



Holly Williams

Holly Williams could have come from anywhere. She might have started singing and writing long before she actually did. Her bloodline could have been nobody's concern. It doesn't matter.

She still would have written songs that explore the tender recesses of love. Her lyrics would still speak with a rare, spare eloquence. Her voice would be just as unforgettable as it is today -- intimate or assertive, a whisper or a declamation, a vessel overflowing with her poignant passions.

It just so happens that she comes from Nashville, not as a transplant with a guitar and a one-way Greyhound ticket but as a native. For seventeen years she felt more at home in the Green Hills Mall than just a few blocks away at the legendary Bluebird Café. And her family? Think about that last name for a minute. Think "Nashville." Oh, yeah, that Williams family.

It's true: Hank is her grandfather, Hank Junior her dad, Hank III her half-brother ... and that doesn't matter either.

For Holly Williams is fully her own woman. Throughout *The Ones We Never Knew*, her debut CD, she stands on her own, with unique gifts that pay tribute to her lineage far more profoundly than mere imitation. She conjures fragile images: recollections of a lover's breath on "Velvet Sounds," of wishes fallen beyond reach on "Sometimes," of the search for strength within the storm on "All As It Should Be," of helplessness in the face of another's suffering in "Would You Still Have Fallen," of willingness to judge all but oneself in "Everybody's Waiting for a Change," of regret for the wounds suffered by some whose affections she shared on "I'll Only Break Your Heart" and "Cheap Parades" ...

Some of this magic may descend from the spirits that haunt her family tree-- but that tree is only one part of the landscape that opens to us on *The Ones We Never Knew*. This album, from its hushed moments of solo guitar and voice to its sweeping crescendos of rhythm and strings, is all about Holly Williams, an artist already as distinctive as any others who bear her name.

That name, in truth, played almost no role in her journey. Her parents separated when she was young; through high school Holly lived with her mother and saw her father only intermittently, during visits to his home in Paris, Tennessee, when he wasn't on the road. There was music at home; her mother, a pianist, played classical music most of the time. Her father's music filled her life, but her grandfather's legacy was only a distant presence.

The only hints that Holly would someday fall into the arms of music came when she was around eight years old. For about a year she scribbled words into a notebook she called Holly's Song Folder, based on melodies she was hearing in her imagination. None of them, she insists, are worth revisiting. Yet there was something in her lyrics that suggested that she would eventually have a lot to say through music.

"These weren't childhood songs," she remembers. "They were songs about issues, like death, people having affairs -- things I knew nothing about. This one song, 'Who Am I,' was about a twenty-year-old girl going through a broken marriage -- and I was writing that at eight years old! I wasn't even really listening to music at that time, but even then I found it easy to put myself in someone else's shoes and write about what they're going through."

Premonitions of her determination and ambition began to occur at about that same time. "I started running these little businesses," she says. "Every Saturday I would wash cars in the neighbourhood for a dollar. I would organize yard sales. I did everything I could to go set goals for myself and stay busy."

Modelling was her main goal at that time, so it made sense to Holly even at age eight to cold-call agencies in search of opportunities. This brought a swift reprimand from both parents -- especially from her father, who knew first-hand of the damage caused by fame won too soon. With that, Holly stepped back into the typical routines of childhood. She sang, but only in school productions, at church, and on karaoke outings with friends -- no more than any other average kid. The song writing stopped.

But the seed had been planted. Now and then Holly felt the pull of music, like a persistent reminder, especially whenever her father was in town to play a concert. "He'd bring me to those shows and I'd sit on the side of the stage," she says. "It was fascinating to be just a few feet from him, watching in front of a crowd of thousands. I loved that."

In the end, it was something less spectacular and more personal that inspired Holly to embrace a life in music. There had always been guitars within reach at home, but at seventeen she decided for the first time to try playing them. Within a week she was writing again. Before long she had completed fifty songs; like her first efforts at age eight, most of these reflected on some of life's darker emotions, even though Holly admits to having had little contact with sorrow or heartbreak at that point.

