the way down to basics, in an instant.

HW: Yep.

PM: I mean, imagine if Springsteen started a record like that, "I wish I was a little boy." It's a very trippy way to start a record. And it's very beautiful. And then later on in that song you sing, "I wish I was an angel in '52, in a blue Cadillac on the eve of the New Year, and there I would have saved him, the man who sang the blues, but maybe he's listening right now." That's of course, about your grandfather, Hank Williams.

HW: Yep.

PM: I was thinking a lot about that. And do you mind if I ask whether the time of his death is known?

HW: It was 1952--you know how it says on the eve of the New Year. It was New Year's Eve in '52.

PM: So he died before midnight? Because in some places, I've seen it that he died on New Year's Day in '53. But in your record, I understand that, no, actually, he died on New Year's Eve in '52.

HW: You know what? I may be wrong on the actual time of--I know the car was pulled over on New Year's Eve. Now, there's many different reports of people saying, "Okay, he died--we saw him dead here," and then people saying, "No, we saw him the next day in the hospital." But it's all--everyone has a different story, so it's very confusing.

PM: I see.

HW: Yeah, no one really knows, because--

PM: And is it known where he died exactly?

HW: He died somewhere in between--some people at the hotel in Knoxville, where he stopped off, said that he was dead when they got there. People took him up to a room--who was driving the car, and a doctor gave him a shot. So some people say Knoxville, but it's known in between Knoxville and Canton, Ohio. I think it was Canton--oh, gosh, I hope that's right. But right near Knoxville, right outside Knoxville.

PM: The information is personal to me in a way, because it's a weird coincidence, but that New Year's Day, twelve seconds after midnight, was when I was born in Yonkers, in that very same window of time. So it's interesting to me to find out just when he died because that very same day I was born. And so you think that, well, maybe people born on that day get a little bit of something from the spirit of those that are leaving.

HW: Oh, wow, that is neat.

PM: So thanks for that, because personally that's interesting to me.

With only one CD behind you, you've already played with a whole lot of interesting people, right?

HW: Yes.

PM: On the road.

HW: And you know what's funny? A lot of touring I did was before my first album was out. When I started playing in Nashville, I guess I was 18 when I first started doing acoustic nights around town alone, and kind of any gig that I could get at first. And during that time I was just playing, and I ended up meeting so many different people just through doing that. So when I did a couple shows with John Mellencamp, that was before a record deal or having a record.

PM: So how did that happen?

HW: Let's see, Mellencamp happened through a booking agent that saw me play one night at a club in Nashville, and was booking a couple for him, and put me on it. And then the Billy Bob Thornton tour randomly came about because his manager met me,

same kind of thing, and saw me play in Nashville. And Ron Sexsmith, same kind of thing, someone that worked with him saw me play.

PM: Oh, God, talk about one of my favorite guys.

HW: Me, too. I love him.

PM: What was it like playing with Ron?

HW: It was amazing. I was 18, and I went over to the UK with a backpack, with some CDs and a guitar--I mean, totally hobo style. Everyone assumes, because I'm in the family I'm in, that it's all--I don't know what they think, probably drugs or something, I guess.

PM: Well, musical royalty, they think.

HW: But oh, it was great. I mean, I'm one of those people that loves to travel to any new place, where I can be alone forever and just find my own way around. And it was just so great. For me to go overseas for the first time with one of my favorite songwriters and someone I respect so much, it was just great, because we were in a little car driving all over the UK and playing shows. And it was just really inspiring, because he has--even though he's not selling millions of records, he has such a strong fan base. And people, instead of their waiting for his big hit single, they know every song, they know every word. That was amazing. We've kept in touch since then, and hoping to do something again maybe in the fall or next spring.

PM: And he's kind of a quiet guy, but once you get him going he's not.

HW: Yeah, you're right. He was very, very quiet at first. And then he opened up a little more. And it was just great. I mean, he has people like Paul McCartney inviting him over for breakfast at one time. And Elvis Costello loves him. I mean, there are huge musical figures who love him.

PM: Oh, I remember hearing about the time that Elvis was on the Letterman show, and he was sitting in the chair. And right when they were cutting to a commercial break, he held up Ron's record.

HW: Did he really?

PM: And he said, "Buy this record," right to the camera.

[laughter]

HW: Oh, that's so funny. Well, he gets that a lot of time from people. I remember when he was touring with Cold Play, Chris Martin said, "If I'm in the charts, then I feel ashamed that I'm in the charts and Ron Sexsmith isn't." I mean, they were huge

supporters. He opened for Cold Play for a while. And Ron is just one of these artists that when you find him, it's like finding a goldmine. But people aren't really looking, I guess.

PM: On the other hand, there's this unknown guy named Bob Snider in Canada that all the Canadians worship. And his--

HW: I know who you're talking about.

