

The Soundtrack of Our Awakening

I seem to have spent my entire life listening to boys talk about music. And sometimes, no matter how smart or untrivial or meaningful the boy might be, the sheer aesthetic presence of a masculine voice in record talk can get on my nerves. Because there are so many males talking, all the time, about everything, on television and on the radio, that I just get sick of men.

—Sarah Vowell, *Radio On*

We were not the first feminist musicians to sing out, but this tour jump-started a cultural phenomenon that would change the lives of hundreds of thousands of women and men; it laid the groundwork so that a dozen years later, young independent women could dominate the music industry. At the same time, millions of people never even knew it happened.

—Holly Near, *Fire in the Rain . . . Singer in the Storm*

Not wanting to identify with women's music is the same thing as not wanting to call yourself a feminist.

—Kaia Wilson, The Butchies, Co-owner, Mr. Lady Records

For more than thirty years, I've collected the work of feminist musicians and comedians who enjoyed cult status as lesbian stage performers in the

1970s, '80s, and '90s. These groundbreaking artists, earning very little in return for what they gave to the women's community, worked tirelessly as local and national activists. Against all odds, they made the subject of lesbian rights into dance music, whether on bass guitar, piano, banjo, drum kit, saxophone, horn, djembe, or flute. They lent a lesbian identity to jazz, rap, romantic ballads, electric guitar licks, African drumming, and stand-up routines. And they demanded that their audiences join them in song, drumbeat, laughter, and action. Their exhortation from concert stages and festival workshops gave countless women the courage to come out, advancing the tide of political change.

Today, however, when I ask my college students to name five openly lesbian role models, they rarely list musicians. They identify speakers, rather than singers: media icons such as Rachel Maddow, Ellen DeGeneres, Suze Orman. The lesbian celebrities they enjoy seeing on television every day are millionaires, far removed from the haybale and the sliding scale of 1970s entertainment. Except for the few who grew up with lesbian moms, none of my students know the lesbian stage musicians, comedians, and songwriters who toured nationally between 1974 and 1999—often for \$100 or less per gig.

These students gasp when I bring in a hefty three hundred–page index of the lesbian music albums and tapes produced independently through the late 1990s. The Indigo Girls and Melissa Etheridge quickly stand out as commercially familiar performers, but the class is surprised to learn that other, earlier stars of the women's music movement are not necessarily dead or retired. In fact, a majority are still touring and selling their recordings—and available for interviews. And the original albums of the women's music movement are still available (as CDs, now) through their original distribution networks, Goldenrod and Ladyslipper.

Why are so many younger women unfamiliar with the recent songbook of lesbian rock and roll; with the huge heritage of lesbian protest music? How do we understand the context for this erasure? Some of it is due to the myopia of any younger generation: what happened recently is uncool. In this chapter, I will approach the rise and fall of women's music in several ways: first, by examining its emergence as a radical and primarily nonprofit movement; next, by describing more personally what it was like to enter that subculture as a young activist myself; and finally, by noting which factors permitted the mainstreaming and normalizing of independent women in rock. It is not one but multiple factors that create amnesia concerning a rich performance culture.

What Was Women's Music?

Terms and language are instantly contested when we start inscribing any history of the LGBT movement. Encoded in the term *women's music* are multiple meanings and legacies. Was it music created by women? By feminists? By lesbian feminists? If white lesbian feminists were one driving force behind women's music in the 1970s, how and when did women of color also take the stage, entering on their own terms? And how were any lesbian musicians' contributions to the American music catalog understood, critiqued, or ignored by straight gatekeepers of rock journalism?¹

Lesbian music has layered histories. Both Angela Davis (*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*) and Lillian Faderman (*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*) have provided scholarly research on women's truth-telling blues songs of the 1920s, music primarily performed and recorded by African American blueswomen. From "B.D. [bulldagger] Women" and "Prove it on Me" to "The Boy in the Boat" (with its sly references to lesbian lovemaking), recorded songs acknowledged lesbian realities in the Roaring Twenties, the Harlem Renaissance, and two world wars that left women alone with one another on the home front. In the more repressed postwar era, we nonetheless find creative secretary Lisa Ben penning "Lesbian Lyrics" in one of America's first lesbian magazines, *Vice Versa*, which she typed and carbon-copied by hand through her secretarial job in Los Angeles beginning in 1947. Ben later recorded a 45 single for the Daughters of Bilitis organization. Born Edythe Eyde in 1921, her pseudonym was an anagram of the word lesbian. These legacies reveal the inventiveness, humor, and frankly sexual content of lesbian music long before Stonewall.

