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## Feeling Women's Culture: Women's Music, Lesbian Feminism, and the Impact of Emotional Memory

Jill Dolan

What is women's music? It is a song, rising from the footsteps of seven million women who were burned at the stake in the Middle Ages. Or songs that make love; oh, please do listen to the songs that make love. Maybe it is music for those who love or want to learn to love women amid misogyny. It represents our brazenness as well as our tenderness; our brilliance as well as our moments of weakness; our passion as well as our despair; our bravery as well as our fear; our desire to be mothers as well as our choice not to have children; our lesbianism as well as our heterosexuality, bisexuality, or celibacy; but especially our lesbianism, for even if we don't actively live lesbian lives, understanding the desire to make love with a woman is divine approval of making love to ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

—Holly Near, "Fire in the Rain"

This essay considers lesbian feminist cultural production in the 1970s as an activist project fueled by potent, newly expressed emotions, which has yet to be given its due in feminist or LGBTQ scholarship. As an erstwhile lesbian feminist myself, I'd like to recuperate the visionary cultural work which, I believe, was caught in the crosshairs of political and academic history, falling victim to the poststructuralist theoretical critique and becoming a scapegoat for a new academic field trying hard to establish itself as legitimate and serious. Given this constellation of historical pressures, lesbian feminist cultural production—women's music, women's coffeehouses and restaurants, women's theatre and performance, and women's presses and periodicals, in all of which "women's" was a thinly veiled substitution for the less easily spoken "lesbian"—were too quickly dismissed as essentialist and retrograde by 1980s and '90s feminist and queer theorists who adopted poststructuralism's suspicion of experience and identity politics.

**Jill Dolan** is the Annan Professor of English, Professor of Theatre, and the Director of the Program in Gender and Sexuality Studies at Princeton University. She is the author of *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), to be released in 2012 in an anniversary edition with a new introduction; *Theatre & Sexuality* (2010); *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005); and many other books and articles. Her blog, *The Feminist Spectator*, [www.thefeministspectator.com](http://www.thefeministspectator.com), won the 2010-2011 George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism. She received the 2011 Outstanding Teacher award from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

My goal is to retrieve 1970s lesbian feminism from the dustbin of queer history, where it languishes as a relic of a time when “lesbian” was supposedly a coherent, and as such, exclusive identity, too white, too middle-class, too sexually conservative, critics say, to serve as an historical model for the new queer sex radicalism and its rejection of bounded identity categories. As queer theory and activism propelled itself away from feminism and from gay and lesbian studies’ more stable definitions of gender and sexuality, lesbian feminism became a convenient whipping post in the academic progress toward new interpretations of subjectivity and subjection. I recall 1970s lesbian feminist cultural and political activism as vital, lustful, intellectually acute, and more culturally diverse than it’s been described during the last twenty or twenty-five years of US academic and activist discourse. I aim to launch this reconsideration by trying to evoke how it *felt* to be part of that moment in history.

I continue to find myself jolted by thirty-five-year-old memories that still inspire my activism, simply through the depth of feeling the events I recall inspire. Affect studies, which has become such a vital area of inquiry in feminist and queer theory over the last decade, provides a useful framework for my investigation.<sup>2</sup> I’m interested in how the sharp feelings that motivated my own politics—along with those of so many other lesbian feminists in the ’70s—have been discounted before scholars really had a chance to analyze what all those heightened emotions, often in community-organized moments of performance, accomplished. My goal in this essay is to describe those emotions here in some detail, so that I can tease out how the feelings provoked by dancing in lesbian bars and attending women’s music performances, especially, moved me and many of my contemporaries into the political activism and systems of belief that transformed our lives.

Women’s music albums and performances were among the most audible, visible, powerful examples of emotion-fueled 1970s underground cultural production. In late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century examples of US popular culture that caricature women who adopted lesbian feminism’s credo and that represent the movement as a naive, stereotypically gendered politic, women’s music is most often the touchstone, representing as it does a powerful signifier of the time and its style. Generations of young people recognize the moment women’s music recalls mostly through representations of unshaven women adorned with labrys—*the double axe that symbolizes a hallowed matriarchy*—and amulets, celebrating goddesses in nonalcoholic, scent-free coffee houses where they ate macrobiotic food and were entertained by monotone, untalented lesbian poets who droned for hours at poor quality microphones. Certainly, that stereotype was based in a partial truth. Yet while the image of white women crooning over their guitars might be iconic, it also reduces to caricature a culture that offered a rich, conflicted, and nuanced sense of community. For many American women who came out in the

mid-to late-'70s, going to women's music concerts and frequenting lesbian bars helped us relocate ourselves as subjects of history.