"I really hadn't gone through anything serious," she laughs. "So I wrote about other people that I imagined or observed. A lot of what I do now is still based on what I see around me. On my album, for example, 'Nothing More' is about a woman at seventy whose husband is having an affair, which is why she says 'Underneath this age is the heart of a child.' And 'Take Me Down' is about people who are in abusive relationships because they're afraid of being alone. Of course, as I started travelling and getting into relationships I started writing more from my own experiences. I've done enough living to where I feel like I'm thirty now, so I tend to write on a more personal level based on what I've observed and felt."

As she finished high school Holly immersed herself in music, writing every day. She scoured local stores for CDs and listened hungrily to everything: Beatles, Stones, Dylan, Tom Waits, Radiohead, Randy Newman, Peter Gabriel, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Jackson Browne, Patty Griffin, Beethoven, Robert Johnson. She also got deeper into reading works by Jack Kerouac, J. D. Salinger -- novelists and poets whose narrative genius could inform Holly's ability to tell stories in song.

As graduation neared, rather than follow her friends into college, Holly gave herself one year to build a career in music. She picked up the phone and started booking small gigs around town. Bit by bit she laid the groundwork through open mike events, appearances at the Bluebird or the Flying Saucer on off nights, and opening slots at rock venues like the Exit/In. For some gigs she would front a band, and she sang backup Bobby Bare Jr. on one two-week tour. But mostly she wrote and performed alone, as her one-year trial run stretched into three.

Eventually, Holly left Nashville for a three-month hiatus in Los Angeles, devoted mostly to practicing on the piano in the flat she had rented, catching concerts by the Stones, Elliot Smith, Neil Finn, and other favourites, and getting more focused on what she hoped to achieve. Invigorated, she drove back home with a pile of new songs in time to accept an invitation from Ron Sexsmith to open on his European tour.

"I'd never even met Ron," she explains. "But I went with my guitar in my hand and my CDs in my backpack. I got off the plane and had to find my own way on trains to the cities where we were playing. Ron and his tour manager had a car, but I travelled on my own. And I loved it. It was a great feeling to play in these little towns in Wales and discover that everyone there knew my grandfather's music and then talk with them all after the show."

Holly's momentum built throughout 2003, as she put together a five-song EP, launched her own website, played some shows with John Mellencamp, and went on the road with Billy Bob Thornton. By this time major labels were taking notice. After weighing offers, she signed with Universal South. "I always wanted to be with a label in Nashville, because this is where I live," she says. "And I wanted someone who would see me as a songwriter, and they're great about that. So I signed with them in January 2004 and we started the album in March."

The result, *The Ones We Never Knew*, is more than a memorable introduction. It's a statement that any singer/songwriter would be proud to have made. There's no excess; every word is carefully chosen, every phrase artfully formed, every emotion stirred with the most minimal, elegant gestures. Within minutes, through her performance, Holly takes shape, as real and undeniable as if she had physically entered the room. And as the last track finishes her presence lingers, as if her candour and poetry were a perfume in the air of memory. Her original planning involved a European tour in 2006 but this plan was screwed up by a car accident the young woman was in involved in right before.

As 2006 then turned out to be a year spend on recovering she is now planning to do her tour in 2007 possibly backed by a new album.

For those who treasure the legacy of her family, Holly honours those who came before, as she will inspire those who will follow, by being true to herself throughout this album. "Hank was always very far from me as I grew up," Holly says. "But I'll never forget the first time I heard him mentioned in a Leonard Cohen tune. I heard Van Morrison mention him in a song. I started reading about how Dylan and Springsteen loved him. I wonder if he knew, when he was just a kid from Alabama, just how much he would affect the world?"

With *The Ones We Never Knew*, others may someday wonder in the same way about a beautiful young woman, who happened to come from Nashville with a heart full of songs, all of them her own ...