Interestingly, it seems more gay men than lesbians are familiar with Eyde; her story is kept alive by queer music archivist J. D. Doyle, who was corresponding with her as recently as 2003; and a chapter on Ben titled "Gay Gal" appears in Eric Marcus's *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights 1945–1990*. In the latter, Ben declares that she was inspired to start songwriting after feeling appalled by gay male drag performers who made fun of women and butch lesbians: "I thought, well, I'm going to write some gay parodies, and they're going to be gay, but they're not going to be demeaning." Later in the interview she calls herself a separatist, qualifying that for her, at that time, this meant "I never sang my gay parodies for straight people."²

The women's music genre associated with the 1970s drew lessons from the civil rights movement, which revived and relied on the black

tradition of freedom songs. What would later be called protest music was often led by women, who did not necessarily identify as lesbians but who, like civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon, saw music as a way to take a stand. Reagon (who eventually formed the group Sweet Honey in the Rock) included folk singers Pete Seeger and Ronnie Gilbert, from the earlier group The Weavers, among her earliest political influences: these performers, investigated and banned by the House UnAmerican Activities Committee during the 1950s, were contemporary white musicians willing to go to jail for a cause. The civil rights freedom songs that Reagon and other women added to the American songbook soon blended with the sound of antiwar concerts and speeches. Holly Near, who toured Vietnam with Jane Fonda and appeared onstage with Judy Collins, became one of many female antiwar artists forced to confront sexism within the progressive movement. Throughout the radical 1960s, political action and theory remained dominated by charismatic male leaders, men who did not necessarily see the wisdom of sharing their microphone time with “chicks.”

In search of original subject matter that reflected women’s authenticity, feminists with roots in the civil rights and peace struggles gradually found one another and began a new musical journey—one that surprised their male comrades. In 1971, the Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band formed in part to critique the often violent tropes in male rock and roll. The band offered a counterpoint to popular songs that brutalized women. Interviewed for the women’s music documentary *Radical Harmonies*, musician Jennifer Abod recalls that her Chicago band member Naomi Weisstein was incensed by the Rolling Stones’ hit “Under My Thumb,” explaining “She wanted to get the word out to every fourteen-year-old girl, and the way to do that was through rock music.” Abod, who also played in the New Haven Women’s Liberation Rock Band, remembers performing on Women’s Equality Day (August 26, 1970) for a women-only audience in New Haven: “We played at the DKE fraternity house at Yale University, which we thought ironic since most of us were dykes.”³

What followed was an avalanche of lesbian and feminist performers who took the protest music of the 1960s to a new level of politically charged content, with lived female experiences—and oppression—as the focus. During the four years between 1971 and 1975, key elements defining *womyn’s music* emerged, and they emerged simultaneously on the East Coast, the West Coast, and the heartland of the Midwest. The sound of confrontational feminist rock began with *Mountain Moving Day*, a release by two bands (Chicago Women’s Liberation Rock Band and

the New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band) on Rounder Records. It was followed by two provocative lesbian-themed albums, both produced independently: Maxine Feldman's single *Angry Atthis*, produced by Robin Tyler in 1972, and Alix Dobkin's LP *Lavender Jane Loves Women*, famously taped in one day in 1973 (thanks to engineer Marilyn Ries's access to a spoken-word recording studio). The following year saw the founding of the two most influential record companies in women's music: Redwood Records and Olivia Records. Olivia's record *The Changer and the Changed*, by Cris Williamson, sold up to eighty thousand copies in its first year, although Judy Dlugacz recalls, "The honest truth is if we knew what we were doing, we never would've done it. If we knew what it would take to be an independent record company with this lesbian part to it—with no money and no knowledge of how to do it—it would've been insane."⁴ *Changer*, which recently celebrated its fortieth year in print, awakened four decades of audiences to the possibility of owning lesbian-identified music.

Between 1974 and 1975, the growing popularity of women's music spawned three more significant institutions, expanding fans' access to the music while keeping control of production in women's hands. These new elements were women's music festivals, women-only sound companies, and women-only album distribution companies. Following earlier gatherings at Sacramento State and San Diego State universities, the first full-length women's music festival met on the campus of the University of Illinois in 1974. It was produced by Kristin Lems (a feminist, though not lesbian herself). Incensed by a recent folk festival that featured no female artists, Lems and her staff ended up institutionalizing lesbian artists as new stars of women's music. By 1975, Boden Sandstrom's WomanSound company and the Goldenrod music distribution network were in place (later joined by Ladyslipper), able to deliver the sound and product of lesbian culture to any venue: stage, park, campground, bookstore, church basement, private living room. There was no stopping the tide. One independent band, The Deadly Nightshade, whose members included lesbians and whose music was overtly feminist, released a women's liberation anthem on Phantom Records that actually enjoyed airplay on commercial radio in 1975: "High Flying Woman."

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the surest way to meet other lesbians—outside of bars and softball tournaments—was to attend a women's music concert. Decked out in brocade vests and clean flannel shirts, sporting pins that declared WE ARE EVERYWHERE, smiling women stood in line for performances by Margie Adam, Gwen Avery, The Berkeley Women's Music Collective, Meg Christian, Ginni

Clemmens, Casse Culver, Alix Dobkin, Therese Edell, Maxine Feldman, Sue Fink, Robin Flower, Deidre McCalla, June Millington, Holly Near, Betsy Rose, Woody Simmons, Linda Tillery, Teresa Trull, Vicki Randle, Mary Watkins, Cris Williamson, and dozens of other music and comedy artists. What made this cultural phenomenon so successful? Why did even the most closeted, underpaid lesbians eagerly fork over hard-earned money to sit on a folding chair or a Unitarian church pew at an event where no alcohol was served? On those rows of folding chairs, revolution was brewing: the sound of words affirming women who loved women, and the sight of competent stage and sound technicians who also were strong females. These lesbian role models spoke their truths into microphones onstage, turning woman-identified pride into top-selling albums and event nights nationwide.

