

BERKELEY WOMEN'S MUSIC COLLECTIVE by Susann Shanbaum

A women's band from the northern California bay area, Berkeley Women's Music Collective consists of Debbie Lempke on drums, Nancy Vogl on guitar and bass, Susann Shanbaum on guitar, bass, and harmonica, and Bonnie Lockhart on piano. For five years, BWMC has been creating and performing music which expresses their commitment to women and to the spirit of revolution they feel in the world today. Their music ranges from a powerful electric to a more round and gentle acoustic sound.

I was asked to write about why the Berkeley Women's Music Collective has been able to stay together for five years. I think about it in different ways at different times, so I'm not sure what the truth of the matter is. I'll just take this opportunity to talk about things that occur to me. I'm not a writer, so I'll just do the best I can on both counts.

The first thing I'd like to talk about is our identity as a band. When we started out as a band, no one thought of herself as a musician. We did think of ourselves as a band. We would spend more time at band practice talking than playing. We were young, it was the beginning of the women's movement for us, and we had a lot to figure out. None of us knew musical terminology or theory except Nancy Henderson, the pianist. We learned much of what we know about music together by trial and error. Until recently our identities came more from being in the band than being musicians. We think a lot about process. Talk talk talk.

We stay together because we are very well matched in terms of talent and ability. We have different strong points in playing, arranging, organizational, and business skills. We all share songwriting ability. I often feel, "who will play with me if

the band doesn't?" I feel lucky to be in the band. We all get our material arranged, performed, and sometimes recorded. That seems like a real privilege.

As people I don't think we get along exceptionally well. What makes us able to work together for so long is structure, commitment, and love. We try to structure things so a commitment is possible. If I thought about making a decision I'd be bound to for five years, I would feel too



(l-r) Susann Shanbaum, Debbie Lempke, Nancy Vogl, Bonnie Lockhart

much pressure. We all feel this way about the band so we make contracts with each other for a limited amount of time -- usually six months, with certain goals set for that time. Then we decide whether or not to renew. It's much easier to go through a bad or hard period when the end is in sight. It's also easier to go through something without constantly questioning whether or not we should be doing it. This brings us to commitment. I can say almost without reservation that once we make a commitment we do it.

Nancy Henderson told us that the end of our first album would be the end of her commitment. We dealt with that by having Bonnie Lockhart join us as pianist. Bonnie worked along with us during the album and took Nancy's place afterward. This was not an easy transition. It took a long time for Bonnie to feel a part of the band, but the band kept together during it. If one of us up and quit in the middle of a tour or recording, I don't think we could sustain.

We've experimented with different day-to-day structures for touring and practice also. Power, leadership, and division of labor exist whether we acknowledge them or not, so we try to make as many conscious decisions about these things as we can. We still have a long way to go, but for now we have a practice leader every practice. This works best if we make a group decision about what's to be accomplished in a specific week or two-week period (for example, three old songs and two new ones to go over). For touring we rotate road manager town by town, and then things are divided according to what we can do or enjoy doing (Vog, packing van; Susann, cooking; Debbie, money; Bonnie, navigation and loading). So some things rotate and some are specialties. We still have resentments from time to time about having to do certain things, or not being able to do other things.

One element of the band's structure that makes it lasting is flexibility. We have to make the structure around the changing needs of the band. When I became lovers with a woman in Oregon, the band went on a six weeks on/two weeks

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off schedule to allow me frequent visits with her. When Debbie decided to go to Boston to music school, we adjusted our touring schedule around that. Bonnie's lover is having a baby in July, so we have to be in town or on vacation at that time. This also does not always bring smiles to the lips of all band members. It's very hard to plan your life around so many people. Four band members, everyone's lovers and their collectives or jobs, sound women, etc., etc., but it's either bend or break. This flexibility has been very important in keeping us together.

Then there is love. We love each other sometimes, hate each other sometimes. While we're working together we're spending our lives the same way. That's a lot to have in common. We all have a lot of respect for each other and for each others' music. We all work very hard and are good women. We get along best when we have a common enemy. Of course we always have a common enemy in the way the whole country is set up to benefit rich white men, but sometimes we lose perspective.

Perspective is another important reason we can stay together. After a couple of years we began to notice certain cycles. Say we're on tour for six weeks. During that six weeks one person will be alienated and depressed the whole time. It won't be the same person for more than four or five days. When one of us slips into this state we know it won't be forever because it's happened and ended so many times before. It's easier to take alienation when you know somewhere inside you it's a part of a cycle, and easier for everyone else too. Getting very bummed out about each other is often losing perspective. We find it a very healthy place to visit, but we wouldn't want to live there.

Now I'd like to talk about business. The BWMC is as much a business as it is a band. None of us likes that very much, but we don't seem to have any choice. We produced our own albums because neither Olivia, Redwood, nor Urana (Wise Women) would do them. Consequently, we're a record company that is presently \$10,000 in debt. When we met together this winter to start rehearsals for the spring tour, we met six whole days before we touched our instruments. No one subject was discussed for more than a couple of hours. The things we had to deal with were record distribution, contracts, equipment, tour managers, bookkeeping, loans, advertising, photographs, practice space, tour schedules of other touring musicians, schedules of all band members and lovers of band members, festival applications, transportation, sound women, repertoire goals, copyrights, and more before we even got to discuss feelings about being together again. Bonnie suggested a number in the show where she stands on the stage and talks on the phone, because she gets more practice talking on the phone than playing the piano in this band.

It's also very hard to keep the business part going while the performing part is in recess, with band members all across the country. We end up paying for everything that gets spaced out.

Well, I guess that's about it. I hope it's helpful to some of you. Keep on playing.

