

Let's get physics-al with the chanteuse of science

By Marc Ramirez

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There is another dimension, one where you might hear Liza Minnelli sing that "life is a cathode ray, my friend," and it is there that you'll find Lynda Williams, the Physics Chanteuse.

A physics professor at California's Santa Rosa Junior College, Williams is perhaps better known among scientists by her sassy, politics-minded alter ego, a hip-shaking mix of Sandra Bernhard and Carl Sagan.

Williams sang in Seattle last month, unleashing her campy fusion of kinetic energy, plunging necklines and pop-music parody on unsuspecting members of the Northwest Science Writers Association.



She did "Carbon is a Girl's Best Friend," which she wrote for the Physics Chanteuse's debut at the 44th annual Midwest Conference on Solid State Physics 12 years ago, and "Genie in a Bottle," whose lyrics go, in part: "If you want to have fusion, there's a price to pay; it's a genie in a bottle, at a hundred million K." We caught up with the chanteuse, who you'll find at www.scientainment.com, by phone from California.

Q: How did the Physics Chanteuse come to be?

A: I attended the American Physics Society meeting, and I had just done a one-woman show on cosmology in San Francisco, trying to explain the Big Bang. It was an epiphany, as if the goddess had just reached down to me: Why not do a show for scientists?

Q: Where did politics fit in?

A: I started out as a journalism major and disarmament activist. I started reading about science ... and then I got disillusioned. What I discovered is, people think physics is hard, but it's the easy problem — you can look in the back of the book and there's an answer. But when you're trying to solve the world's problems, like war and poverty, there's no back of the book.

Q: Were you the science-fair type in high school?

A: I was the high-school student who had the fake ID and was going out disco dancing. ... I had a telescope when I was a kid, and my girlfriends and I were super smart, but no one guided us because we were so rebellious. We didn't know what science was about; we had no idea it was asking interesting questions about the meaning of life.

Q: How do you prepare for a performance?

A: I have to do unbelievable quantities of research. ... Not only do I have the fear of performing that every performer has, I have the fear of not sounding smart in front of a room of scientific experts.

Q: Are scientists a tough audience?

A: They just don't have fun. Geologists and astronomers tend to be the most loose and easygoing. Women can be tough because they think I'm sexualizing science. ... One of our female faculty saw my show, and her comment was that I wiggle my hips too much. It's like, if you're talking science, you can't wiggle your hips.

Q: What pressures, other than atmospheric, do women face in science?

A: It's geared to the boys' club. It's still about weapons and technology. ... It's always a scientific response to problems that could go away if we could just negotiate and solve them with human diplomacy. It's like these Dr. Strangelove, bizarre Frankenstein solutions to world problems, and if you ask me, that's why more women aren't in science.

Q: Why should voters be scientifically literate?

A: We have these global crises facing us that require some level of scientific literacy, and if you don't understand, then you give your power away, and democracy fails. ... I do the Physics Chanteuse so I can talk about this stuff. Nobody was listening to me before I got up and put on a cocktail dress and sang.

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