

BAY AREA WOMEN

Bonnie Howard

On January 17th, an unusual thing happened in San Francisco--a Woman's Music Festival. It was only for women and well over the 600 capacity came; the aisles and doorways were filled. An unbelievable amount of energy emanated from the festival. It was organized by women, for women and the proceeds went to the new Woman's Information Center in San Francisco.

Afterwards, I spoke with the performers about their lives, their relationships to their music as women, and what was happening with women in music in the Bay Area. I learned a great deal. I spoke with Rosalee Sorrels, Selby Guenther, Suzanne Shanbaram and Nancy Henderson of the Berkeley Women's Music Collective, Helen Tucker of Charlie's Aunts, (although she was not part of the festival, she helped put together Virgo Rising), Holly Tannen, and Pam Pollet and Peggy Mitchel formerly from Sweet Chariot.

Pam and Peggy had taken a tour of the country together for the specific purpose of finding women musicians. They did not make it to New York, but covered much of the middle section between there and California. They came back very depressed. They found very few women musicians; the few they did find were into folk music, either single things or male-dominated acts. Why so few? Peggy felt the vibe was out here to do it. The women weren't afraid to represent themselves. Rosalee Sorrels commented that she really loves Berkeley audiences. She found them more receptive to different kinds of music, less judgemental, willing to listen to where you were. Pam said that although she felt bad vibes at first in several of the places she played on her trip, once she and Peggy began to play, the reaction was unbelievable positive.

How did these women begin in music? Hesitantly. Each had different problems, all had self doubts.

Holly Tannen began with classical guitar in high school. She never performed, but played in her room where no one could hear her. She never sang because she

"knew" she couldn't. Later, with her dulcimer, she started to get into jamming. To many women this kind of playing presents a block. Holly said about jamming:

"/ You've got to work through that feeling that you can't do it. Because at first you can't do it and of course at first you sound terrible. You have to be willing to sound terrible in order to get through that."/

It was not until later when she heard Joni Mitchell that she began to deal with her fears of performing. She said her life had been controlled by fear and she had always tried to hide, yet she heard Joni Mitchell bringing her fear out in front of thousands of people and by facing it, it changed. She sang it out there. She's not afraid of all that stuff inside of her. For Holly, the main way to face it is to sing. It is terrifying and exciting.

Holly now teaches dulcimer and she says her women students begin by playing softly and singing tentatively. Holly tries to work with this:

"/ It has to be O.K. with you to be scared, to fuck-up, to make an ass of yourself in front of people. Most people are so afraid of making a fool in front of people that they never make any effect in the world at all."/

Selby talked about the discrimination she felt as she developed her musical talents. But she says, "It isn't the trips he lays down on me, but the trips I've laid down on myself." Musically, she wants to know where she can share her experiences with other women. Whenever there is a jam, it's all guys.

Selby feels that her oppression as a woman comes from a more personal level--not having developed her concentration enough, learning to be an aggressive learner and knowing that you need to learn that, having been trained to discipline ourselves only as a means of gaining approval.

//It is easier for women to perform [because the approval of the audience is there] and a lot harder when that approval isn't part of the concentration, //

for example, during practice. You want to be equal, but you know that everything you have to learn about music you end up learning from men.

//Getting an instrument together as a woman and as a man are just two completely different trips. But it's happening and it's so beautiful.//

Rosalee Sorrels started collecting folk music as a hobby. As she became known for that she met more and more people in the music field. After her divorce she turned to writing music for a living. A man whose opinion she respected encouraged her. Being taken seriously built her confidence. Supporting five kids on a musician's salary means that she has to believe in herself. She says that no one can tell her that her music isn't good because she knows that it is good.

Helen Tucker, mother of four, also has conflicts because of her career: "I am really into being a mother. But kids still believe in the 'mother' image. You're not supposed to be going off and doing your thing." Helen adds that, "If you get into something you really want to do and love doing, you're a much better mother. When you are home you give them much more time and much more listening."

