

berkeley ♀'s music collective

This interview was done last February when the Berkeley Women's Music Festival was in D.C. as part of their tour. Members of the Collective are Nancy Vogl, Debbie Lempke, Susann Shanbaum and Nancy Henderson. The interview was done by Carol Edelson and Phyllis Telfair

OOB: How often do you practice?

NV: 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 whole evolutionary process of us getting together and being friends and knowing each other. It's not all time spent practicing. We talk and work things out with each other.

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

DL: What we try to do is to give everyone a balance of songs to sing. Everyone sings lead the same number of songs. 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---

NH: ---Bonnie Lockhart.

DL: 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.

NV: 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 that we are trying to say is the main thing that gets across. I think we try to be conscious and responsible to the women who listen to us and we don't just jet up there and say TA DA--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.

NH: If we say anything amiss we assume we will hear about it. We spend a lot of time talking about our politics and what we are going to say.

NV: What 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 where the other person is coming from in her ideas---like Susann and I used to get into these terrible fights about different political questions. Sometimes when I can see 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.

NH: 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 I would have ever gotten to play if we hadn't all said "Well, let's sit down and work these songs out,"--and throw in these backup parts as we hear them and come to these decisions. It takes forever, but it's a really growing way.

SS: and fun.

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

NH: 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 had a whole opposite approach to how I learned to play. I've learned a lot from people who learned the other way. I've learned to be a lot more loose, get rid of some of the rigid ideas about what music is.

NV: I think it's the combination of styles we have that makes us who we are as musicians and people. If we learned theory now 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.

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

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

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

SS: 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.

NV: 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.

liked the music.

OOB: Did you play for men?

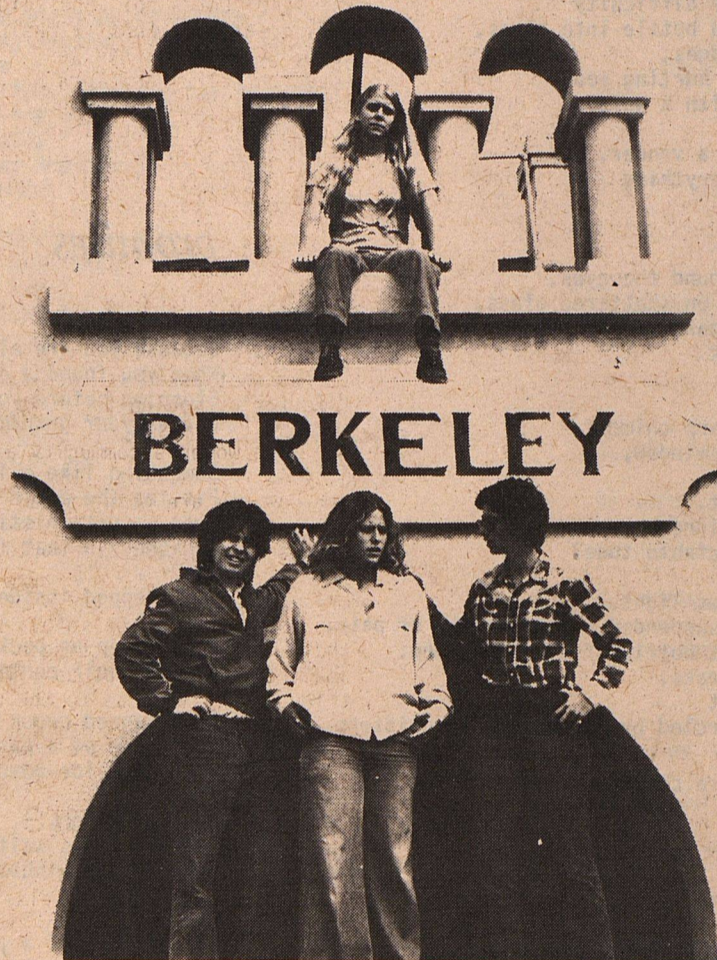
NV: Yeah, there were always hot shot musicians and loud mouthed men in coffeehouses and bars.

OOB: Did they like the music?

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

OOB: Was that true?

NV: Men base their skill on technical proficiency, and because they begin to play electric guitar in High School and get a lot of encouragement, they learn to express themselves in traditional music ways. 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 folksingers. For the last hundred years they've been playing on nylon string guitars and going da da da da



top: Nancy Henderson, bottom: Debbie Lempke, Nancy Vogl, and Susann Shanbaum

OOB: Do you believe that the music the band plays is always a political statement?

NH: 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.

NV: 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 be doing music unless I was doing women's music in women's places, but my music personally is not that political lyrically. I would have an easier time playing at a straighter place than Susann, but I don't like to do it.

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

NV: But I played like that. I played traditional bluegrass. It doesn't make any difference. They

da. That's all they were allowed to do with encouragement.

DL: When I was in High School I played guitar and I was a folksinger. I felt like I could put a song across, but I wasn't given any support.

