

DAR WILLIAMS '89:

BEING THE CHANGE

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY BILL BURKHART



A prominent singer-songwriter, Dar Williams '89 brings her quest for social justice into her daily life, her music, and, most recently, into a Wesleyan classroom.

It's a December 2012 morning and musician Dar Williams '89 is having breakfast at O'Rourke's, something she used to do as an undergrad, but there's really no time for nostalgia. She's teaching a course this semester at the Allbritton Center for the Study of Public Life, and the class meets later today.

Williams slides into the sunny rear booth for a veggie omelet and coffee and is quickly recognized by Brian O'Rourke and the staff. No stranger to Middletown, Williams, in addition to her visiting professor status, attends class reunions and performs locally. Wait staff glide by with coffee refills galore; O'Rourke himself proffers a plate of tasty morsels along with a request to pose for a photo with the staff. She agrees, darts off to find a mirror to "clean myself up" and returns with a dash of pink lipstick and smile that dazzles in warmth.

A singer-songwriter, Williams released her 10th album, *In the Time of the Gods*, last April and tours the country playing in festivals and small venues. *The New Yorker's* Hendrik Hertzberg ("A Fan's Note," Nov. 2011) calls her "one of America's very best singer-songwriters." Hertzberg's parenthetical example of her work—"I think it's safe to say that hers is the one and only folk-rock toe-tapper about Stanley Milgram's classic obedience experiments"—may send you running to your Psych 101 notes for a brief refresher and to your computer to hear her sound.

In "Buzzer," one of the hundred-plus songs she's written over the past two decades, she imagines the perspective of one of Milgram's subjects: "I'm feeling sorry for this guy that I press to shock/He gets the answers wrong, I have to up the watts/And he begged me to stop but they told me to go/ I press the buzzer, I press the buzzer ... tell me who made your clothes, was it children or men..." The song is about our own complicity in the injustices of the world.

Hertzberg lauds Williams as "an exemplary citizen, as the many hard-up environmental, feminist, and social-justice groups for whose suppers she has sung can attest." As a working musician advocating social change, Williams' perspectives and input were of great interest to Rob Rosenthal, Wesleyan's John E. Andrus Professor of Sociology, as he was writing *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*.

"Her whole take on the world," he says, "is 'What can I do to help?'" A few years later, as Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, he began developing the concept of the Allbritton Center as a place where practitioners could bring their expertise to academics, and he realized that Williams would be a natural fit.

To give her students deeper insight into the use of music in social movements, Williams invited singer and activist Peter Yarrow, most widely known as one-third of the folk trio Peter, Paul and Mary, to her class. On Oct. 3, Yarrow led the class in a number of songs from the civil rights era, punctuated with his recollections of participating in protests. He recalled the experience of standing with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the other leaders of the movement on the platform in front of the Mall in Washington, D.C., just before King began his "I Have a Dream" speech. As Yarrow stood with Williams and her students in their circle around the inside of Zelnick Pavilion, Yarrow instructed them all to cross their arms in front and link hands as they sang "We Shall Overcome." The emotion was palpable.

This was exactly what Rosenthal had in mind by including practitioners in the Allbritton Center. "You can say to students, 'It's really powerful when you sing in a group'—but if you get them to sing in a group, then they understand it a lot better. And they understand why it was that singing was powerful in the Civil Rights Movement."

Williams, also, found inspiration in the experience: "A lot of the '60s was: Who showed up? Dylan didn't; his songs did, but he didn't—and I used to think it didn't matter. But watch-

ing Peter Yarrow—who has such an ethos of showing up, and who puts himself physically in this place—has really changed my view on what it means to show up. He has this faith in what it means to attend a rally, a march. His mind is wide open; I'm just more aware of what it means to show up."

Williams, says Rosenthal, is "serious about music as a social form, and she thinks deeply about it."