From these origins in clubs and college campuses, the women's music movement of the 1970s grew as a defiant counterpoint to the limited roles and opportunities for female artists in the male-dominated recording industry. It spread to every city where self-taught producers dared to bring in artists. Every region soon had its signature "local" performer: Libby Roderick in Alaska, Lucie Blue Tremblay in Montreal. North America's remotest provinces hosted romantic and radical lesbian entertainers in a secret subculture known mostly to insiders. Every issue that the mainstream press distorted (or did not report on at all) in the women's movement was addressed, directly, in speech and song, by lesbian artists. The transmission of a feminist message by women to women included a specific set of practices that were also political: sliding-scale admission prices for low-income women (around the same time that Ticketmaster began making it impossible to see Tina Turner unless one had a trust fund); the naming and unlearning of racism and sexism; sign language interpretation at concerts and up-front seating areas for deaf or disabled fans; and intentionally diverse stage lineups. Holly Near recalls performing openly lesbian music with Meg Christian at the California Institute for Women, a prison concert arranged by women's music scholar Karlene Faith.⁵ The initially all-white lineup of the 1975 "Women on Wheels" tour, which featured Margie Adam, Meg Christian, Holly Near, and Cris Williamson, was soon answered by the "Varied Voices of Black Women" tour, which Olivia Records produced and the all-woman Roadwork production company booked. Featuring Gwen Avery, Pat Parker, Linda Tillery, and Mary Watkins, this tour brought poetry as well as jazz, blues, and piano to the women's music audience. Olivia Records released one of the first-ever spoken word albums, pairing white lesbian poet Judy Grahn with black lesbian poet Pat Parker for the historic poetry record-

ing “Where Would I Be Without You?” in 1976, America’s Bicentennial year. And Holly Near established Redwood Records in order to bring the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock—led by Bernice Johnson Reagon—to a larger audience base.

With in-your-face lyrics critical of patriarchy and male privilege, few artists expected to please male fans or mainstream critics, and the new issue of separatism fueled endless debate: Should men even be allowed at concerts? What about men from the Left, men some women considered comrades and allies? This conflict exploded at the very first festival, National, in 1974, where performer Meg Christian asked that her audience be women-only. Soon, production companies that had formed to promote women’s music concerts developed broadsheets and flyers to explain, in differing ways, the rationale of women-only space.

This concert is for women only. It is important that you understand why. Women must have an opportunity to come together to develop our culture as part of the process of taking control of our lives. . . . For women who have been raped, beaten, deserted, fired, misled, manipulated, discriminated against, had their children taken away, etc., the man at the concert may trigger pain even if he is the nicest guy in town. . . . Men can offer support by staying away and encouraging other men not to go. They can offer to do child-care, sponsor an event for men so that men can also build a non-sexist culture. (Oven Productions)

The atmosphere of a women-only event is different. It often allows us to experience a new level of support from other women, and it provides a time to relax with each other without needing to explain or defend our ideas to men. . . . If a performer requests a women-only audience, to develop and sustain communication and intimacy, we must respect that in deciding to produce her. Feminist and lesbian singers often perform materials that makes them very vulnerable; they have the right to choose their audience. (Lucina’s Music collective, Atlanta)

The political reaction to women’s music depended upon whether one heard its delivery and its stance as pro-female or anti-male. Holly Near, whose own work spanned the debate and called for revolution as well as alliance building, captured the meld of protest and romance in

her song refrain “We are a gentle, angry people, and we are singing for our lives.” Her career reflected the rapid pace of change, from a 1973 appearance on *The Partridge Family*, in which her character’s response to being asked out by a boy was “Now I’m a sex symbol!” to one year later handing out flyers at the National Women’s Music Festival, explaining why “women only space was not discriminatory. I felt absolutely sure about that. . . . I asked that those men who did not understand or who disagreed take the seats in the back of the auditorium so that women could fill up the front and feel surrounded by women during the concert.”⁶

In the same way that rock and roll changed the American landscape forever and launched a youth revolution with a recognizable set of values, fashions, and products, radical feminist culture created an art form—a central and commodified pro-lesbian *experience* that newly out women could plan, schedule, attend, purchase, savor, and bring home to replay over and over. Prior to the expansion of any other feel-good messages about lesbian life and identity, “womyn’s” cultural events generated pride in three ways: they brought women together in multigenerational social mixers, a welcome alternative to bar nights for the underage and sober; they made it possible for a talented pool of artists, musicians, speakers, and producers to earn a living creating entertainment by and for lesbians; and they constructed role models at a time when, in the words of lesbian photographer Joan Biren, “There was nothing in the culture that nourished us.”⁷ The fact that bars had long been one of the only gathering spaces in isolated gay communities played a definite role in fostering alcoholism for the pre-Stonewall generation. Thus, the often lampooned statement that women’s music was “healing” held a real truth for those combating dependence on alcohol and drugs; at least one women’s music festival, Gulf Coast in Mississippi, was deliberately substance-free.

Together, the performers, producers, album distributors, and fans supporting this underground-yet-visible subculture forged a network of accessible celebrities, at a time when almost no other performers or politicians were out. The movement talked back to sexism in the male-dominated music industry by establishing alternative performance sites and distribution channels for artists too radical for mainstream venues (and radio airwaves.) Eventually, feminist radio shows (often affiliated with student-run university stations) played a role in introducing the music from Olivia Records and Redwood Records; and with the advent of tape cassette releases, women could drive to and from work listening to lesbian music.