According to one woman, there is a larger number of musicians in the Bay Area than in any other. The proportion of women is high. Selby Guenther says, "It's possible to jam with a different woman every night of the week and not repeat a single person."

Bringing women musicians together was the purpose of two separate projects. One was a class offered by the women's alternative school, *Breakaway*, called *No Wrong Notes*. Selby talked about it saying that it was a jam for women meeting in a private home. Women would come and play together, teaching each other what they knew. There was one forty-five year old woman who came each week to play drums. The class was a good source for music contacts and also helped bring together gay and non-gay musicians.

The other project, called *Berkeley Women's Music Collective*, was put together by Nancy, Suzanne and the other women in their band. Originally, workshops were planned covering topics like making the transition from reading notes to jamming, and problems getting into music professionally. They also wanted to have a place with instruments women could use, to give courses to each other, and to maintain an index for referrals. Lack of resources cut their hopes short but the present band was formed from contacts made in organizing the collective.

Nancy said that, when she came out to the Bay Area, the women she played with weren't super good. She had the space to be bad, quite a different experience from the former competition with her brother. Space to be bad; space to grow is necessary. One of the rewards according to Selby "is a bond of understanding that is very deep. I especially find this true in Berkeley."

The older, more accomplished musicians talked about what their music meant to them, why they write. Rosalee feels about her music as an artist feels about her art--that it is something beautiful and creative in itself. Rosalee says something personal rather than political through her music.

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This August, in Santa Cruz, there will be a lesbian music festival, held in celebration of being ourselves. If you write music, play music, or listen and dance to music, please come with energy and love. The festival will last for a weekend--the exact date has not yet been set. There will be child care provided and as much housing as possible.

Please write to us if you are interested in coming so that we may have some idea of what kinds of accommodations we need to provide, and we will send you as much exact information as we can about date, place, facilities, etc.

We hope to hear from you, and look forward to seeing you in August in Santa Cruz.

Amazon Music Project
529 Chestnut St.
Santa Cruz, CA 95060



Helen Tucker:

"I love to write songs. Something will happen that will really make me feel really, really good and I'll have to get it down. Or something will happen that will make me so angry or so hurt that I'll have to get it down. It's a marvelous thing because once you can work at it and get it down and into the gut and let all the words come out with music, then it's like you've worked with it and got it outside and from it is a really positive thing and it's been creative."

Holly Tannen:

"Everybody has music inside of them. Sing because you have to sing. It comes out of that space in you where it's so heavy that you can't face it and then you face it."

The movement toward women's music is marvelous, beautiful, terrifying, and exciting. Most important of all, IT IS HAPPENING!



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NEWS

Indra Allen, a feminist musician, is publishing a newsletter about "WOMEN IN MUSIC AND THE MUSIC IN WOMEN." The first issue, dated March 2, is a three page mimeo, resource list. It contains information about women's record companies and individual women who have produced their own records (Malvina Reynolds, Willie Tyson, Joanna Cazden, etc.).

There are also notices of women looking for other musicians to jam with. There are also announcements about music events of interest to women and performances of individual women in the D.C. and San Francisco areas. This would be an excellent way for musicians and other interested women to keep in contact with each other and also to keep us all informed of places to go to hear good, live women's music.

CONTACT: Indy Allen, 4900 W. Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20007.

(Indy Allen has an album of her songs out called LONER which is being distributed by Cell 16, 14A Eliot St., Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138--\$3.00 per copy.)

Professionals

Casse Culver, a D.C. area musician writes, "As a service to those of us who are trying to earn a living with our art, I would like to see *Paid My Dues* devote a section to 'professionals' for the purpose of trading information about gigs; i.e. what clubs welcome feminist performers; decent paying clubs, etc. All this in conjunction with the many Women's Centers across the country."

This sounds like a good idea to us. All we need is reports from women who are willing to share their experiences as Ms. Culver has outlined.



Does anyone remember the *6-Pak*, an "all girl" band from Grand Rapids, Michigan, that used to play at high school and college dances about five or six years ago?