PM: You know Bob Snider? Very strange, beautiful guy?

HW: In Canada Kasey Chambers introduced me to his music. I've heard a couple songs of his that they played me.

PM: So amazing.

HW: Yeah.

PM: And the third guy in the story [Michael Wrycraft] told this story where he, Ron, and Bob were all going to the Juno Awards, because they were all nominated, and Ron and Bob in the same category, in Best Roots Solo something. And so when Ron won the award, he got up there and he said, "Well, thank you very much, I really appreciate it. But I just want you to know, when I go home and listen to music tonight, I'll be listening to Bob Snider."

HW: Oh, wow! That is great.

PM: That's really something, right?

HW: [laughs] That is great. But yeah, so that came about--a good bit of that was right before I was signed. And I mean, since then, I've played with great people, too. But personally, Ron, and Kasey Chambers, I love, too--but Ron was just really exciting because I was really young and hadn't traveled at all or toured at all. And he did that for me.

PM: It's beautiful. One of my favorite guitar players, and favorite guys, really, tours a lot with you, Doug Lancio.

HW: Yes! I love Doug. Love Doug.

PM: He's an old buddy of mine, and just an incredible guitar player.

HW: Isn't he? Yeah, we've been in the studio, actually, cutting some stuff and doing a few demos at his house. And oh, he's just amazing--perfect--just the kind of people I'm looking for. He's just so pure. And he's got that guitar playing that's so amazing, but you never know he's there, because he lets the songwriter or the artist really stand out. And it's hard to find musicians who kind of allow you to do that. I mean, my kind of music, I

really want the lyrics to be heard. I really want people to hear what I'm saying. And it's so hard to find people who can play great, but they're quiet and they're kind of--it's just this really cool vibe that he adds to it, but it's not overshadowing or anything.

PM: Yeah, because what he's really expert at is creating an atmosphere.

HW: Uh-huh.

PM: He just creates an atmosphere for the song to live in. He gets into the song, and he creates the atmosphere that's suitable for the song, and then the singer-songwriter has all the space they need to sing their song.

HW: Yeah.

PM: It's just incredible. And he's some kind of a female singer-songwriter specialist.

HW: Yeah. [laughs] He is, he really is.

PM: You know, Martina and Patty Griffin, to Holly Williams, and there are others, too, I can't think of right at the moment.

HW: Well, he worked with Nanci Griffith a lot. And he just did Robinella's new album, Robinella and the CC String Band.

PM: He produced that, right?

HW: Yeah, he just did her new album.

PM: Man, he jumped out there as a producer really quick.

HW: Yep.

PM: He's just that kind of guy. Who else plays with you on tour?

HW: Well, it's really varied over the last few years, because Doug and I did a lot of acoustic shows. I've still never done a tour with a whole band. When my album came out, I really wanted to keep it a little more raw. A guy named Craig Wright played drums.

PM: Oh, sure, he's great.

HW: He played with Steve Earle a while back. And a guy named James DiGorolamo has been playing piano for a while. But I haven't played with a band in a while. I really want to do a show in summer. I haven't played in Nashville in a year and a half. I really want to do a show with a band, because I just haven't played one forever. But I've been looking for a really good standup guy. I've been writing a lot on piano and I love standup bass. I mean, I've always loved it.

PM: You oughta call Charlie Chadwick.

HW: Yeah, I don't know him yet. So there's been a lot of acoustic when--I was in Europe a good bit last year, and Doug came with me. And we just did two-people shows. And we were doing smaller rooms over there. I like that, you don't worry about anything drowning you out, it was just really raw, and I really love that.

PM: Wow. So I don't know much about your producer. I've heard his name a lot, Monroe Jones. Tell us about him and how you hooked up with him.

HW: I met him before I signed with Universal South. He had a small division of the label called Ebb Flow. And my manager had worked with him in the past. He's done everything from contemporary Christian albums to some with Stevie Nicks, back in the day, and Duane Eddy--he'd worked with a real variety of people. We had coffee one day, and just talked about our influences and the kind of records we listen to. And we just hit it off. So we went in the studio--well, I guess it's been a while ago, two years ago in the spring--and started working together. And he was great because I was so used to working with myself and an engineer, without a producer, with me choosing the musicians and the rooms and just really working a lot on the producer side of it. He was really great because he didn't try to overstep that or bring all his guys.

I mean, for me, when I'm in the studio, it's really important for me to feel comfortable with the people I'm playing with. And I've never really done the Nashville session player thing. Now, I've used a few guys I already know. But for me to use strangers in the studio was always a really kind of bizarre thing to me. I felt like I had to kind of connect with them and--to know what I wanted to do. So with him it was great, because we just experimented a lot with all kinds of different musicians. And it was a lot about the performance and just getting the song down first, and then working around it.

PM: Yeah, you made a great sounding record.