This transformation of a daily commute (or a trip across country, or just across town to visit homophobic relatives) into a personal lesbian

concert space was a portable affirmation of self that had never before existed. Once the music could travel companionably through otherwise unfriendly environments, lesbians gained an unquantifiable advocate. Owning such treasured cassette tapes heightened a sense of belonging to a larger national, even global, community. The new material culture of lesbian identity, however, could also be a threat. A lesbian music tape or concert tickets left behind in the office desk of a closeted employee effectively outed her. One lesbian historian recalled a friend who, in the late 1970s, survived a serious car accident. This friend had been playing a lesbian music cassette in her car at the moment of collision, and though badly injured, was desperately concerned that rescue workers would see or hear the tape and reveal her sexual orientation to her family.

Those who dominated the concert and festival circuit for the next twenty-five years created the soundtrack for an era, their songs and albums intrinsically woven into many women's coming-out experiences and relationships. The women's music oeuvre thus served multiple purposes: its catalogue offered a veritable Motown of lesbian make-out material, and it energized feminist patrons of the arts to discover and promote new performers to keep stage lineups diverse and fresh. "Have you heard *her* music? Let me play you this album!" served as a fair opening line for political bragging rights and for seduction as well, two imperatives often conflated in the heady days of lesbian feminism.

In an environment melding political engagement with seduction, artists were also encountering one another, whether in romance or confrontation: playing together, falling in love, breaking up, penning songs about exes. Offstage, this ever-shifting climate of intense relationships and controversies could and did create fallout. Moreover, an audience receptive to new music about lesbian lives might overlook gifted instrumentalists while applauding any lyric with the word *lesbian*, and even reviewers judged instrumental recordings by a feminist yardstick. These factors gradually alienated some very talented artists. Banjo player and composer Woody Simmons, who released two popular albums, played on others, and engineered still more, was singled out for praise in the *New Yorker* by critic Ellen Willis in her review of the first National Women's Music Festival. In her own reflections, Woody remains careful not to idealize the early years of women's music, mindful that selective memory can gloss over the harder truths from an era of competitive touring:

I was so young and not at all experienced with politics or socializing. At first I was excited to be associated with all the women I met who were contributing to this women's

music network. When I first toured with the Clinch Mountain Backsteppers, it was 1974 and we were sometimes the first artists to be produced by the newly emerging women producers; sometimes at colleges, sometimes at clubs or bars. It was like one big slumber party, touring cross-country in a van, staying on producers' couches or floors. It helped to be young.

I remember it not being as exciting or glamorous as I thought it should be. I felt like I was the only sane one around. The more I toured, the more I would encounter the politics of women's music or lesbian culture and I became more and more disenfranchised. I played at festivals many times in the 70s and 80s and saw how women would bring their anger along with their good intentions. I suppose it's easier to protest against those who have little power than taking it to the real cause of their plight in life, the world of men. There was a lot of cocaine at the festivals. And there was so much disagreement as to who was more oppressed. I wanted more from the women involved with the music: I wanted more love and less ego; I wanted to be accepted for who I was and not judged for wanting less conflict, less drug use, less self-centeredness. All any of us were trying to do was to empower ourselves; but that meant empowering ourselves within our small pond. So it was that I stopped touring in 1983. But for all the drama that took place at women's festivals all over the U.S., we did not resort to violence against one another. Part of our agenda was that we did not want to emulate men.⁸

The quickly established dominance of the "big four" (Margie Adam, Meg Christian, Holly Near, and Cris Williamson) did push other artists to the side, if not intentionally. Both fans and producers enabled a star system to flourish, in part because production companies depended upon fronting a few recognizable names to draw audiences. However, much of the culture remained impressively intimate and antihierarchical for decades, so that audiences were able to meet many of their favorite performers through personal encounters. In her memoir *Fire in the Rain . . . Singer in the Storm*, Holly Near recalls thinking, "My God—we are the Beatles of the women's movement!" but she and other popular artists were not whisked into a limo after performing. They came right off the stage, talking to and eating lunch with fans, offering workshops on songwriting and producing. And as late as the mid-1990s, some twenty

years later, stars such as Margie Adam routinely earned no more than \$600 for headlining a small festival. The culture offered a complex mix of socialist and capitalist messages.

At festivals, artists such as Meg Christian and Therese Edell pitched in to do the much-hyped work shifts necessary for smooth and secure operation. One might end up chopping carrots next to a concert headliner.⁹ This proximity to the artists also broke down the alienation that lesbians so often experienced in other audiences. Since no other leaders were directly addressing lesbians' interests or treating them as an intelligent, worthy demographic, many an isolated women felt that a sympathetic musician was *speaking directly to her*. This, combined with the ease of meeting a performer, did lead a few fans to stalk or harass their favorites, and suddenly new discussions were launched about protecting lesbian artists.