NH: I come from a musical family, my brother is a musician, my father is a musician. My whole life was spent competing with my brother and his friends, and I couldn't make the grade. I took lessons for years as a child. When my brother was in high school he learned how to play and improvise. He wouldn't teach me any of his secrets. I thought it was just this thing that I didn't know how to do, that I couldn't learn to do. Either you had it or you didn't. I think that the men in my life have really stunted my growth as a musician. They were always competing with me and not offering any support. I wanted to learn technically how to improvise. They couldn't tell me about it. They'd say "You just don't know how to do that." Then I found out that there are rules, there are steps, anyone can learn, anyone can learn how to sing, anyone can learn how to play. Men are involved in this whole mystification trip.

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SS: 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 a musicians union.

OOB: Do you belong to the union?

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

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

DL: 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.

SS: Colleges have lots of money for concerts and women's groups should be able to get some of that money so we could fly there, give a concert and fly back.

OOB: Do you eventually want to record?

SS: Yeah, we want to record. We are talking about in the future getting together the band, finding the right women to do it, and finding an atmosphere that won't be totally uptight like most recording studios are. Right now I personally don't think I'm ready to make a record. I am ready to get what we have to say out, but I don't think I have any great proficiency.

OOB: But what's the criteria for making a record?

NH: 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.

SUCCESS

OOB: How do you define being successful?

DL: 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.

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

NH: 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.

DL: 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.

SS: 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.

musician's life

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

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

DL: I really feel like I try to watch it. You get exposed to so much alcohol. That's why so many performers turn into alcoholics. I want to be really careful about not getting into that.

NH: 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.

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

OOB: Is it easy to slip into?

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

NH: Sometimes I feel like I've slipped into it.

DL: There is always beer around.

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

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

OOB: We read in the Plexus interview that you met on the softball field.

NH: Yeah, we did. I met Debbie on a softball field. We were playing softball and I heard her talking something about amplifiers, and I said, "Amplifiers?! What's this about amplifiers?" And she said "Let's go!" She said "I've been having this great idea about a music collective." And I said, "Great." I had just, three days before, moved back from New York back to Berkeley in search of a band. I found it immediately. It was quite coincidental and quite nice. Then Vogl moved into my house, and Debbie knew Susann from long ago. It really only took a week before we were all together.

OOB: Where are you going on your tour?

NH: We have jobs in twenty cities.

SS: 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.

DL: 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.

NV: 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 thing for us, and they take care of us. They introduce us to things, they take us to the women's center, they tell us what's happening in the community. It's really wonderful to see how strong it's going.

♀ music culture

OOB: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

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

NH: Yeah, I'd like to talk about the women's 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 Kroach and great individual performers, there are women's production companies, there's Paid My Dues, we made a songbook, 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. Maybe we could even listen to women's music on the AM radio.

OOB: I'm not sure I'd want to hear your songs on the AM radio in the context of a commercial radio station blaring commercials.

SS: Yeah, but there are some good things about it. If somebody wants to put The Bloods out and they want to play it on the radio and you are sitting there listening to the waterbed commercial and some woman is saying "come to the waterbed" and then Debbie comes on and says "You might think it's ludicrous, when the moon is full I feel my uterus," I think it would be fine. It's good for what it's good for. I don't know if I'd want to put my energy into joining the AM music business. That would be more destructive to me than it would be worth maybe. But it's real important that in women's music and in the whole women's

movement that there are different levels of people doing different things. Some of them I just can't relate to doing at all. I can't relate to what some women musicians are doing at all, but I'm glad they are doing them.

OOB: Do you see some of those things, like going on television, as a way to reach other women musicians?

SS: 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. This is the same discussion as when a woman says that if your family has money you should go back and kiss ass with your family and get their money. Now if you can do it, do it. I probably could, personally, but if some woman can't, then she can't. You can't stand there and tell a woman "Well, this is the most right on thing to do." It's like the Sparticus 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. What good would we be to the movement if something like that would totally fuck us up.

NV: 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 so they play straight clubs and they deal with the man. They have a good consciousness in themselves but they are not political at all, so it's hard for me to think of them as part of women's movement music. They are doing important things, they are showing men that women can play music and write good songs.

SS: They are showing women that women can write good songs.

NV: Yeah, when women go with men to straight clubs it is important for them to see a woman performing who is together as a person and a strong woman herself. It's real important to those women to see a woman 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 the women's 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.

SS: We always have to struggle with each other to push ourselves forward. I don't have the attitude that whatever anyone wants to do 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 still at the same time struggle with them to try to push them towards what you see as forward.

NV: I think women's musicians should be part of the women's movement, but I don't feel that they should be any more a part than anyone else. 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.

SS: And carpenters, waitresses and housecleaners.

NV: 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 play because it makes it real easy for me. I get to do what I want to do, play music, and at the same time try to support myself by doing it. I feel like I'm real lucky to be able to do that. I think it's really brazen of me to think that I deserve what I'm doing any more than some woman who wasn't lucky enough to get encouraged to play an instrument and now she has to work in a dentists office or has a kid or has to take care of a family. I feel like no woman's time is any more important than any other woman's time, as far as getting paid. I feel we should all remember that we are just as important as each other. I use "we" and I really should just speak for myself.

NH: I agree--you can say we.