



Ferron (Debby Foisy) (b. 1952)

by Victoria Shannon

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One of Canada's most famous folksingers and a pioneer in women's music, Ferron has been compared to Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen. One critic called her "the Johnny Cash of lesbian folksinging."

She is a poet whose mostly autobiographical lyrics touch the emotional center in listeners and call forth a connection few singers can muster. Her deep alto voice resonates with the ravages of her experiences, yet soars with courage and hope.

Among female singer/songwriters Ferron is regarded as a goddess. She has been a mentor for such other singers as Tracy Chapman and Ani DiFranco.

In a nod to her, the second season of *The L Word* featured Ferron's song *Testimony* covered by Sweet Honey in the Rock. As Bette and Tina's new baby is passed to each woman, Ferron's lyrics resonate in the background:

Listen, there are waters
Hidden from us
In the maze we find them still
We'll take you to them
You take your young ones
May they take their own in turn
But by your lives be you spirit
And by your hearts be you women
And by your eyes be you open
And by your hands be you whole.

Ferron was born Debby Foisy on June 2, 1952 in a semi-rural suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia to a working class family. She is the oldest of seven children.

Her mother's French-Canadian family was very musical. She recalls a childhood in which "I heard guitars and banjo and accordion and scrub board and my grandfather clogging. I put it together . . . music meant fun, meant love and laughter."

At fifteen, Foisy left home to escape a harsh childhood, supporting herself with jobs as a waitress, cab driver, and packing coffee in a factory.

In 1971, Foisy changed her name when one of her friends had a dream in which she was called Ferron, loosely translated from French as "iron and rust," a perfect description of her voice and material.

Ferron made her professional musical debut in 1975, playing her song "Who Loses" at a benefit for the



A portrait of Ferron by Roberto Portillo.

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Women's Press Gang, a feminist publishing house. She began singing in coffee houses like the Soft Rock Café, and acquired a reputation as an insightful songwriter and folk singer.

From her basement, Ferron recorded *Ferron* (1977) and *Ferron Backed Up* (1978). She took those albums to the Womyn's Music Festival in Michigan where she hooked up with Ladyslipper Music and started shipping albums out of her basement to the United States on her own record label, Lucy Records.

In 1978, Ferron met Gayle Scott, an American filmmaker living in Vancouver. Scott became her first and only manager, and together they produced *Testimony* (1980), *Shadows on a Dime* (1984), and *Phantom Center* (1990).

Testimony catapulted Ferron to fame, and its title track became an anthem for the feminist movement. Under Scott's management she began a concert circuit that took her all over the United States. Suzanne Vega, Tracy Chapman, and Ani DiFranco all opened for her concerts during this time.

Although Ferron knew she was a lesbian as a teenager, it took Scott's encouragement to push her out of the closet. Ferron recalls Scott telling her, "If you can't tell the truth when you have nothing to lose what do you think is going to happen when you have everything to lose?" Her audiences embraced Ferron's honesty.

When *Shadows on a Dime* was released in 1984, *Rolling Stone Magazine* bestowed a four star rating on it, calling it "a thing of beauty" and referring to Ferron as a "culture hero." The *Boston Globe* critic said, "Someday, they will call Dylan the Ferron of the '60s." Almost thirty years later, the tracks on *Shadows on a Dime* still resonate with listeners.

In 1985, Ferron was awarded a Canadian Arts grant to write music and take voice lessons, but she needed a personal leave as well. She admits to having had a drinking problem at this time. She also contracted hepatitis. When the grant money ran out, she supported herself by working as a carpenter's assistant, a bartender, and a day care worker.

In 1987, she relocated to the United States, but did not return to making music until 1990 when she released *Phantom Center*, which features backup vocals by a then unknown Tori Amos. The album was the result of her move, her personal exploration, and her arriving near the end of her thirties.

