

SHE'S NO BARBIE DOLL

Hugh Boulware CHICAGO TRIBUNE August 24, 1988

Stand back Barbie Dolls—here comes Vesta Williams.

That's what Williams, a full-throated R & B belter, calls the studio-fortified singers that have recently become so popular in the dance music market. Though reluctant to name names, Williams says, "So many of these singers, they must have a sugar daddy or something. I've even heard that some people use other vocalists to sing underneath them in the studio, sort of 'ghost singers' to strengthen their part. Hey, if a song was that hard for me to sing, I'd give it up."

Not that Williams is likely to find singing difficult. As demonstrated on her current Top 5 R & B single, "Congratulations," her voice is remarkably supple and expressive. A gorgeous ballad, "Congratulations" tells the tale of a woman surprised by the marriage of an old beau to another woman.

Though Williams wrote the lyrics herself, the story is not autobiographical. "I never had anybody leave me at the altar, and if they had, I wouldn't have said 'congratulations,' I would've blown up the church," she says, laughing heartily. "But you have to have a plot for a song, or the 'movie' doesn't work."

Born in Coshocton, Ohio, Williams grew up with a gospel background, although she admits she was naughty in church: "My grandfather was the minister, and it seemed to me like he was always shouting when he preached, so I was a little brat in church, ruining the whole vibe," she chuckles. "But it was a place where you could be free with your feelings. The better you sing, you'd get that immediate encouragement from the congregation, and if you're not singing so well, they let you know real fast."

About a decade ago—Williams wouldn't be precise about that date or her age—she moved to Los Angeles, where she still lives with her 11-year-old daughter. Slowly building a reputation within the industry as a demo and jingle singer, Williams also spent three years on the road with Chaka Kahn singing background vocals.

"I did go to the school of [Chaka Khan](#), you know; I studied there, but I graduated! I learned what to do, and what not to do, ya know what I mean?" she said, referring to the soul diva's temperamental behavior.

Williams was finally signed to a solo deal with A & M Records, which released her eponymous debut in 1986.

After that record was released, Williams continued to do session work for artists such as Sting and Anita Baker, and even tried to take voice lessons.

"My record company wanted me to, don't ask me why," she said. "It's the chic thing to do in L.A., kind of like going to therapy. If you ask me, it's a scam. They have you sing a couple of scales to lower your confidence and charge you \$100 for a half-hour. (My instructor) wanted me to sing like an opera singer; everything was 'drop your jaw.' But that's not me."

So after one lesson, Williams decided to do it her way. On her recently released second album, "Vesta 4 U," Williams collaborated on eight of the nine tracks.

Williams finds inspiration in any number of places: "I'm good at fantasy; sometimes I enjoy taking a dive into a nice juicy fantasy that's not really about me. And I am in love right now, so I'd think about that in writing 'Sweet, Sweet Love' or 'How You Feel.'"

"And I look at the relationships around me; if you told me some of your business, I might do a song about you," she adds mischievously.

Though the current album includes several techno-dance tracks that utilize drum machines and programmed keyboards, Williams admits a preference for singing with musicians.

"I'm a new kid on the block, but I come from the old school-I enjoy singing with the real orchestra so there's another energy to feed off of. Besides, I'm blessed with the ability to finish my vocals in first or second takes, and if I'm singing with the musicians, everybody feels more willing to take chances."

For the current tour, which brings her to the Taste of Halsted festival Friday, Williams performs with five musicians and three background singers-all male.

"I believe in being the only female out there," Williams says emphatically. "Everybody has their own concept and that's mine. Sometimes women can be catty and I just didn't want that headache."

Peppering her show with impersonations of [Paula Abdul](#), Dr. Ruth Westheimer and Michael MacDonald, among others, Williams says she aims to entertain.

"It's kind of sad when people come up to me after a show and say, 'I never heard anybody sound as good as their record before.' When I go to a concert, if you can move me just once, just give me one arm full of chill bumps, I'll go home happy, and that's what I try to do for my audience."