Fans reacted powerfully because the women's music message was powerful. This movement was very much about the right to love. As talented entertainers, lesbian singer-songwriters invoked moods and penned lyrics for every romantic feeling between women, naming stages of female partnership that were acknowledged nowhere else in pop culture. When the "womyn's music" *sound* is jeered at, today (in various contexts put down as treachery), we forget that nearly all women and men in every society grow up with access to heteronormative songs and lyrics from cradle onward. Lesbian musicians scrambled to write songs for every possible narrative of a lesbian's life—girlhood, adolescence, coming out, coupledom, breakup, partner loss, discrimination—yet were held to impossibly high standards (by critics who grew up with dubious teen-love ballads such as "Go Away, Little Girl"). Certainly, an amateur artist singing about the newfound power of her relationship could produce music that was politically driven and undanceable, which was feminist rock critic Ellen Willis's complaint. In her 1975 essay "After the Flood," Willis expressed these reservations:

Why did I like so little of the women's-culture music I had heard? The feminist music scene . . . was a women's version of political folk music, which replicated all the virtues (simplicity, intimacy, community) and all the faults (sentimentality, insularity, heavy rhetoric) of the genre. Some of it was fun to listen to, but the idiom was too well worn to promise anything exciting or original. . . . What disturbed me most . . . was that so much of it was conventionally feminine.¹⁰

Looking back at those early years of radical performance, women's music publisher and activist Toni Armstrong Jr reflected, "Many [artists] weren't talented enough for mainstream exposure, but women's music audiences were willing to overlook lack of skill in exchange for overtly lesbian or feminist entertainment."¹¹ Of course, *men* performing protest music with a political edge had not always sounded coherent or tuneful either, but the appeal of the charismatic outlaw male sold records to idealistic teen girls, as well as to other would-be male rebels. As Tara Rodgers addresses in her book *Pink Noises*, women additionally lacked access to the musical experimentation and study granted more freely to men throughout history.

Despite critics' swift stereotyping of women's music as white-girl-with-guitar, concerts and festivals could and did offer a wide range of musically fresh bands with chops. This was due in no small part to the influx of talented players who *weren't* being hired as rock or R&B session musicians by mainstream companies whose studio heads refused to consider female drummers, bass players, cellists. Meanwhile, classically trained musician Kay Gardner (who played flute on Alix Dobkin's album *Lavender Jane Loves Women*) explored the roots of female vocals, harmonies, and tonal structures in her work: onstage, in workshops, and in her book *Sounding the Inner Landscape*. Gardner's argument that women's music employed different sound structures than men's was an exciting theory in an era of artistic radicalism, when many feminists were rediscovering works by forgotten foremothers. (Judy Chicago's electrifying installation "The Dinner Party" appeared in this same time, with place settings dedicated to overlooked female artists throughout history.) What became known as a *gynocentric* approach to art, writing, and music informed the structures Kay Gardner and others brought to women's music staging; in this way, the movement gained theorists, composers, and scholars who lent their expertise to concerts.¹²

Cultural research aside, concerts were a novel, affordable date night that couples could look forward to; they were places for newly out and/or single lesbians to encounter each other; and as large-scale community events they served as radical awakenings for entire audiences. Every revolution needs anthems, and a charismatic performer could transform a crowd into a thousand activists—instantly.¹³ When LGBT activists find the courage to sing a more empowered song today, it's partly due to all those concerts in the 1970s, '80s and '90s, which galvanized women to "go forth" (in the words of popular performer Margie Adam, who sang that motto right at the White House gates in the early 1980s).

At the time, it was still dangerous to gather in such large groups, when just being seen (and possibly outed) could lead to street harassment, loss of one's job, threats to child custody, being disowned by family. Butch-appearing women in particular were familiar with the risks of attracting attention by entering a "known" lesbian venue. Yet so many women were desperate for positive reflections of lesbian life that just to be at a lesbian-majority event was thrilling; actually enlightening. Joining together to create this temporary majority at women-only concerts allowed audiences to experience (for the first time) an environment where lesbians were in charge of what was said about lesbian lives.¹⁴ Producer Ginny Berson, a co-founder of the Olivia Records collective, summed it up: "In many cases, it was the first time women were seeing the entirety of the community—that oh, my GOD, we can *fill this room!*"¹⁵ Concerts and women's music festivals, as destinations, blurred the line between private house party and the occupation of public space. They also played important political roles in showcasing the sheer ethnic and racial diversity of the women's community; to forge any sort of unified "us," women would have to cross other identity boundaries. This was a wake-up call¹⁶ to many isolated women. At women's music festivals, in particular, which eventually drew crowds of six to eight thousand, lesbians met their counterparts from every state and country. Just knowing a dyke who had a New Zealand accent or an Alaska license plate expanded consciousness. Few who attended the Michigan festival in 1992 have forgotten the small woman who, grabbing the stage microphone during the International Welcome ceremony, shouted "HI! I'M A LITTLE DYKE FROM BURMA." Moreover, gatherings such as concerts and festivals where performers intentionally sang about the rituals and stages of women's lives broke down barriers of age, as well as race and class. In her memoir *The Notebooks That Emma Gave Me*, Kady Van Deurs, fondly known at many festivals throughout the 1980s and '90s as "Kady the Battle-ax Lady," described the awed following she attracted while attending the very first Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in 1976:

Last week, in Michigan, at the Women's Music Festival, young women kept coming up to me and saying, "Do you mind if I take your picture?" I said, "I'd love it." They said, "You are so beautiful." "Yes, I know." And I do know. Louise says, "It must be that they have never seen such an old dyke." Oh, yes, I see those brown spots all over my face and hands. I feel the bones pushing against skin . . .¹⁷

As their audiences grew in size and diversity, artists ranging from Holly Near to Alix Dobkin and Casselberry-Dupree intentionally used the stage to convey information about El Salvador, anti-Semitism, apartheid, African American women's music heritage, and much more. Songs directly confronted black and white friendship struggles, or the hidden subject of incest. Decades before social media and the Internet, concerts were sites for organizing, nights when it was briefly possible to build community action networks or find support for causes. But if the women's music movement seemed didactic to some, with performers often chastising their audiences as they taught them, the music was more often comforting to those whose own families had rejected them (or merely withheld approval for long-term relationships). In celebrating the life stages of love, the movement was a substitute parent for millions. Slowly and thoroughly, the lesbian music scene produced a better-informed army of Amazons, women soon politically and emotionally quipped to enact steady gains in legal rights. The soundtrack for coming out and falling in love was also the soundtrack for coalition.

Notes from the Third Row: Experiencing the Heyday of Lesbian Concerts

What was my personal point of entry into this culture? During the most dramatic year of women's music production and expansion, 1974–75, I was a sullen eighth grader in a Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C. The founding of Olivia Records had just been plotted in the nation's oldest continually operating lesbian bar, Phase One, not twenty minutes' drive from my front steps; and at one point that year I unwittingly walked right past Meg Christian, Margie Adam, and Cris Williamson while they performed at the women's arts festival in nearby Glen Echo Park. I lost a first encounter with their music on that day because I was busy shopping for a women's symbol necklace, which I wore to school for the rest of junior high. Though out as a young feminist at thirteen, I would not have believed that one day I'd be the historian writing about those lesbian artists onstage. However, there was something in my school knapsack that day that would serve to connect us all later on, once I was ready to come out. By 1974 I was already carrying a spiral notebook and fountain pen everywhere I went.

As soon as I found my way to lesbian performance culture, as an out and awakened eighteen-year-old in 1980, my journal described everything I encountered. By my sophomore year of college I was writing

page after page during women's music concerts and festivals. Though I was neither a musician nor dating anyone in a band, I felt there was a role for me, somehow, in lesbian rock and roll; I would simply have to invent it. For the next three decades, I tape recorded, transcribed, and described what I observed being sung, beseeched, ranted, and sold at concerts, festivals, rallies, and women's spaces promoting "our" artists. I would be the scribe in this new tribe, for no one knew if it would last—it might disappear, like the jazz age, like the era of big-band swing. I wanted to bottle it like wine.

Those well-worn notebooks now remind me that when I came out, during my first year of college, there were no out lesbians on entertainment television. Prime time had no representation or discussion of gay youth and no images of women who lived with and loved other women (except for Gena Rowlands losing child custody in the sobering made-for-TV movie *A Question of Love*). There were few successful LGBT grown-ups to look up to; no famous lesbians in history identified as such in schoolbooks; no school support groups, hotlines, or resources for bullied, questioning, or activist LGBT teens. Girls my age who came out were still being locked up in psychiatric centers (of dubious standards) by their own parents.

I'd been listening to women's folk music albums for years—my mother's treasured volumes of Joan Baez and Judy Collins—and I already enjoyed the sound of female folksingers on my record player, the way that every American kid claims a favorite genre by the time they have their first radio, or stereo, or headset. Folk music was my bin in the record store. It had served well enough as music of rebellion, of awakening and conscious sexual desire. Still, no lyric I'd ever heard spoke directly to my continuum of girl-liking feelings, from A to Z, the way straight kids were able to progress from bubble-gum music to more mature material by starting out with a Donny Osmond song. Where was any woman's voice singing about a future in the arms of another woman? Not on Top 40. Not on FM. All one found, night after night on radio, was music in which men lusted for women so badly they sometimes ended up killing them. Eventually, a friend handed me Cris Williamson's LP *The Changer and the Changed*.

Now what? At the very moment when my cousin Shannon and I were picking up our (landline, rotary) phones to tell one another "I am gay," right-wing politicians emerged, ready to turn back the clock of progress. The new Reagan administration quickly launched a flurry of antifeminist bills: the Family Protection Act, the Hyde Amendment, Proposition Twelve in California (which would have banned all gay

teachers from the classroom). The Moral Majority solidified an evangelical political base, one still wielding power today. AIDS became first a tentative rumor, then a death sentence, leading to panic and even more homophobic backlash; an entire generation of brilliant gay men began to pass from our midst, with the White House never addressing that crisis in terms of its impact on lost lives. For gay men, it was an era of death, a rollback of so many gains made since the Stonewall riots in June 1969. As Andrew Sullivan wrote, “The entire structure of emergent gay culture—sexual, radical, subversive—met a virus that killed almost everyone it touched. Virtually the entire generation that pioneered gay culture was wiped out—quickly.”¹⁸ This view of “gay culture” is entirely masculine, lacking any hint of lesbians as pioneering actors; yet it illustrates a key point. In this peculiar historical parentheses, sex between men was demonized anew while lesbians were all but invisible—except in traditional female roles as grieving nurses and caregivers to men.