### **The Case against Women's Culture**

One of the first forms of lesbian feminist cultural production to circulate through the new, anticapitalist community-based networks was the ubiquitous coming out story. As lesbian sociologist Arlene Stein says, "Like a fictional bildungsroman, in which a character achieves self-development by making a challenging journey, the process of coming out moved the individual from one state of being to another."<sup>3</sup> The generic coming out story followed this pattern, from a prehistory of singularity and ignorance about sexual and gender differences to an enlightened, empowered description of self-actualization through a lesbian feminist community and its politics and theory. But academic scholarship that criticized experience as the foundation of lesbian feminist politics began to throw these popular, pedagogical stories into disrepute. Scholars like historian Joan Scott, whose essay "The Evidence of Experience" was a foundational part of this literature, cast doubt on the hegemony of experience as the definition of women's "truths."<sup>4</sup> In fact, feminist theorists borrowing the tenets of poststructuralism suggested that "woman" doesn't exist except as she's created by language that's always originally male. The notion that women could or should produce a separate (or separatist) culture was derided by poststructuralist scholars who believed that gender and culture are constructs of history and, as a result, fluid and changeable rather than transcendent and unique. The academic challenge to experience offered important insights into what, by the 1990s, had become an unfortunate didacticism about identity.<sup>5</sup> Alice Echols's influential essay, "The Feminism of Yin and Yang," was the first to parse feminism into liberal, cultural, and materialist; her low regard for cultural feminism became enormously persuasive.<sup>6</sup> Once the criticism of cultural feminism was launched by smart, influential commentators like Echols, abandoning its tenets became popular for feminists and lesbians swayed by poststructuralism's sexier terms and outlook.

The project of poststructuralist theory, especially in the academy, also became a legitimizing practice for interdisciplinary feminist studies. Women's studies programs and majors and minors were established on campuses across the country by activist scholars determined to create a home for research by and about women that had been precluded from conventional disciplines. But once established, often by the late '80s in the US, many of these programs found themselves under attack for being "soft" centers of "feel-good" learning, or what later came to be disparagingly called "victim studies."<sup>7</sup> The rigors of poststructuralist theory helped to raise the field's profile as a legitimate course of study. Theory made women's and feminist studies difficult and scientific and, as a result, more authoritative. The rigorous claims of poststructuralism couldn't be accused of sentimentality, whether of the "feel-good" or "victimology" sort.

Instead, poststructuralism's rationality was refreshingly *unemotional*, repressing much of the heightened activist feelings that, along with experience, had given lesbian feminism in the 1970s its breathless historical momentum. In the language of affect studies, then, the original women's studies programs were culled from the very experience and emotions that consciousness-raising groups helped craft into feminism. The initial challenge of the field was to emplot such alternative ways of knowing into the academy's institutional structures, where women's studies' new and different ways of knowing proved a productively uneasy fit. But the very emotions that fueled the field's founding—public feelings of liberation, self-knowledge, and sisterhood—were soon impugned as nontheoretical and hegemonic.

But lesbian feminism had always been a theorized practice. From Shulamith Firestone's potent *The Dialectic of Sex* to writing by collectives like the Furies and the Combahee River Collective, lesbian feminists combined Marxism, socialism, materialism, and third world feminism in their theoretical work.<sup>8</sup> And the term "lesbian" was never a stable identity or label. Adrienne Rich's foundational essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," was nothing if not an effort to parse "lesbian," to make it more fluid and open, so that more women could organize politically and affectively under its banner.<sup>9</sup> Men used the threat of lesbianism to keep women in line, creating the image of an unfeminine, unwanted being whom no straight woman would want to emulate. But when feminist anger in the late '60s and early '70s reached its boiling point, radical women transformed that very stereotype into a positive rallying cry. "WE ARE THE WOMEN THAT MEN HAVE WARNED US ABOUT," Robin Morgan nearly shouted (the caps are hers) in her prophetic essay, "Goodbye to All That" (1970).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the Radicalesbians wrote in their foundational screed, "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), "What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion."<sup>11</sup> Many 1970s lesbians defined their identities through their politics and resistant life choices, as well as or even instead of their sexual desire. As journalist Ariel Levy said, in her recent "Lesbian Nation" article in *The New Yorker*,

