

SPOTLIGHT

Rudolf Van Dommel



DAR WILLIAMS

How a back-to-basics move led to a reevaluation of her rich musical history

FOR YEARS, DAR WILLIAMS HAD BEEN thinking about rerecording some of her older songs in stripped-down arrangements. When she at last undertook the project, she was surprised at how much she had changed since starting her career nearly two decades ago. "Listening to the original recordings, I thought, 'Wow, I don't sound like the same person anymore,'" Williams explains. "My voice has changed, I've changed and my understanding of how those songs have lived out in the public has changed. But the combination of those things is also what made me want to rerecord them with just voice and acoustic guitar. A segment of my fan base wanted this very badly, and it's something I was happy to do."

Many Great Companions gathers those new bare-bones recordings onto one disc, and pairs them with a second CD featuring some of Williams' best-known songs in their original forms. She produced the new recordings with fellow singer-songwriter Gary Louris at a small studio in upstate New York, hewing close to the spirit of the original arrangements while giving the new tracks a soft-lit, intimate vibe. She welcomed a few guests, including Mary Chapin Carpenter, Patty Larkin and Nickel Creek's Sean and Sara Watkins. "Mary Chapin Carpenter is

amazing with harmonies," Williams says. "Her participation alone was enough to make the project worthwhile. And it was similar with Patty." Larkin adds a second guitar to the updated version of Williams' "When I Was a Boy." "That is arguably the most important song on the album," Williams observes. "Patty has such gravitas, I thought, 'This reinterpretation is meant for her to do!'"

Williams first balked at the idea of including the additional best-of disc, describing the experience of revisiting her old recordings as a bittersweet one. But her manager convinced her it was the right thing to do. "He pointed out that those original versions are what people listen to," she says. "It's those versions that people turn to when they're getting past a heartbreak, or something else that's difficult." Throughout her career, Williams says she has strived to avoid one thing in her songwriting: "Blame," she says with a laugh. "Even when I was young I knew that things like hypocrisy and betrayal were inevitable, and that they were really more sad than something worth railing against. I'm glad I made that decision early on. Otherwise there would be 15 songs about ex-boyfriends that I could never perform."

—Russell Hall

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