berkeley female music collective

This interview was done last February when the Berkeley Women's Music Festival was a part of their tour. Members of the Collective are Nancy Vogl, Debbie Lempka, Susan Scharbash, and Liz Bender. The interview was done by Carol Edelson and Phyllis Seltzer.

Q: How often do you practice?

N: We used to practice four days a week for about a year. It took us that long to get 15 songs. We'd also talk. The band has been a way for us to get to know each other, to get better at singing together and being friends and knowing each other. It's not all time spent practicing. We talk and work things out with each other.

Q: What is the process of deciding what you are going to play?

D: What we try to do is to give everyone a balance of songs to sing. Everyone sings lead on the songs she has written. Nancy Henderson hasn't written as many songs so she sings songs that another woman has written.

Q: Everyone discusses what our priorities are for the next song we do, new topics we haven't covered yet. If it's an especially new thing that we haven't said anything about, that song is pushed.

N: We go through all the words of a song and try to think of all the different ways it can be interpreted. We try to make sure that the thing we are singing is the main thing that gets across. I think we try to be conscious and responsible to the people who listen to us and we don't just get up there and say OK, here we are. We try to be responsible to how they relate to us, and make sure that what we are saying is really true.

Q: If you say anything antithetical we assume we will hear and accept.

N: We spend a lot of time talking about our politics and what we are going to say.

Q: What do we do is try to arrange our priorities and give each person as much space as she needs to really hash out something. A lot of times we get into huge arguments because we just can't see what the other person is trying to say, and really just defending what we want. Sometimes it's not a question of compromise. It's a question of just trying to understand why the other person is coming from her ideas, like us and I went to get into that terrible fight about different political questions. Sometimes I am not sure why she is saying a certain thing, it makes me understand why I react to a certain thing. We go through a lot of different things like that to come up with the final theory or line in a song, or even a word in the backup.

Q: The process of working out songs is the most thrilling thing we do. Everybody comes from a different music background, what they listened to in their past, what style they play now--by coming together we've learned how to play different styles--folk music and gospel and jazz and blues. We've got all these styles that I don't think we would have ever gotten to play if we hadn't been together. It's great to work these songs out, and throw in backup parts as we hear them and come to these decisions. It takes forever, but it's a really growing way.

Q: What are your music backgrounds? Do any of you have backgrounds in music theory?

N: I do. I don't think I could have learned to play if I didn't know theory. Some people just play what they hear. I feel a whole lot more comfortable now if I can read and write music. I think I can sonically get rid of some of the rigid ideas about what music is.

N: I think it's the combination of styles we have that makes us who we are as musicians and people. I think it's more now that I think it would be beneficial to us, but I think if we all came from a strict rigid music background, our music wouldn't be the same.

Q: When we got this music collective together, we were going to have classes, teach what we knew.

N: Do you teach each other to play the instruments you know?

Q: Kind of help out and give suggestions to encourage.

N: It's just totally because of the women's movement that I got encouragement to do and express myself musically. I wrote my first song about two years ago. I never thought I'd be able to write a song.

N: In my life I do have other things I want to do besides music, as far as making a political statement and political choices that I make, the way I choose my lifestyle. The band is a means for me to incorporate all the different parts of myself and try to express it in a musical way. Music is a main part of my energy, because I love it. It's a way I can also express my political views and my emotional experiences through the band. The music we do and the songs that we sing are all lesbian and politically oriented. It's a way it can all come together.

N: What is the music the band plays is always a political statement.

N: My whole life I played classical music. Then, for five years I didn't play at all. It wasn't until I realized that I could say--right out front--say something in my music that had to do with my politics that I started playing again. Before that, just the idea of jamming or playing professionally--I didn't know why I should do that--I couldn't think of any good reason, until I realized I could make political statements with it.

N: I played music before I got into the women's movement. I was playing at hootenannies and fairs and stuff like that. I don't feel like I could try to learn it now, but I didn't have any ideas at all. I was doing women's music for a while, but my music personally is not that political lyrically. I would have an easier time playing at a straighter place than Susan, but I don't like to do it.