Now, when the phrase "lesbian mom" is a commonplace, it's hard to imagine a time when female homosexuality was imbued with a countercultural connotation so potent that women were drawn to it by ideology rather than by desire. Similarly, if you are a young gay woman today, it can be difficult to understand the idea of organizing your entire existence around your sexual preference.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, it's easy to forget how differently some lesbians lived our lives not so very long ago. Gayle Kimball, tracing what she described in the moment as the

“women’s renaissance of the seventies,” said, “We are witnessing a potentially revolutionary proliferation of women’s culture: films, music, magazines, presses, books, and bookstores; coffee houses, theatre groups, and credit unions; health clinics, women’s centers, caucuses in academic societies, and women’s-studies [sic] programs; shelters for battered women, centers for displaced homemakers, political caucuses, minority women’s groups, and international feminist groups.”<sup>13</sup> The bookstores and restaurants and theatre groups offered a material location in which to enact and embody what the Radicalesbians called “the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women’s liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution.”<sup>14</sup> Much of the women’s culture Kimball enumerates and that the Radicalesbians presaged was owned, operated, and supported by lesbian feminists, working in collectives, living in cooperatives, and defining their lives by the politics they newly embraced. Women’s culture was emphatically not what came to be called lesbian “lifestyle” politics toward the end of the twentieth century. The credit unions and coffee shops lesbian feminists frequented meant to undermine patriarchy at its capitalist core, by developing a countercultural movement that would offer a gender equitable, lesbian sex-positive way to live off the grid of—rather than happily within—mainstream dominant culture.

Saying “I am a lesbian feminist” indicated common cause with all of these political and cultural pursuits. Performance theorist Sue-Ellen Case insists that “[t]hese incantations, vocalized for political effect, were what we now term ‘performative’ language rather than, as they have been termed, ‘essentialist.’ . . . [t]hey were meant to function as a linguistic tool to break through the centuries-long tradition of patriarchal, unmarked language.”<sup>15</sup> Saying “I’m a lesbian feminist” also meant you belonged to a community, however imaginary. Identity might be a practice rather than ontology, and community might be symbolic, rather than functional, but those myths of coherence and belonging productively fueled the political movement with focus, hope, and camaraderie.<sup>16</sup> Lesbian feminist community in the 1970s, as any other community, came with its own set of norms and conventions, exclusions and elitisms. But those exclusions shifted over time and place, and were always conscious and negotiated. Men and boys over twelve weren’t allowed at the Michigan Womyn’s [sic] Music Festival, for example, but that policy always was and remains hotly debated.<sup>17</sup> The history that’s been told of women’s culture has been oversimplified to imply a lack of healthy dissent or resistance from within the ranks.

To redress this history, I draw here on my own emotional archive, experimenting with a form I call “critical memoir” to underline that in addition to mining my own affective memories of being constituted by gender, race, and sexuality, this essay is meant to be analytical and situated, considering cultural history and the expressive artifacts that shaped and continue to ground my identity.<sup>18</sup> I’m using

personal narrative to consider the relationship between individuals and communities, and to explore in anecdotal as well as theoretical detail how one lesbian feminist self-formation happened at a particular moment in time. My own experience isn't necessarily exemplary; in fact, I'm interested in demonstrating how history trickles down rather serendipitously into personal experience, in ways that are often cataclysmic, but that we can only recognize as such after the fact, only by looking back. As feminist theorist and memoirist Nancy Miller eloquently suggests, "[W]hat may look like a stubborn attachment to the past is just as powerfully a passion for what is to come in all its unknowability. Life writing is a way of moving forward into the future by revisiting the past."<sup>19</sup> My experiments with critical memoir demonstrate my belief in personal narrative's renewed vitality and relevance to our on-going effort to change public political consciousness. This return to the emotional archive of women's music, in particular, documents the affective labor required to make myself and to be made by the force of collective as well as individual moment and will. My hope is that, as Miller says, "We read the lives of others to figure out how to make sense of our own."<sup>20</sup>

### **A History of Feeling through Music**

Very early in my coming out process in the mid-'70s as an undergraduate at Boston University, desperate to find a place for myself in the world, I caught wind of a protest to be staged against the virulently antigay activist and Florida orange hawker Anita Bryant. I found my way to Boston's Copley Square, where what seemed to me to be a huge crowd of people was gathered on the green in front of Trinity Church, directly across from the hotel in which Bryant was staying. As I found a space for myself on the ground behind some women who seemed friendly, I wrapped my arms around my knees and listened to the anti-Bryant political speeches, absorbing the critique with a huge intellectual and personal thirst. But when the platform speakers began to lead everyone in refrains from the gay and lesbian political songbook, I felt my own outsidership and my simple desire to know those lyrics most keenly. The songs were Tom Robinson's anthem "Glad to be Gay" and Cris Williamson's "Song of the Soul," both easy, tuneful paeans to the gay and lesbian subjects who crowded in front of the stage, forming themselves in opposition to dominant culture. More than the political speeches of the moment, which I'm sure were equally stirring, I remember the music and how happy it made me to think that this was a political movement in which people sang together.