HW: Well, thank you.

PM: How did it do--did it find a home at radio? Is it finding a format out there? Are people getting on it in the radio world?

HW: We didn't really find a home at radio. It was kind of confusing, because we did a video for CMT, but nothing was on country radio. And as far as radio-wise at the label, there wasn't any kind of radio promotion or anything for anything outside of the country market.

PM: Right.

HW: So that was kind of confusing. And now we had a long talk in January, and we decided to split for the next record. And everyone is on good terms. As far as that goes,

they know this market very well, and I don't know what my music is, just the songs that I write. But I think more along the lines of artists like Mindy Smith or Kate York or Patty Griffin, more the singer-songwriter thing. So we never really tried to release singles or say "this is going to be released this week." I never did a radio tour here. Now, in Europe I did radio tours and the whole bit. But here it was really me just playing out and doing random different shows, and Jimmy Kimmel, and some different TV areas and things. But we didn't go for certain radio home on this record.

PM: Right. And did you say you're switching labels for the next record?

HW: Yes. And I don't know where yet. I had just met with two labels right before the wreck. But in about two weeks I'm going to start that process again and figure out where it's going to fit for the next one.

PM: It sounds from your songs in this first record that the most important things to you are your friends and relationships. Is that accurate?

HW: Yeah. I'm just kind of a simple person like that. For me, I love to write about relationships, not necessarily boyfriend or love or anything, but of any kind, family, friends, or any kind of situation. I tend to always write about emotions and just--

PM: And people.

HW: And the human heart. I'm always writing about that. So to me it's never been the thing of "I want to have this single." I never want to be at a concert where people are waiting for one song. I want to be an artist where people come to hear every song--not just the one they hear on the radio, but they really get into the album. Because any time I write a lot of songs together, I feel like they all kind of fit for that one thing. You know?

PM: Absolutely.

HW: I really like to make more of a statement record.

PM: Well, what would you say about this: What kind of a friend are you, and what do you look for from a friend?

HW: I'm one of those people that--I kind of have the friend who you can get drunk with, and the friend who you cry with, and the friend who has your humor, and sort of one of everything. It's always about finding people who have the most of one thing, so kind of whatever mood you're in, you go down your list of people and decide who you want to--

[laughter]

PM: I need this, therefore I call "X."

HW: Exactly. I just try to be compatible. I mean, like this past weekend I was in Missouri catching chickens and feeding baby goats. And then I'll go spend a week in L.A. I can very easily adjust to any kind of situation.

PM: Uptown, downtown, right.

HW: I'm just fascinated by that. So I have friends from all walks, from being in the music business, and through my family, and then just being a normal kid at Brentwood Academy and going to high school in Brentwood, and doing that whole thing.

PM: Yeah.

HW: So for me it's all about having a variety. But it's all about a trust and honesty thing. A lot of my friends, I've known them for five years or more, and just having people that you knew when you were a kid, so nothing changes your relationship, no matter what happens to you or where you go or anything.

PM: What songwriters are you gravitating toward, or who do you find nourishing or inspiring?

HW: I usually have the same people. But to me, always, the most inspiring, Tom Waits I adore.

PM: Wow.

HW: I love and adore him. Leonard Cohen, Elliott Smith, Jackson Browne, Neil Young.

PM: How interesting.

HW: Nick Drake, Robert Johnson.

PM: You're really surprising.

HW: I'm one of those people who knows every song of theirs and has everything, one of the few people that just--you know, once I find them I buy everything. On the female side, I love Joni Mitchell, love Patty Griffin, Laura Nyro.

PM: You rarely hear people credit Laura Nyro as an inspiration these days. And that's a beautiful thing to hear.

HW: Uh-huh.

PM: I love her music.

HW: Yeah, me, too. It was just so raw, and lyrically, I mean, I think she's amazing.

PM: You're a very surprising person.

HW: [laughs] And it's funny, because back before I played guitar--I started playing when I was 17--I listened to your straightforward top 40. I knew who Tupac and Skynryd were, and Jewel. I mean, I didn't know anything besides what I heard on top 40.

PM: Wow.

HW: So when I started playing guitar, I became totally fascinated by this whole other world. And I remember sitting at night on Amazon.com, and typing in a name like Dylan, and then finding Blind Willie McTell, or finding Son House, and just searching, searching, searching through so many people. And I found Tom Waits through Sarah McLachlan, of all people.

PM: Really.

HW: Which is really random, because she's totally a modern artist. And she covered "Ol '55" and I went out and bought everything.

PM: Yeah, because one like me wonders, well, how does a person, even a songwriter, who's 25, find the music of Laura Nyro in 2006.

HW: I actually found her--Bob Dylan's player, a guy named Larry Campbell, played on my record.

PM: Sure.

HW: And Larry turned me on to Laura, and he just said he thought I would love her music.