She got her start in the coffeehouse movement, which she calls "an atomized success story of the post-Woodstock era—little outposts of discussions about democracy and the American psyche." A theater and religion major at Wesleyan, she moved to Boston expecting to begin a career as a thespian (or possibly an academic—"I liked the idea of living by my wits," she confesses). Instead, she found herself welcomed into the open-mic music scene in Cambridge, and it was life changing. To this day, she is adamant about the importance of community. "I always tell people, find a community. They can be petty and jealous and wrong—as long as they are sometimes right."

Additionally Williams was a strong voice in the women's music movement, and Rosenthal notes that his daughter found Williams to be "A MEANINGFUL ARTIST TO HER AS SHE DEVELOPED A FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS."

They were utterly right in their support of Williams, who continued singing and writing and began recording. She moved to Northampton, began touring the country, and gained popularity in the folk circuit. Her 1993 release "When I Was A Boy," with its theme of moving beyond gender-biased behavioral expectations, caught the zeitgeist of that era and brought further attention to

the young artist. “I lucked out,” she says. “The ’90s were a gender exploration decade and people were breaking down all these boundaries for themselves. I think a lot of good gender deconstruction happened then, and I’m very pleased to have been part of that. But I didn’t know that was going on. It wasn’t a bust down the ramparts sort of movement; it was an evolution.”

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Close enough.

In 2002, Williams married Michael Robinson ’86, who was a senior when she was a frosh. “Everyone had a crush on him.” Later, when their paths first crossed after college, he posited that they’d known each other as undergrads. Williams disputes this. “It’s like when Dave Mathews asked me, ‘Have we met?’ I told him, ‘Oh, no. I would have remembered that.’”

The couple has an elementary-school-aged son who plays soccer, and a preschool-age daughter, whom they adopted from Ethiopia. They have a garden; Williams gets most of the family clothes, including her “girly clothes for concerts” at local thrift stores. Robinson, a builder, owns a grease-powered car and “shares the messy task” of draining the oil with the local physics teacher, who also owns such a car. In Williams’ world, the private ownership of an environmentally friendly car takes on a community-building aspect.

The importance of community—and how to build it—is at the heart of her Wesleyan

Thinks Big talk. Modeled after TED talks, these semiannual campus-wide events asks professors—chosen by the student body—to share in a 10-minute talk a novel idea or concept they are developing. Hers was on “Positive Proximity” and took place the night before her class.

At O’Rourke’s, Williams begins defining the term by how it feels: “It’s when being so close to other people is a positive thing, rather than that other thing that makes you wish you lived in a cabin in the woods.”

Then she follows up with the concrete: “It’s—‘You’ve got a dog, I’ve got a dog, we’re walking our dogs, maybe we should get a dog run? I can pull some weeds here, you can pull some weeds there; so-and-so can pound in the fence—let’s do it.’”

On a macro scale, these conversations have transformed small-town America. In the ’90s, what she saw from the tour bus window was disheartening: “Main Streets with boarded-up shops and roads that showed you the way out.” By the next

decade, though, farmers markets and local festivals filled town greens—and she found herself invited into newly repurposed venues: small concert halls built from old train stations.

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Non-motorized outdoor activities are a key building block of positive proximity, she says, allowing people the chance to meet up with each other, discover common interests, and build the dog run or the music venue, or host the agave beer festival. She is a frequent walker in her town, noting that five different directions will produce five different conversations. Also gardening—“the shared sensibility of where food comes from” is a key building block. “‘Food’ is practically a verb in positive proximity,” she says.

In a fanciful prescription for injecting more “positive proximity” into Wesleyan, she turns “fooding” into a guerrilla activity, giving props to the “Wild Wes” segment of landscaping—the ecologically low-impact area next to Foss Hill—and suggesting that berries could grow around the playing fields, vines of beans made to climb up the cement walls of the CFA. Also, we could all plant great patches of basil, enough to create a pesto-fest, the proceeds of which would rehab pianos saved from landfills (she’s not into the buy-it-new mindset). These pianos, moved into dorms and special interest housing, will form the center around which singing and music-making will arise.

