redwoods, lovely women, new culture:

Women from the women's media collective video taped a women's music concert in Sacramento a year ago. They were so excited by the event that they decided to organize something similar in the Santa Cruz area. Interested women came together and created the Amazon Music Project (AMP). In February they sent out letters all over the country asking for feedback on the need and desire to have a lesbian music festival.

"But the reality is clear: Sexism, Patriarchy, capitalism exist as barriers to our vision. Women must learn to recognize the system and maneuver it to work for us."

The most shining reality the organizers of the Amazon Music Project have been faced with is the concept of private property. There are many beautiful places for people to gather in this area but they are owned by wealthy and by men.

---Amazon Music Project Statement

I went to an organization meeting before the festival. Women there told me that the major difficulty was finding a site for such an event. They spoke to the contradictions. Capitalism dictates that the wealthy own land, and landowners don't support women's struggle. And AMP had a limited supply of money.

Finally a site was found—the Chateau Liberte. A bar/club in the mountains on acres of redwood forest. A contract was negotiated which agreed that women could occupy all the facilities (land, bar, swimming pool) during the hours of 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., that at 7 the club would reopen to "normal" business. It was also agreed that women would control the gate during those hours and that the owner would receive $600 for letting said facilities and some negotiated take of the gate. The only men to be present were those who lived or worked on the land.

At the same meeting, AMP women spent a lot of time speaking about security. How would they keep men out? What would they do if bikers came? A system of whistles was agreed upon to indicate trouble. Women working the gate were to have support in numbers—and women from the rape crisis center who were trained in the martial arts would be in the crowd.

coming together

The purpose of the Amazon Music Project is to create a space for women to get together and enjoy each other's company and make our own music. The music party is the creation of all the women who attend.

Amazon Music Project is a core group of women who have coordinated facilities in the Santa Cruz area. The non-professional make up has been intentional to provide a supportive, conducive environment for women musicians whose music might otherwise remain unheard.

The organizational process can be a very alienating one because it places individuals in the situation of developing reality out of a vision.

Our vision is clear; it surpasses the creation of an all-women's music party. Strong women will gain control of our own culture, our own economy, our own bodies— we will control our own lives.

---Amazon Music Project Statement

music and bodies

On Saturday I arrived at the gate and was greeted by lovely bare-breasted women who took my $2. I wandered down the road under huge redwoods and began to hear guitars and women's voices. Wandered further to find an outside pool filled with naked women playing in the water. Women mostly chose to be free of gams in the entire weekend. Around the pool women were jamming on flute, clarinet, conga drums and assorted instruments. Others were improvising dances to the sun lite.

On a grassy spot beyond the pool, there was a children's area equipped with swings, old tires, good food and big people to care for the smaller people. Friendly dogs ran around freely. There were a few gawking men who I assumed were employees at the chateau.

By mid afternoon there were 400 or 500 women at the festival. The majority defined themselves as lesbian. Though there were many women present who still loved and worked with men. There were several European women. Many with video equipment, women with cameras, women from a lesbian women's radio program in Seattle, women from the New York women's school who were selling copies of the Whiterunderground's Prairie Fire. And surprising to me no less than 10 women from Washington, D.C.
amazon music project

open mike / performers

Most of the women who performed were from northern California. The schedule of performances had allowed time for women who had been contacted by or made contact with AMP previous to the weekend.

Large blocks of open microphone time had been reserved for any women who had not made previous contact and who wanted to share their music or rapping with their sisters.

Women were encouraged to support the gallo wine and Coors beer boycotts when purchasing their liquid refreshments.

Women who were involved in the Inez Garcia defense committee spoke during open mike publicizing Inez Garcia’s trial. Inez is a Cuban-Puerto Rican woman who had been working with the farmworkers. She was raped by two men, killed and shot one of them. She is on trial for premeditated murder.

Another rap was inspired by the fine, deep voice and jazz rhythm of a San Francisco band called Bitter Sweet. Their set ended with the Laura Nyro song, “I’m going to kill my man.” A spirited woman from the Women’s prison project came to the mike and reported that 15% of the women in the California prison system who were there for killing their men in order to release from prison. She spoke of a psychological study done of women who had killed the people who they identified as the real enemy in their life and had found that they were well-adjusted women. As a result of her study, the men who were killed were more than in all the other countries in the world combined.