However, for my generation of women just coming out, the 1980s were a dynamic decade, a time when all over the United States, feisty women’s bands were onstage at concerts, promoting same-sex love. No decade could more poignantly illustrate the vast gulf between male and female identity politics in what is now lumped together as LGBT (or *queer*.) One of the most powerful achievements of the lesbian feminist movement at that time was new access to women’s history, and that included rediscovering “lost” women artists and writers and composers, celebrating their lives in song. The academic wing of the movement brought women’s studies scholars and women’s music artists together at concerts and festivals; learned musicologists, such as Catherine Roma in Cincinnati, directed local feminist choruses. While gay men mourned, lesbians sang, and although lesbians were enormously involved in caring for people with AIDS, often present in gay men’s lives, many lesbian events were off limits to gay men, further removing what the women’s community accomplished from the view of gay male critics and historians such as Sullivan.

Our coming out was a mix tape. There were so many new names and album titles and references (and phone numbers!) to exchange: a wild juncture in time when we suddenly gained a history, but still lacked an Internet. Everywhere, it seemed, women were writing in their journals. Journal entries became song lyrics and manifesta; word after word after word in service to that shared, surging feeling of discovery. Publications followed; and women’s bookstores mushroomed in every city. Thus, in my own journals, I struggled to describe the whole deliciously uncontainable scene.

I quickly learned that my journal wasn't appreciated inside gay bars, where everyone assumed I was some sort of informer/agent. The question was whether I could get away with discreet journal entries at the women's music concerts where I was spending all my time and money. Producers and artists sternly requested no flash photography and no tape recording at concerts (though this was well before anyone in an audience owned a personal video recorder, let alone a modern Smartphone). But no one said a wide-eyed baby dyke couldn't write longhand about what she was seeing and hearing onstage, and how it made her feel. What I often ended up writing, over and over, was this line: "It feels like pure protein coming in." The exhortation to action we were hearing from performers onstage was not fluffy-lite girl-group pop. This message had heft. It *was* meaty, muscular, sustaining; we were all expected to get up and put our biceps to the wheel of feminist revolution: a work ethic expressed by the denim overalls so many activists wore in those years. Other grassroots folk concerts in the movement years of the 1960s also had this ethos of urging the audience to get involved—politically, of course. Women's music events had the additional quality of being conspicuously anticonsumer. Instead, each individual was asked to become a producer—of the next concert; finding the next venue, in the next city, for touring artists. If no church basement was available, then how about offering a house concert right from your living room?

I knew it looked rude to write throughout an artist's performance, but in the beginning I wrote page after page because I truly couldn't believe what was happening. At a point when I had never been shown a single self-identified gay woman on TV, attended a Pride rally, or entered a gay bar that held more than a handful of women, just being in a room with one hundred lesbians had all of the *Is this really happening?* incredulity of the Apollo moon landing. Many, if not all, movers and shakers in the movement later granted interviews where they too mentioned this "tipping point" of being in a gathering of more than the eight women you knew personally. Would the movement last? Who knew?—and I certainly wasn't going to miss the opportunity to write about it while sitting in it, just as I relished travel writing as an act of proven participation: see where I am. This was travel to a different place altogether; entries that might as well begin with *I am climbing Mount Lesbos*.

Many women's music fans bought or heard the albums before actually attending their first Holly Near or Cris Williamson concert; we already had a personal relationship to these songs, which we'd played over and over (on a turntable, remember) while lying in bed with the lights off, swept up in the possibility of lesbian love. If it was pleasant to write mush

in a journal while listening to music at home, wouldn't the writing hand tingle to write during the women's music concert, too? Or was I the only one tingling in the writing hand, rather than in other body parts, at her first lesbian concert? At nineteen, here's what I wrote about my first time.

March 25, 1981. The concert atmosphere was wonderful—WOW, I'd say there were at least 250 gay women there—talking, giggling, smoking, boozing, hugging, kissing, eating pizza, reading or distributing leftist literature, carrying backpacks and wool parkas and beer bottles, wearing berets, Women's Center t-shirts, jeans, jumpers, peasant skirts, bandannas, overalls, tweed blazers. M. told me I was beautiful, I gave her a massage, she kissed my hand. At every table this same energy was taking place. I sat and watched what felt like millions of woman-woman couples hug, kiss, smile and gaze at each other—I cannot explain the euphoria of finally being in a public place surrounded by women loving women. And I was actually holding a woman I love just like everyone else. Eventually I summoned the courage to put my arm around her. She took my hand, and energy sizzled along my arm into her fingers. Onstage the sign language interpreters presented poems and songs in sign, and the audience went wild, as most of us had never seen music signed before, in such perfect rhythm and beauty, with graceful, fluid arms and wide-awake faces. The hearing women cheered and applauded; the deaf audience members had their arms out extending the "I Love You" sign. But we remained holding hands until we had to let go to applaud at the very end. I felt strong and proud as I walked to the car afterwards. WE WILL SURVIVE!