"Song of the Soul" was one of the most popular cuts on Williamson's 1975 hit album, *The Changer and the Changed*. The album's iconic cover showed the handsome Williamson posing, loose limbed, happy, and appealing, among the stunted cacti of Joshua Tree National Park, and reads as evidence of lesbian feminism's delight at realigning itself with nature as a place of celebration and resistance against dominant culture.<sup>21</sup> Williamson's sartorial and musical folk

stylings caught the political commitment of the '60s and translated it for '70s lesbian feminism. Her songs rang with what we would later call New Age cadences and their lyrics were odes to women-loving women. *The Changer and the Changed* sold a remarkable number of copies, given its very specific audience, during an historical moment in which women's music sold mostly through word-of-mouth; it became one of the best-selling records ever released by an independent label.<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 1. Women's music pioneer Cris Williamson, whose album *The Changer and the Changed* (1975) became one of the best-selling records ever released by an independent label. Photograph by Irene Young.

Thirty years later, teaching queer scholar Judith Halberstam's essay on women's music then and now in a course on queer performance, I learned that my students knew nothing about Williamson or her album. Halberstam discusses the song "Sweet Woman," from *The Changer and the Changed*, and compares it with a rock rendition The Butchies—a lesbian queercore band from Durham, North Carolina—created decades later.<sup>23</sup> To help them understand The Butchies' nod to women's music, I played the original song for my students. Through the several minute number, I could feel my face flush with memory and nostalgia, even as I knew most of my students were, at best, politely interested, rather than moved. Hearing Williamson's song brought rushing back my memories of a moment in lesbian feminist history they couldn't imagine. That song is a cut from the soundtrack of my life. All these years later, it's this music that lets me access the emotional archive I want to reconstruct. Hearing those chords, I feel a visceral memory that makes my skin tingle. But it's not Cris Williamson whom I remember most. The chords of her song "Sweet Woman" remind me palpably of the more quotidian



moments of the lesbian feminist culture-building in which I participated: afternoons of stuffing envelopes with flyers for political rallies on the dining room table in our collective, six-women household in Allston-Brighton; of cooking meals for one another, our turns dictated by the chore wheel hanging on our refrigerator; of shameless flirting with housemates who were in relationships with someone else, staging clandestine meetings in bathrooms for quick gropes and deep kisses; of dancing together at bars we refused to leave until the lights came up, sobering us with their fluorescent glare but never diminishing all that tremendous erotic and political feeling we enflamed in one another.

In the mid-1970s, lesbian feminism was still a subculture. The bars were one of the few public spaces available, and certainly one of the only places in which we could perform our sexual attractions and intrigues outside of our homes. Evenings at the bars became a welcome release from the feminist political work under whose auspices many lesbian feminists organized their lives. When I finally met friends who eased the process of my own coming out through feminist activism, they took me to two lesbian bars, the Saints and Somewhere, located around the corner from each other in the depths of downtown Boston. There, the university-identified lesbian feminists danced in groups of women, celebrating a new-found freedom from male-dominated space and sexual expectation. The working class dykes danced in couples in which one lead and the other followed. The lesbian feminists, who were then wary of these butch-femme couplings, couldn't quite see at the time that who led and who followed was as fluid and changeable as our own leaderless group dancing.

Prior to my first visit to the Saints, my lesbian identity had finally been declared and even consummated in some uninstructed sex with a woman for the first time, an event engineered on a cold Boston night in which a snowstorm that kept me from traveling home required her to be generous with her bed. But my sexual and political identity was still so new I felt wholly transparent, a fraud easily sniffed out by what I imagined as the lesbian authenticity police, especially at the Saints, where the bartenders seemed so weathered in their own sexuality. My emotions were heightened my first night at the bar, thrilled by having arrived at last at the beginning of a journey I'd wanted to make in an unarticulated, inchoate way for so long. But mixed with my excitement was paralyzing fear and embarrassment. I truly didn't know how to act; I was certain that I wasn't moving, dressing, or speaking correctly. I followed the model of my friends, slightly more seasoned than I was in knowing how to order at the bar, how and when to make eye contact, when to shoulder through a crowd, and when to hang back and wait for a channel to open up through these jostling lesbian bodies. I watched them and tried to learn when it was okay to look, without appearing to be staring, at all these women with whom I suddenly, presumptively had something in common.