PM: That's an astute commentary from the man. That's beautiful. What did you get? Did you get *Christmas and the Beads of Sweat*, or *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*, or--

HW: Yeah, I have *Eli and the Thirteenth Confession*. And then I got a live tape from somewhere.

PM: You got to get *Christmas in the Beads of Sweat*. And she did a soul record, too, called *Gonna Take a Miracle*, that was so good!

HW: Man, I haven't heard that. Yeah, I'll have to get those. But even things like Leadbelly, I could listen to him all the time. I don't know why I gravitated toward that music. But people would assume that I grew up with music all around me, but it's actually the complete, complete opposite, because my dad did not want us around any kind of music business. So I remember going to a few concerts--I mean, I could count them on my hand when I was little. And when my dad was around us, he didn't play music, he was hunting and fishing and not talking about music. And so I really didn't

have anyone, the aunt or the uncle that turned me on to the cool bands. For me it was a very late thing where I got into all this stuff. And I guess that's why my taste is--people assume that I listen to Garth Brooks and Kenny Chesney, or whoever.

PM: Right.

HW: Me and my dad actually have a lot of similar--I mean, he and I both worship Robert Johnson and all the old blues guys.

PM: Really?

HW: And John Lee Hooker, and Son House. That's about all he listens to.

PM: Your dad is way into the old blues guys.

HW: Oh, that's all he listens to, nothing modern. He cannot.

PM: Does he like Howling Wolf and Muddy Waters and that--

HW: Oh, yeah. He sings Howling Wolf all the time with his dobro. I mean, literally, the only thing he listens to is old bluesmen, that's all he likes.

PM: How interesting.

HW: Yeah.

PM: Well, how does your dad like the record?

HW: He loves it. When I first told him I was going to do this, he was leery, like anyone would be. But when he knew that I was writing, and that I was really passionate about it, and it was kind of coming from me, and I was touring alone, and just kind of doing everything myself, he was really proud then, and knew that I was in it for good, for good reasons.

PM: Wow. What's your relationship with him like? Is he a real teddy bear, or what's his personality, with you?

HW: He is great. I mean, like all day today we've been out metal detecting out in Hank and Audrey's old yard on Frank Road.

PM: [laughs]

HW: And we found a belt buckle from 142 years ago, four inches under the ground.

PM: Amazing.

HW: And he said they were like super rare. He was jumping up and down. And we found bullets and buttons. His philosophy when we were little was: "I'm not Bocephus, I'm Daddy to you." So his relationship with us is not the Bocephus you see on TV--not the, you know, "I'm drinking beer, and I'm cocky," and whatever kind of thing that he puts out on TV. It's like the southern protective father, even now.

PM: Wow.

HW: And he loves to just sit around and play guitar and go fishing. And he's a real, real country boy. Like really. So when I moved to L.A. he thought I was crazy. And if I go to New York--you know, he hates the city. But he really is just very old-fashioned, kind of, I think, his family values and everything.

PM: Wow. Do you have time, or do you make time for books much? Is that part of your scheme?

HW: Yes. Many.

PM: You read anything good lately?

HW: I'm about to get into *The Fountainhead* again. I read half of it a few years ago and never finished it. But my favorite authors--I love J. D. Salinger, some of F. Scott Fitzgerald's stuff--Dostoevsky, I love his books. Lately, Jack Kerouac is probably my favorite author.

PM: Wow. People are so surprising. Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?

HW: Yes.

PM: Any special way, or--

HW: I think after the wreck, after something like that happens to you, and you're spared, you automatically feel closer to whatever it is you believe in. And I did grow up with the southern Bible belt. My mom had us at church every Sunday unless one of us had a high fever. But as a teenager I stopped going, like most everyone does. But I don't know, something was instilled in me as a child, and I've always had faith, I've always felt very close to God. Things that have happened in my life, and just my bizarre family triangle, and my dad has had so many times when he should have died, whether it was wrecks, or his mountain fall, or being spared from going off in the war one day--I mean, just a lot of things. And after this, and this whole thing, when they got us out of the car, and the doctors can't believe we're alive, and seeing the car--when something like that happens, it kind of re-instills everything.

So lately I'm just--I don't really like the word "religion"--I believe that everything happens for a reason. And I just have a lot of faith. And I kind of believe every moment is ordained, and anytime anything bad happens, it doesn't bother me as much. Like there's

a song on the album called "All As It Should Be," and that's all about my faith and just believing kind of whatever God's will is, it'll happen.

PM: Well, I really think you made a beautiful record. And it's really interesting to talk to you, Holly. You're just such a genuine and forthcoming person.

HW: Thank you.

PM: It's really, really nice to meet you, and I thank you for your time today.

HW: Cool. Well, thank you, Frank, and hopefully I'll talk to you soon.