Additionally, she’d like more interactions—preferably over music—between faculty and students. “We spend a lot of

time thinking about each other, and we have more in common than I think I realized when I was an undergrad.”

Community, food, music, and movements all figure prominently in her class later that December day. Williams enters the Judd Hall classroom, smiling, talking, weighted down with lap-top satchel, guitar, books, and some baked treats for the midpoint break in the long afternoon class.

She begins by telling the class about her meeting with an environmental group, and educating that group on the way messaging works in the music industry—a subject she and the class have discussed at length in previous sessions.

The quick take-home: don’t set out to write a song on recycling called “Throw It in the Right Can,” and expect to see it in the top 100.

“Unless everyone is going to say, ‘Oh, we’re more interested in recycling than sex,’ that top-100 billing just isn’t going to occur. The popular music industry is just like a large nose,” she explains. “It smells money and goes after that.” They talk about niche markets, about the conversations you have around the music star—like, if Beyoncé wears sandals made of coconut husks, what topics the media might explore—and then she asks who has a song they’d like to share, based on their reading. “Home,” one offers.

“Which one?” asks Williams, and the class begins whistling the beginning of Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeroes’ song, then spontaneously singing two verses.

“I know this one,” Williams says. “Where would I have heard this? Was it in an ad?”

It was, as it turns out, and Williams queries them on whether that weakens whatever message it could have. Is it less effective in a movement if it’s been used to sell something? And why is it that they all know the lyrics? Could they use this advantage to engage people towards a cause?

On that subject, a student queries her: Would you allow your work to be used to promote a product? Williams recalls that a retirement community wanted to use her “You’re Aging Well.” She really doesn’t want to use her music that way, she says.

“How about for a company that made women’s plus-size hemp clothing?” is the

next exploration—a hypothetical company with both an environmental and a feminist agenda. Williams laughs and agrees. “I’d let them use my music.”

Back to “Home,” she asks what the song illustrates. It’s an example of a “you and me” song, without a call to community, students respond

“The market is happiest that way,” Williams observes, noting that dividing a group weakens its power. She compares “Girl Power”—singular—to the earlier phase of feminism that promoted a community.

More songs—Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young’s “Ohio,” which came out after the killing of four young people at Kent State in 1970, and the music industry reacted swiftly to the culture.

“You don’t usually hear a song that’s so specific to one time and place now,” a student observes.

The class continues, with discussions on building community and the music industry, with singing favorite songs, and with a break for snacks. Williams is leading the class in talking, singing, and fooding themselves into a tightly bonded community.

On the last day of class, Williams exits, clutching a poster-sized card the class has made to thank her. She’s high on the projects they are planning and is introspective about the new way she has fit into the Wesleyan community and what she hopes for her students.

“The thing I’ve tried to explore in the class: that moment in a movement where you are going to tip the axis, and you’ve done it mostly through the ways you’ve used culture—it’s astounding, it’s world changing.” She’s thinking back to her syllabus—the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, his “I Have a Dream,” all the singing of that era—and forward to her students’ final projects: thoughtful proposals about music events to save harbors, wetlands, promote gender equality. Williams muses: The question she’s asked them, they are now asking themselves: “How and where we can bring music into movements more, and find out what it is to tip the axis in our time?”

She smiles, ready for action. “Because there are a lot of axes that have to be tipped.”

For more on Dar Williams, see p. 9, “Letter Home,” to read about an upcoming project. Go to thisiswhy.wesleyan.edu for a video in which she discusses the class and sings “Storm King.”



Musician Dar Williams ’89 composes songs and is part of community life in the small New York town where she lives with her family. In the fall 2012 semester, she commuted to Wesleyan to teach “Music Movements in a Capitalist Democracy” through the Allbritton Center for the Study of Public Life.