Under cover of those windowless rooms, with their peeling vinyl booths and cigarette-burned tables, we crowded together to drink watery beer, served by bartenders who intimidated us with their butch indifference to our barely contained excitement at being so putatively free. And we danced. 1977 was well before the Indigo Girls, with their proud lesbian love songs available for purchase in mainstream stores like Tower Records. The '70s were the heyday of subcultural women's music pioneers like Williamson, Holly Near, and Meg Christian, who could only sing about women-loving women on small independent record labels that circulated through an economy so far underground, you had to be well established within it to know where to buy their albums.



Fig. 2. A poster advertising a women's music tour of California featuring Cris Williamson, Margie Adams, Meg Christian, and Holly Near. Image reprinted courtesy of Holly Near.

In the bars, we danced instead to songs with lyrics that seemed coded just for us. One of the first anthems that lead me to the floor was Sister Sledge's "We Are Family," which brought everyone to their feet, eager to wave their arms over their heads and shout together in a show of solidarity, not necessarily for feminism, but for just *being there*. Even then, many lesbians in those dank bars with their sticky bathrooms and smoky mirrors were survivors, who found their way to these unmarked spaces and arrived sweaty and triumphant. We danced to the tinkling overture of Gloria Gaynor's "I will Survive," overlooking the lyrics about

changing the lock and returning the key and rewriting the song as our own personal declarations of surviving a patriarchy that would have had us straitjacketed into marriages with men or maybe even dead. Those dance floors staged our politics and our desires. They encouraged us to look at one another, and the most brazen among us did, letting their eyes travel the length of a body, to linger on the places where our ubiquitous flannel shirts loosened from our jeans and showed some of the flesh about which we could finally be openly fascinated and desirous. The bars let me inhabit a body that for too long curried self-hatred as self-protection. Through the heady pleasure of the music, I could experiment with a bodily connection to myself and other women that began to stir an articulated emotional life.

We went to the bars almost every night the first few years after I came out. But during the day, we immersed ourselves in the political work of a movement whose nascent theory undergirded our evening's pleasure. All the activities in which I participated then were run nonhierarchically; they were open to anyone. Desire, commitment, and a willingness to work were all that was required. As feminist historians Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon say, "Women's liberation gave rise to a variety of woman-owned and woman-operated enterprises. . . . In the early years of the movement, these operated with ultra-democratic principles characteristic of the 1960s: the businesses were nonprofit, everyone was encouraged to learn all the skills, and there were few if any wage differentials. The enterprises were often run with collective decision-making, and they sought above all to serve and empower women."<sup>24</sup> This exceedingly open, adamantly nonexpert way of conducting business eventually made it difficult for lesbian feminist culture to survive beyond the first flush of its initial success, but being valued without judgment was enormously enabling for the women who worked with these organizations.

I wrote theatre and film reviews for *Sojourner*, the collectively-run feminist monthly newspaper out of Cambridge where I was one of the very few arts writers. I urged feminist theatre and film criticism onto a collective who felt the arts weren't as important as more urgent political projects like women's reproductive rights, lesbian equality, racial inequities, passing the ERA, and all the other social and legislative battles being fought at the time. Film and theatre somehow aligned with pleasures that weren't significant enough when the feminist movement was just getting off the ground politically. And the '70s weren't the era for feminist cultural *criticism*; instead, this was the moment of women's cultural *production*, when making things that looked and felt new and women-appropriate was much more significant than looking at the rest of culture critically from a feminist perspective.<sup>25</sup>

Women's music was then the preeminent form of lesbian feminist cultural production, an underground pleasure to which my lesbian feminist friends and I turned for one of the only available public affirmations of our sexual and political lives. The first women's music concert I attended was in the Sanders Theatre on the Harvard campus, across the river from where I lived in Allston-Brighton. I didn't

know the performer, a woman named Holly Near, but my friends had already keyed into the cultural network her music represented. Walking into Harvard's Memorial Hall and the theatre it housed, I was shocked to be surrounded by a crowd of almost exclusively women who weren't drinking and who were wearing their coats and moving through a well-lit public space instead of a dark bar. Holding tightly to the people I knew as we passed among strangers calling to one another with excitement, I again experienced that frisson of inauthenticity. I was sure that something on my face or in my bearing would reveal me as a fraud in the very environment through which I so wanted to move as inconspicuous and typical, as just another lesbian feminist among the glorious hordes assembled that evening.