S: It would be creepy. I don't think you would get any encouragement.

N: But I played like that. I played traditional Bluegrass. It doesn't make any difference. They liked the music.

N: Did you play for men?

N: Yeah, there were always hot shot musicians and loudmouthed men in coffeehouses and bars.

N: Did they like the music?

N: Yeah, but that's because I was good for a girl, so it was easy for me. I happened to be technically more proficient that most of the women around then, so I was superficially accepted by them. I never felt that was as good as being technically.

Q: Was that true?

N: Men base their skill on technical proficiency and because they begin to play electric guitar and get a lot of encouragement, they learn to express themselves in traditional music styles. That gets down to the difference from women's music. Most men learn rock and roll, they play in a band and listen to the music, and that's not been socially acceptable for women. That's why women are folkingers. For the last hundred years they've been playing on nylon string guitars and going da da da da...
They pass it down from generation to generation, just like mechanics. It's the way I used to feel hanging out in the garage. They keep it to themselves—they have musicians in union.

Do you belong to the union?

It's too expensive, and not only that, we don't play that kind of stuff.

Do you think you can support yourself with music without playing in those kinds of situations?

I take one gig at a time, you know. There's the emotional drain of playing a very straight gig and you are going to have to put out all this energy. You have to weight that against how much you are going to be paid for it.

College has lots of money for concerts and women's groups should be able to get some of that money to fly there, give a concert and fly back.

Do you eventually want to record?

Yeah, we want to record. We are talking about in the future getting together the band, finding the right woman to do it, and finding an atmosphere that won't be totally upright, like most other places. We personally don't think I'm ready to make a record. I am not ready to get what we have to say out, but I don't think I have any great proficiency.

What's the criteria for making a record?

Right, whether you are going to do it to win yourself acclaim or to get your songs out—I think we want to get our songs out.

How do you define being successful?

I'd say supporting myself with music. Right now I have a housecleaning job on the side. We aren't able to make our living in the band. I feel that in about five years the women's community will be able to support musicians.

I'm not into monetary success with music. It's hard to earn my living that way. I guess I am an artist and music will have to go through too many changes, and I'm not into having professional status. It's a lot of pressure.

I'd say the energy that comes back to us when we are playing for women, to feel that they've heard what we said. That flow of energy that comes back from the audience—that's success for me.

I agree with that too. The reason I mentioned support is because we all want to get paid for when we play, we want support for what we play. Success is support no matter what way you talk about it. It has to be both financial support and—support.

If we are not supported by the women then we have no business doing what we are doing. If the audience says no to what we are saying then something is wrong with us.

Do you think that taking care of your body is important to your music?

It's a reckless life, I must say. You go to bars, and you get free drinks.

I really feel like I try to watch it. You get exposed to so much alcohol. That's why so many young singers develop addictions. I want to be really careful about not getting into that.

I haven't changed my habits at all from before I was a musician. I'm still the same kid. But I must admit, the late hours I don't go for.

We try to keep ourselves as healthy as we can. We try to keep away from sleazy musician's life as much as possible.

Is it easy to slip into?

We can't stay up late enough to go out at four o'clock in the morning. We're not used to it.

Sometimes I feel like I've slipped into it.

There is always beer around.

But I think generally we try to be conscious of what we are doing. We try to eat good food around. When we are on tour, we buy eggs and cheese and bread and try to keep ourselves healthy.

We report to the local gym in every town and try to do a little exercise.

We read in the Nexus interview that you met on the softball field.

Yeah, we did. I met Debbie on a softball field. We were playing softball and I heard her talking. She turned on my amplifiers, and I said, "Amplifiers? What's this about amplifiers?" And she said "Let's go!" She said "I've been having this great dream. Maybe we're not political correctly."

And I said, "Great!" I had just, three days before, moved back from New York back to Berkeley in search of a place to live. It immediately, was quite coincidental and quite nice. Then Vogel moved over and Debbie knew Susan from long ago. It really only took a week before we were all together.