Susan Shanbaum taught herself guitar and harmonica and began to play bass and electric guitar when she joined the Berkeley Women's Music Collective. In this issue she has also written for us a review of Mary Watkins's new LP Something Moving. ●

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ter technique to help us loosen up on stage. We learned here that we could be our most flamboyant, entertaining selves without assuming that one person would detract from another.

We needed extra assurance that we could each shine at what we do best, without being accused of "star-tripping" by others in the band.

At a particularly tense point within the last year, we called in a group facilitator. It was the best thing that ever happened to us in terms of deep communication. Our facilitator focused on each of us in turn, sorting out how we felt about each of the others, individually and in the alliances that had formed. She encouraged us to feel "safe" in expressing whatever we felt, without regard for how we would be judged. We promised not to use any of this information against each other, and knew that only truthful opinions would lead to lasting compromises. She even suggested that we "sponsor" each others' songs, especially if we disagreed with them. That was a far cry from our past practice -- seeing who could yell the loudest for her own piece of turf!

As strange as they seemed at first, these ideas have worked. Of course we still have disagreements, but we now have a structure for airing them when they first arise and the trust in each other that was created when we put our deepest feelings on the line during those "safe" times.

And They Lived Happily Ever After . . . ?

We face the future with optimism. We're even looking forward to a ten-day southern tour. That may not seem like much to a traveling band, but for us it's a big deal! Our structure for dealing with our egos has gotten more sophisticated along with our music. Now we set aside safe times for discussing those all-important feelings -- five minutes before each rehearsal ("I'm in a rotten mood because my cat is sick") and five minutes at the end ("I wish you had paid more attention to my new fiddle break!"). Now we are aware that there is fear and insecurity underlying most destructive or personal criticism. Ultimately, we learned that when we are aware of ourselves as a group, we think twice before demanding our own ego gratification.

Collectivity doesn't have to mean that we are a "melting pot" of watered-down musical styles or political viewpoints. Our songs, taken as a whole, reflect our respect for each other as people. We sing for dedicated workplace organizers, fun-loving connoisseurs of whimsy, women loving women, and women loving men because we are all of these people.

Actually, in conclusion, we sometimes think we have stayed together this long -- for most of us, longer than we have stayed with any one person intimately -- because we were all priestesses together in a past life.

Marcia Deihl is a recovering compulsive overreaper whose inspirations include Lotte Lenya, Bea Lillie, Robin Hood, Calamity Jane, The Skillet Lickers, and Gilda Radner, in no particular order. ●

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music. Why, then, do not women composers make, on the level of our highly developed culture, symphonies, requiems, songs, dances equivalent to those that are created by women everywhere in other cultures? Why are we so inhibited?"⁸

Drinker, writing in the "Foreword" to the Notes at Smith College, lists the gaps in her study and admits, "Nor have I done more than touch upon the manifold activities of modern women in connection with the dissemination, education, performance, and composition of music." Let's summarize what she does mention on "modern women" in this book. She mentions Lili and Nadia Boulanger, Mabel Daniels, Margaret Dessoff, Teresa Carreno, Antonia Brico, Emma Steiner, and Olga Samaroff, only a few of whom were composers. She discusses women's work in music therapy since World War I, a

natural development of woman's role as healer and nurturer. She does refer us to a couple of sources which do discuss women as composers active in the 1920s and '30s, on the last page of the bibliography under "Additional References," but seems virtually unaware of the works and activities of women composers of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s.

In her conclusion she states that "The existence of many women of high intellectual capacity, of superior artistic imagination, and of ability to express themselves in the modern idiom of music conclusively disproves the possibility that the female sex is barred from the sacred circle of creative musicians,"⁹ yet she does not discuss their works or even give us their names, perpetuating the myth that there were too few to mention.

It seems clear that Sophie Drinker was a feminist, but why didn't she make the connection between her history of women in music, her belief in women's creative abilities in music, her awareness of the difficulties and day-to-day struggles of women musicians to become accepted and known, particularly composers and those women of her day who needed her support, both moral and financial? She acknowledges that there were women composers active during those years, but her choir did not sing their music, and she did not write articles about them or specifically mention them in her book. The Drinkers were known for giving financial support to particular music projects, but in my research I found no evidence that she gave financial support to women composers. No compositions by women are dedicated to her.

The 1920s and 1930s, particularly in the United States, was a rich, creative period for women composers of the classical art-music tradition. Why didn't Drinker include them in her book? Why didn't she offer them support, arrange for performances of their music, and work to make them better known? Why this preoccupation with the music of the past and the music of women of other cultures, and a disregard of the music by women of her own time and her own part of the world?

On the one hand she is saying, in terms of musical output, that women of our society are inferior to the women of so-called "primitive" societies, yet she admits that contemporary women composers have proven that women certainly have the intellectual power and creative imagination and abilities in the realm of composition. She complained, "Why are we so inhibited!"¹⁰ Yet she did not support the activities of those women who were attempting to prove themselves as composers. She did not follow through on the implications of her works, and that is one of the tasks we must take up today.

I believe we have a responsibility to support and encourage today's women musicians. Certainly it is important to reclaim the women composers of the past, bring their music to the concert stage, and write our histories, but at the same time we can't let the women composers of our day go unrecognized, unheard, unknown, only so they might be rediscovered when they are dead and gone, like the women composers of past generations. We have a responsibility to make ourselves aware of and knowledgeable about the music of contemporary women.

It is important that we pick up where Drinker left off and proceed on her basic principle of the innate creativity of woman in music. In putting together women's history in music, we should use all we have at our disposal in the way of new resources, research methodology, bibliographic and documentary skills, not losing sight of the feminist spirit of her book. We must document this history conscientiously and help one another in this research by sharing our information and sources.

But as we carry on our search of the past, let's not forget the reasons why we pursue the topic. One reason is to give contemporary women musicians the confidence and stren-