We can agree that this entry hits every painful cliché of the young lesbian at her first women's music concert, right down to the introduction to ASL etiquette, and adopting that popular WE WILL SURVIVE slogan, which appeared on buttons and T-shirts for years. It's important to remember that *no* mainstream magazine, radio program, or book reported on the women's music scene; with no representation in popular culture, women had no preparation for what to expect once they ventured out to that first concert or festival. The sheer shock value (sensory as well as political) is what made first-time immersion so stupefying: Women playing bass! Women mixing sound! Women under stage lighting without makeup! Consider that even a social recluse would be

exposed to the sight and sound of male rock bands via American television programs during that same era. Schoolchildren too young to attend any actual concerts first “saw” boy bands (and ultra-feminine girl groups) on Saturday morning kids’ TV programs throughout the 1960s and ’70s: gender-normative rock and roll exemplified by industry-packaged bands such as The Monkees, The Banana Splits, The Jackson Five, Josie and The Pussycats. Even on PBS, with hip educational shows like *Fraggle Rock* and *Schoolhouse Rock*, one was more likely to encounter a frog or a bear or a chimp playing bass than a woman.

Almost no men reported on the women’s music movement; certainly not the staff of *Creem* or *Rolling Stone*. Some fans and supporters who were in fact journalists avoided writing reviews to protect the location of women’s music festivals and concerts from antigay violence. One relied on word of mouth, the underground women’s press, posters wheat-pasted onto urban phone poles in the dead of night, and, eventually, a few independent journals such as *Musica*, *Paid My Dues* and *HOT WIRE: The Journal of Women’s Music and Culture*. Feminist radio programs like *Sophie’s Parlor* in Washington, D.C. and *Amazon Radio* in Philadelphia introduced women’s music albums to area listeners, as did many college campus radio stations.¹⁹ Even *Ms.*, in its mission of authentic feminist journalism, did not report on women’s music festivals; Cris Williamson finally appeared on one cover in fall 1980, next to Nancy and Ann Wilson of Heart, under the headline “New Stars of Women’s Music.” New? Cris had had a best-selling album since 1974—the same year *Ms.* ran a piece lamenting sexism in men’s rock, “Can a Feminist Love the World’s Greatest Rock and Roll Band?”²⁰ Readers of *Ms.* did write in request more or better representation of emerging lesbian artists. Dian Hamilton complained in 1978, “What we need is more coverage of women who are not covered by male media. This means more coverage of lesbian-identified artists. . . . I suggest that your writers do more research to find out what’s really happening in wimmin’s communities across the country. Good luck in becoming more woman identified.”²¹ And in February 1982, an anonymous reader told *Ms.* “about this sexually bigoted world we live in. My fiancé is a radio announcer. . . . On a few occasions, I have helped him out on his show by selecting the music. He informed me he was taught at [Brown Institute in Minneapolis] and instructed by the station’s program directors never to play two records back to back that were by female artists.”²²

Well aware of the mainstream’s reluctance to publicize lesbian artists, I felt an almost moral obligation to record what I was experiencing; to preserve these images of a revolution mainstream history books would

never mention. I did go on, later, to write for *HOT WIRE*, finding a mentor in editor Toni Armstrong Jr. At my first women's music concert, one question nagged at me: How would I write things down while holding a woman's hand? Was I in the movement—or in the moment—to be historian or lover? That conflict more or less informed my life in feminism for the next thirty years. I would love women when and where I could; but something was happening that had to be described.

By the end of the 1980s, despite a more media-savvy gay and lesbian rights movement, just a few lesbian artists had made the transition from women's music subculture to mainstream media visibility. College and radio audiences embracing the music of Tracy Chapman, Melissa Etheridge, and the Indigo Girls were not initially aware of the artists' sexual orientation—or that all four had played onstage, in their early years, at radical women-only festivals around the country. The leap to what Margie Adam termed “overground” success was so rare that, having seen Tracy Chapman perform live on the day stage at Michigan in 1987, my friends and I almost couldn't believe what we heard in fall 1988: the industry release of Chapman's hit “Fast Car” broadcast over the speakers in Boscov's Department Store in downtown Binghamton, New York. During that same autumn, k.d. lang suddenly appeared on network television.

The acceleration of a few artists in the late 1980s belied ongoing inattention to talented women in music. In *She-Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul*, author Lucy O'Brien notes, “The three main British summer festivals in 1993 were a good indicator of how, in the year of Riot Grrrl and the frenzied gender debate, women were progressing. Out of 103 bands at the Phoenix event in Stratford-on-Avon, there was a total of four female acts. . . . Reading had six out of sixty and Glastonbury had the edge with ten out of eighty acts.”²³ If O'Brien was familiar with the sexism that buried existing women's bands, some of her contemporaries believed women never performed in in any hardcore and punk before the mid-1990s. Although lesbian artists from L.A.'s Phranc to the U.K.'s Lora Logic of X-Ray Specs began as punks (I was corresponding with Lora Logic during 1981–82), D.C. punk activist Jenny Toomey felt comfortable saying in a 1994 interview, “I took some feminism classes and realized that it wasn't an accident that I wasn't in bands. 'Cause the fact of the matter is, there weren't any role models, there weren't any women who were in bands at the time.”²⁴ In fact, several East Coast festivals featured punk dyke acts like Squeeze Louise and Mary Gemini in the early 1980s. The Riot Grrrl movement of the mid-1990s soon satisfied young women's desire for an “angrier” sound, but O'Brien noted it came at a cost of setting aside the very