But once Near stepped out onto the stage and opened her mouth to sing, I understood that I would find my way among these women. Near's was the first lesbian feminist body I ever saw publicly adored, the first I saw use theatrical charisma to pull together a rag-tag audience into my first inkling of what a community might feel like. Near was a brilliant performer, full of old-fashioned stage presence honed from her years performing in more conventional musical theatre and touring with Jane Fonda, Donald Sutherland, and others in a show Fonda produced called "Free the Army." After that tour politicized Near, she reports in her autobiography, "[M]y energy was going into political music and peace work. It was not the music of the sixties. It was not exactly folk music in any traditional sense. I didn't play the guitar and my singing style was a mixture of folk, pop, and musical theatre. The lyrics and presentation were becoming more feminist-oriented, and I was finding a hungry audience."<sup>26</sup> Her voice was brassy and bold, colored with the cadences of Broadway that made even the folk songs she sang ring a bit more brightly.

Near knew how to put over a song, creating with her voice and her address a proud community of women. In fact, the major record labels hadn't been interested in her material because, as one company representative told her advocates at the time, she "wouldn't become a successful pop vocalist because there was no element of submission in [her] voice."<sup>27</sup> At her concert that night in Cambridge, Near performed us into our lesbian feminism through her physical display of ease and pride and her distinct and palpable pleasure in singing among us. She generated moments I've come to call "utopian performatives," live moments of performance that create, in their doing, a fleeting sense of what utopia might feel like, as the music lifted us up and out of ourselves in an ephemeral but powerful moment of belonging and community.<sup>28</sup>

### **Women's Music as Lesbian Feminist Cultural Production**

Most commentators say that women's music began as a named phenomenon in 1969, when openly lesbian folk singer Maxine Feldman first sang "Angry Atthis" in gay and lesbian bars.<sup>29</sup> Her plea for recognition and her plaint against sexism

and homophobia became the first women's music record to be released as a 45-rpm single, produced by lesbian comedian Robin Tyler. Tyler successfully toured the country in the 1970s, performing at colleges and universities. Feldman opened for her by singing "Angry Atthis."<sup>30</sup> Although the Michigan Womym's Music Festival quickly became synonymous with women's music culture, by the late '70s, the burgeoning sphere of entertainment and politics had prompted the establishment of companies like Olivia Records and Redwood Records, which was Holly Near's recording home.<sup>31</sup>

Olivia was formed by an enterprising group of Washington, D.C.-based radical feminist members of the Furies and the Radicalesbians, who fell in love with Cris Williamson's music.<sup>32</sup> They approached the lesbian icon after a concert, telling Williamson "they wanted to start a women's business that would be an economically viable tool for organizing, and that would be good for lesbians. . . . Cris had said, 'Why don't you start a record company?' And they did. They'd formed the Olivia Collective."<sup>33</sup> Women's music distribution and production companies like the D.C.-based Roadworks set up shop around the country in the early and mid-'70s to facilitate the music's spread and the lesbian feminist politics it preached by organizing tours for popular musicians on what quickly became a coffeehouse circuit.<sup>34</sup>

Women's music, like the rest of women's culture in the '70s, experimented with new ways of valuing art and work. It was mostly produced by people with no prior experience, women determined to make up new organizational structures through an idealized mix of politics and pragmatism.<sup>35</sup> Most of these women were "amateurs" in the true sense of the word; they loved the work and were driven by a culture of enthusiasm and desire.<sup>36</sup> Despite what Naomi Weisstein, who performed with the Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band, calls "enthusiasm-in-place-of-expertise (or 'militant amateurism'),"<sup>37</sup> women's music production companies at the time took their mission quite seriously.<sup>38</sup> They knew how much lesbian feminist communities needed to see these women musicians perform, to validate identities that had no public mirrors in which to see themselves affirmed. Describing a performance at the San Diego Women's Music Festival in 1975, Near said her audience came prepared to "listen to the music that many had waited all their lives to hear."<sup>39</sup> Since lesbian feminists were invisible in dominant culture, the idea that we could speak or sing to one another in large public forums seemed both exciting and astonishing, and made it worth all the unpaid labor required to bring these musicians to town. As scholar Maida Tilchen says, "There wasn't any tradition or precedent for the tours, but somehow the performers were able to find volunteers in various towns who would find a place and a sound system, publicize the concert, and try to convince women in their communities to risk their money and see this innovation."<sup>40</sup>

Women's music was pedagogical in the 1970s. In addition to building community through the fervent feeling inspired by its performers, the music itself delivered political meanings in a folk/popular style that taught audiences the issues and guided us toward activism. Before I heard Near sing, I didn't know about the freedom struggles in El Salvador or South Africa. Before I saw Susan Freundlich signing her concerts for the hearing-impaired, I hadn't thought about what it would mean to be differently abled in American culture.<sup>41</sup> Women's music provided moments of intense public and private pleasure and also schooled us in the simplest precepts of lesbian feminism. Those performers were our teachers as well as our heroes.