Between 1992 and 1994, Ferron released three albums on her American label, Cherrywood Station: *Not a Still Life* (1992), the instrumental *Resting with the Question* (1992), and *Driver* (1994). *Driver* was picked up by Earthbeat Records, highly praised by critics, and nominated for a Juno Award in 1995.

Warner Brothers signed Ferron in 1994 and reissued *Driver* and *Phantom Center* on their label. They also arranged an extended tour for Ferron and her band, but the deal ultimately fell through. In the end, Warner Brothers owned *Driver*, *Phantom Center*, and a new album, *Still Riot* (1996). The latter issue features Indigo Girl Emily Saliers, singers Lauren Wood and Christ Webster, violinist Scarlet Rivera, and percussionist Vicki Randle.

In 1996, Ferron received an Outmusic Award for Lifetime Achievement at the Gay & Lesbian American Music Awards. However, she was financially and emotionally broken and bruised from the Warner Brothers experience, so she took a sabbatical from performing and went to live with friends in California.

In 1999, Ferron released *Inside Out*, an album of cover songs, at a benefit for the Institute for Music Arts. On the album, Ferron covers songs that meant a great deal to her when she was growing up. Among these are "Town without Pity" and Van Morrison's "Crazy Love."

In 2000, she released *Impressionistic Ferron*, a retrospective album reprising her earlier work and including a 24-page autobiographical booklet. She continued to perform at smaller clubs and to facilitate writing workshops. In 2002, Ferron was featured in Dee Mosbacher's *Radical Harmonies*, a documentary about women's music.

In 2004, Ferron began working on the album *Turning into Beautiful* (2005), with borrowed money in a farmhouse on Saturna Island in British Columbia. The album was produced by db benedictson. The farmhouse was a place Ferron lived when she was a teenager in a foster home. She filled the farmhouse with band members from *Driver*, *Testimony*, and *Shadows on a Dime*. For Ferron, it was a coming home in "body, mind, and direction."

Turning into Beautiful is a return to basics for Ferron's music. On the album is the haunting song "Souvenir," which reappears on her 2008 album *Boulder*.

Ferron's newest CD is *Boulder* (2008), produced by out-musician Bitch (half of the punk group Bitch and Animal) on Bitch's Short Story Record label. Long an admirer of Ferron, Bitch tracked Ferron down in Three Oaks, Michigan, drove her RV to Ferron's house, and stayed until she convinced the singer to record songs on a little Mac computer with one mic.

After Ferron recorded the songs, Bitch took the recordings to her friends in the music community. Consequently, the CD includes guest appearances by Ani DiFranco, the Indigo Girls, JD Samson (Le Tigre), Sam Parton (Be Good Tanyas), Tina G (God-des), and Julie Wolf.

The CD has garnered praise from critics and long-time fans alike. As usual, Ferron's lyrics are compared to Leonard Cohen's and her now-weathered voice to Marianne Faithful's and Loretta Lynn's. But such comparisons are misleading insofar as they fail to recognize Ferron's originality. Ferron is a poet whose words come from an emotional place inside her and they reflect a unique perspective.

Bitch sees *Boulder* as a chance to bring two generations of musicians together, making the music accessible to women of all ages. Ferron and Bitch are currently touring together to promote the album, and their shows are a creative mixture of humor and artistry.

Ferron has observed, "When you wait to see what life's going to give you, life can only respond to what's going on inside." Clearly, what's going on inside Ferron these days is the same eloquence and creativity she has exhibited for over thirty years. At 55, she is a long way from the troubled 15-year-old who left home to pursue her music, but she is still following her dream.

In 2006, Ferron opened an artists' retreat for women in Three Rivers, Michigan, called "The Fen Peace and Poetry Camp for Women," a place "where women can get connected or stay connected with their creative passion."

With her partner, Marianne, Ferron has set up a mail-order business distributing her products. She says, "I think my job is to get a little bit near the edge and come back and talk about it, but I don't have to put myself over the edge. I can just live and it'll be OK."

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