The music was of a varied quality and often wonderful and subtle. The folk, Bertolt Brecht’s rock and roll, blues, sweet charlots hard soulful rock, jazz, attempts to find new musical forms particularly noted in BB K-Roke.

The musical performances during open mike provided some of the most interesting improvisation. Women who did not know each other blending rhythm and style.

The way that women musicians appreciated one another’s music was the highlight of the weekend. A woman from a band named The Berkeley Women’s Music Collective smiled and said she just felt blown away by what she heard—“and its all different,” she said.

I felt particularly inspired by the four women in the Berkeley women’s music collective. Their energy is incredible—whimsical. They speak to collective. All of them write songs; singing the lead on these songs they write. They perform at benefits and struggle with each other about which political struggles to support. Though they all had early musical training, they said they would not be doing music now if it had not been for other women. Their material is varied, funk, country, blue.

They were finishing a low down blues—called the “furry it comes over me”--

and after a last “yes, it does,” one of the AMP women came up to the stage filled with rage. She had asked three bikers who had driven in to leave. And they had drawn knives and threatened to rape her. She shouted strongly, “fuck you” and one of the bikers hit her in the face. They just drove off on their bikes. When she had spoken to the owner of the property, he had offered no support saying these guys are my normal clientele.

Women in the audience were stunned and—then shouts of what are we going to do about it. At some level, there was agreement to an en masse removal of any other such men.

Music continued and at 7 women left to go to the night’s accommodations. AMP had spent much time arranging for housing for people to stay at. There was a cam site where 200 women could sleep outside. And many women in the Santa Cruz area shared their homes with those of us who had travelled to the festival.

On Sunday, there was a general sense that women had become completely comfortable in this forested space they were occupying. There was a free sharing of wine, beer and herbs, lavender silk-screened t-shirts of an Amazon woman, more dance and music. There was also a hassle with the owner. He was threatening to throw us out all if his “normal” clientele could not come in to spend time at the bar.

On Sunday at about 5:30 a band called Gang Band played. It was composed of six lesbian women and one man who was introduced as a lesbian. Their style was an aggressive na$h rock. Even when they sang lyrics with feminist content like “I’m taking out my coil, I’m in love with a girl...”I felt ripped off.

They played on. Many women in the crowd seemed to enjoy the band. Others were growing furious. Some of the protesters jumped to the stage and demanded that Gang Band stop playing. AMP woman suggested a voice vote. The crowd was split. The protesters continued their protest, voicing most of their criticism at the band’s male member. He became defensive—spoke to his good intentions and was jeered and then angrily left the stage.

A woman came to the stage upset. Said she had come to the festival with her eight-year old son. Who had started to cry over the above incident, saying he never wanted to grow up because he never wanted that to happen to him. She started to cry.

At about this time my ride was leaving for San Francisco. I left feeling an energetic heaviness.

support and criticism

"Lesbians are building a strong culture. But you can’t just wave aitch, it’s under attack, and you have to defend it." (woman from New York Women’s School)

The Amazon Music Festival was a fine women’s celebration—fine music, an energetic sharing of selves.

Some criticisms might be. Because the new and revolutionary culture we are creating is under attack, we must be careful with our process. We must select carefully which of the landlords we deal with. Perhaps Chateau Libre was not the place to have the festival. And certainly if it was known as a bikers’ hangout, security needed to be tighter.

That women should learn to sing the music in their souls and to sing and play to/with one another is essential. However, in an attempt to respect and nurture women, we must also find new ways to be critical. Perhaps Gang Band (a band that, to begin with, chooses that name which seems to indicate a strange pun on a quadruple rap) should not have been invited.

And/or how do we offer criticism in a crowd? How do we develop the ability to speak with one another, wholly when conflicts and tension occur? How do we keep in touch?

Love and support to sisters in Santa Cruz.

"The Amazon Music party was a result of energy from past lesbian events; the energy and music generated that weekend will contribute to the next event and the development of a lesbian culture."

by natalie reuse