Women's music and other cultural productions of the moment let many people access transformative emotions that propelled them into politically activist work. I palpably recall the tremors of wonder and awe that coursed through Holly Near's and Cris Williamson's concerts. Hundreds of women gathered in Boston during those years to take pleasure in music that spoke to them and of them in large public spaces. Many of them were white, college-educated, and middle-class, but many of them were also women of color and women who paid for their tickets on the sliding fee scale through which lesbian feminists made more widely accessible the culture they built. Many of the performers were women of color; Gwen Avery and Linda Tillery, Mary Watkins and Pat Parker, Toshi Reagon and Big Lovely, and Casselberry and Duprée regularly performed alongside Near and Williamson, and Alix Dobkin and Meg Christian.

The emotional archive women's music calls forth taps into a moment in political history in which *feelings* were vital for refashioning subjectivities, and when alternative cultural production was a place to evoke and capture those founding emotions. Lesbian feminist communities were fraught and emphatically partial in the 1970s, but they were rich with the buzz of the zeitgeist, with the drenched atmosphere of political fermentation and urgency. They were protective and sustaining before they became dogmatic and confining. And they need the same scholarly excavation and remembering brought to other aspects of LGBTQ life. As Ann Cvetkovich says, "[T]he archive demanded by gay and lesbian history is an emotional one. It not only demands new kinds of evidence but also requires that we think about evidence as an emotional category. Because gay and lesbian history . . . is produced through memory as much as through documents, those in search of the past must construct an archive through the work of emotional investment."<sup>42</sup> I think about the feelings produced by dancing in lesbian bars and going to hear women's music with just this sense of emotional investment. I can cast about my home for photos and ephemera from my lesbian feminist life in the '70s, but ultimately, those emotional historical moments are best evoked by remembering the culture-building that produced sustaining and empowering affective investments in reimagining an equitable collective future.<sup>43</sup>



## Notes

1. Holly Near, with Derek Richardson, *Fire in the Rain . . . Singer in the Storm: An Autobiography* (New York: William Morrow, 1990) 225.
2. For explications and examples of affect studies across disciplines, see Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, eds., *Political Emotions* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Erin Hurley, *Theatre & Feeling* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
3. Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997) 48.
4. Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (Summer 1991): 773-97.
5. For an investigation of the dynamics of lesbian feminist dogmatism and cultural production, see Stacy Wolf, "All About Eve: Apple Island and the Fictions of Lesbian Community," *New Theatre Quarterly* 10.37 (1994): 28-32.
6. Alice Echols, "The New Feminism of Yin and Yang," *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983) 440-59.
7. Camille Paglia was one of the foremost proponents of this antiwomen's studies line, along with other pseudo-feminist pundits like Katie Roiphe. See Paglia's various essay collections, including *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992) and *Vamps & Tramps: New Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1994) and Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1993).
8. See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow, 1970); for information about the DC-based Furies collective, see <<http://washingtonart.com/beltway/furies.html>>, accessed January 22, 2012; and for the Combahee River Collectives' manifesto, see <<http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>>, accessed January 22, 2012.
9. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5.4 (1980): 631-660.
10. Robin Morgan, "Goodbye to all That," *Going Too Far* (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1977) 121-30.
11. Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, eds. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 107.
12. Ariel Levy, "Lesbian Nation: When Gay Women Took to the Road," *The New Yorker* 2 March 2009, 33, accessed 18 January 2012 <[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/02/090302fa\\_fact\\_levy](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/02/090302fa_fact_levy)>.
13. Gayle Kimball, *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981) 23.
14. Radicalesbians 109.
15. Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 3.
16. See, for example, Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), on the importance of emotion to political movement.
17. At "In Amerika They Call Us Dykes: Lesbians Lives in the 70s," the historic conference revisiting lesbian feminism at the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies (CLAGS) at the City University of New York in October 2010, the question of gender separatism at the Michigan festival was still the most provocative topic addressed. See the conference schedule, archived at <[www.70slesbians.org](http://www.70slesbians.org)>. Accessed January 18, 2012.
18. This essay is part of a larger project-in-process tentatively titled *From Flannel to Fleece: Women's Cultural Productions, 1970-1990*.
19. Nancy Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People's Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 137.
20. Miller 137.
21. Cris Williamson, *The Changer and the Changed* (Oakland, CA: Olivia Records, 1975).
22. *AfterEllen.com* reports that it has sold over 500,000 copies since its release. See Sarah Warn, "Back in the Day," 5 May 2005, accessed 18 January 2012 <<http://www.afterellen.com/column/2005/6/backintheday.html>>.
23. See Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
24. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, eds., *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 79.

