

San Francisco's Women Musicians

by Anita Casalina

□ The San Francisco Bay Area, a region that is unusually conducive to creativity and divergence from tradition, has proved fertile ground for a growing network of nontraditional women musicians. As musicians, many of these women are pioneers, both in their choice of music and in the instruments they play. In the context of rock, jazz, funk, and Latin music, these women play such typically male-associated instruments as electric guitar and bass, alto and tenor saxophone, trumpet, flugelhorn, and traps, congas, and tymbals.

There are a number of all-woman bands in the area, ranging from commercial "top 40" groups and jazz trios and quartets to an all-woman big band that plays swing and bebop tunes from the '40s as well as the more complex contemporary big-band music. Some of these groups play primarily in women's bars and coffeehouses or at concerts especially for women, and have developed loyal followings. Others have found success playing for mixed audiences. A local women's salsa band was invited to play at San Francisco's Cinco de Mayo Festival (Mexican Independence Day)—quite an honor when one considers the machismo that can be attached to such events.

Having gained recognition in the local music circuit, some of these women are now being asked to sit in with big-name artists when they play in the area. They are also being invited to play a lot of "casuals," or one-time gigs, for parties, dances, and so on. As these women become more confident in their abilities as musicians, they continue to support each other as well as women who are beginning music students, offering music lessons to women at very reasonable rates.

In addition to composing and arranging music, some of these women write lyrics and are committed to writing about social issues, especially women's experiences.

Most of the musicians I have spoken with agree that studio work represents one of the most formidable barriers to their attempts to achieve equal status with their male counterparts. Any musician has difficulty getting the opportunity to record his or her own music in a studio, or to play behind someone



San Francisco musician Alicia Low, top, and Linda Tillery, winner of the Bay Area Music Award

who holds a more recognized position. For women, this difficulty is compounded by commonly held stereotypes of them as playing a more passive role in the music business. They have to prove to the record industry that what they have to offer is salable. For this reason, the recent successes of women's record labels are important to the whole community of women musicians.

Olivia Records, an all-woman feminist recording company based in Oakland, is widely recognized as recording and producing quality music by women. After a decade of business, the number of albums sold seems to be increasing with each recording, and the concerts Olivia sponsors are drawing larger audiences—up to 3,500 people at a time, most of them women. The album recorded on the Olivia label by drummer and vocalist Linda Tillery won the Bay Area Music Award of "Best Album on a Small Independent Label."

Olivia is currently going into production with a third album by singer Meg Christian. In February another Olivia vocalist, Teresa Trull, will play a concert at the Great American Music Hall, one of the most popular clubs in the area. At that time, Olivia will begin promotion of Trull's most recent album.

In addition, Margie Adam's recording company, Pleiades, is located in Albany, California. Redwood Records, the recording company founded by Holly Near, has an office in San Francisco and has produced an album by Alive!, a women's jazz quartet that has a strong local following and has toured nationally. The Berkeley Women's Music Collective has recorded its own material. For all of these recordings, women have done much or all of the engineering and production work. Another recording collective is currently being formed that will involve women and men working together.

As in so many other professions, it will take time for women in music to receive proper recognition as performers and studio personnel. But women's involvement in the industry is beginning to change nationally, and the ever-expanding group of women in the San Francisco Bay Area represents an important part of that change. □