Where are you going on your tour?

We have jobs in twenty cities.

There were women's groups in a lot more cities that asked us to play that we didn't have time for or couldn't get it together.

The women's community and the lesbian community is real strong. When you go on tour you wonder how you are going to do it. But you don't realize that there is a whole women's community that's taking over the world.

And they take care of you. It's not like you go and you check into a hotel. We stay with the women who are putting on the things for us, and they take care of us. We introduce us to things, they take us to the women's center, they tell us where to go, where to stay. It's really wonderful to see how strong it's going.

Is there anything else you want to talk about?

I feel like we've been talking about ourselves—I guess that's what the interview is for, but I just feel self-indulgent.

Yeah, I'd like to talk about the music and music culture. There are a lot of women all over the country that are trying to help it grow. There are women's bands like Be Be Koch and great individual performers, there are women's production companies, there's Paid My Dues, we make soundtracks, and there are other people making songbooks. The whole reason we are playing is because there is a women's culture emerging, it's about time.

It would be hard for anyone to listen to women's music on the AM radio.

I'm not sure I'd want to hear their songs on the AM radio in the context of a commercial radio station being broadcast. It's about time but I don't feel like I'm really lucky to be able to do that. I think it's really important for us to do it because there are a lot more women in other parts of the country than the AM radio, and as far as getting paid, I feel we should all remember that we are just starting to be heard and we should just speak for myself.

I agree—you can say we.

Do you see any of those things, like going on a mission, as a way to reach other women musicians?

It depends on whether a woman can do it or not. If it would take away from me, if I couldn't do it, then no. You have to admit, when a woman says that if your family has money you should go back and have sex with your family and get their money. Now if it's worth it, I probably could, personally, but if some woman can't, I can't stand there and tell a woman "Well, this is the most right on the thing." It's the Spartacus League telling men to enlist into the army so they can go and change the army, to turn the armed forces against the government. And some of these guys just can't. What good would they be to the movement. We should good to be to the movement if something like that would totally fuck us up.

And some women are not into the women's movement. That's why it's hard for me to define women's music. I know women musicians who are not feminists and who are not political, and they deal with the man. They have a good consciousness in themselves and so it's hard for me to think of them as part of women's music movement. They are doing important things, but the idea that women can play music and write good songs.

They are showing women that women can write good songs.

Yeah, when we go with men to straight clubs it is important for us to see someone performing who is as a person and a strong woman herself. It's really important to those women to see that who is not just showing her tits because she has got to play at a bar, which is what most bar owners want the women to be like. So their movement has all these different places for women to be at. It's not good for us to put down each other and say "you are not right on enough, you are not political enough." It's good for each of us to do what we can do the best we can do it, and learn from each other.

We always have to struggle with each other to put ourselves forward. I don't have the attitude that whatever someone does is fine, but you should try to have a balance of positive energy enough to support other women musicians for doing what they are doing and also at the same time struggle with them to try to push them towards what you see as forward.

I think women's musicians should be part of the women's movement, but I don't feel that they should be any more women's movement. Something that I'm concerned with is that sometimes I feel like women musicians are credited too much, acclaimed in the movement right now. I feel like it's important for me as a musician to be aware that there are women doing things as important or more important than what I'm doing. I hate to see women musicians put on a pedestal by other women just because they happen to be in the public eye so much. There are women writers, theorists, sculptors and painters and every type of women's expression.

And carpenters, waitresses and housecleaners.

And those things are just as important as what I'm doing. I just happen to be lucky that people like to listen to what I'm doing. I make it easy for me. I get to do what I want to do, play music, and at the same time try to do something myself. Some thing that I'm concerned with is that sometimes I feel like I'm really lucky to be able to do that. I think it's really important for us to do it because there are a lot more women in other parts of the country than any other woman's time, as far as getting paid. I feel we should all remember that we are just starting to be heard and the women's movement has really important movement that there are different levels of people doing different things. Some of them I just can't relate to doing as a professional. I think some women musicians are doing all at, but I'm glad they are doing them.