25. Though Sara Warner reminds me that there was cultural criticism, of a sort, in women's publications like *The Ladder*, which featured book, movie, and music reviews.

26. Near 78.

27. Near 79.

28. See my *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

29. For information on the history of women's music, see, among other scholarship, Nancy S. Love, "'Singing for our Lives': Women's Music and Democratic Politics," *Hypatia* 17.4 (2002): 71-94; Bonnie Morris, *Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals* (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson Books, 1999); Boden Sandstrom, "Women's Music: Passing the Legacy," *Women's Culture in a New Era: A Feminist Revolution?* ed. Gayle Kimball (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005) 99-135; Ruth Scovill, "Women's Music," *Women's Culture: Renaissance of the Seventies*, ed. Gayle Kimball (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981) 148-162; and Arlene Stein, "Androgyny Goes Pop: But is it Lesbian Music?" *Sisters, Sexperts, and Queers: Beyond Lesbian Nation* (New York: Plume, 1993) 96-109.

30. Rebecca Krefting, "Robin Tyler: Chuckling Towards a Queer Intersectional Politics," unpublished manuscript, 22.

31. See <<http://www.michfest.com/>>. Olivia Records became a lesbian-oriented travel company, and is now planning to celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary as an independent entity (in 2013); see <[www.olivia.com](http://www.olivia.com)>.

32. Jennifer Baumgardner, "Womyn's Music 101," *F 'em!: Goo Goo, Gaga, and Some Thoughts on Balls* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2011) 41.

33. Near 107. Olivia was "named for a feisty heroine in a pulp novel who fell in love with her headmistress at a French boarding school . . . In 1973 the collective put out a 45 with Meg Christian on one side and Cris Williamson on the other" (Baumgardner 40).

34. In Dee Mosbacher and Boden Sandstrom's documentary about the heyday of women's music, *Radical Harmonies*, many of the women interviewed recall that women musicians on the road at the time just wanted places to play. Dee Mosbacher and Boden Sandstrom, producers, *Radical Harmonies* (San Francisco: Woman Vision, 2002; videodisc).

35. Even the vocabulary, at the time, was newly circulating. Near tells a story about insisting, in her touring contract, that all housing for her and her band be "chemical-free space," to avoid the criminal implications of the drug culture rampant in some communities at the time. She says this was because she didn't want to run into trouble with police when she toured. Near recalls, "Often when we did benefits or community events in a town, folks would generously offer their homes for me and my group to stay at. This saved costly hotel expenses. We arrived at one woman's home a little early and found her doing last-minute cleaning. She had her arms full of containers from under the kitchen sink. She apologized and said, 'I'm sorry, I was just told it is in your contract that you need chemically free space.' Bless her heart, she was literally taking all the chemicals out of her house" (Near 157). The amusing anecdote also underlines that language that has come to be universally understood and representative of particular kinds of community practices and mores ("chemical-free," "scent-free," "smoke-free," etc.) were in the mid-'70s just being established as the new lexicon.

36. Thanks to Erin Hurley for this insight.

37. Naomi Weisstein, "Days of Celebration and Resistance: The Chicago Women's Liberation Rock Band, 1970-1973," *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement*, eds. Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 306.

38. And many went on to become sought after sound engineers (Sandy Stone and Boden Sandstrom), lighting designers (Leni Schwendinger), and music producers and distributors.

39. Near 107.

40. Maida Tilchen, "Lesbians and Women's Music," *Women-Identified Women*, eds. Trudy Darty and Sandee Potter (Mayfield, 1984) 291.

41. See her website at <<http://www.susanfreundlich.com/html/about.html>>. Accessed 18 January 2012. Freundlich in fact pioneered the now common practice of signing for the hearing-impaired at music events.

42. Ann Cvetkovich, "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture," *Camera Obscura* 49, 17.1 (2002): 137. See also her book, *An Archive of Feeling: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

43. I'd like to thank special issue editors Erin Hurley and Sara Warner for their smart engagements with drafts of this essay, and for their intellectual and affective support and encouragement throughout this project.