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THE MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL:
BUILDING A LESBIAN COMMUNITY

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THE MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL: BUILDING A LESBIAN COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

THE MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL:
BUILDING A LESBIAN COMMUNITY

By

Mary A. Gebhart

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival has played a significant role in building both a national and an international lesbian community. How has it lasted more than two decades? And how has the festival come to be function as a site of lesbian community building?

The festival promotes lesbian community building through the use of a physical space to create a women-only environment that emphasizes inclusive acknowledgment of difference; radical musical performances which allow for the negotiation of conflicts, and the commodification of women's music and culture. Using ethnographic data (mainly interviews and festival visits), primary sources (*Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture*), and secondary sources this thesis attempts to historicize each of the three issues, analyze selected events, and pose new questions regarding lesbian commuinty building within the context of the festival.

To all lesbians who have made, and continue to make, the festival community a reality.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FAF.....Festival of American Folklife

MWMF.....Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

NWMF.....National Women's Music Festival

WILD.....Women's Independent Label Distribution Network

INTRODUCTION

In 1976 a group of lesbian feminist musicians and their supporters joined together to create the "Mother of All Festivals," the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF). Designed to promote the value and emphasize the significance of women's music, women's material culture and women's relationships with one another, the MWMF used other festivals (i.e. folklife and Native American Pow Wows) as models for creating a public, yet private space for women. More than twenty years have passed since the first MWMF, and yet every year more than 5,000 women continue to travel from all over the world to spend a week camping in the woods of northwestern lower Michigan, listening to music created and performed by women, buying goods and services designed for women by women, and participating in workshops (designed) to strengthen political, social, economic, and romantic relationships between women.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival's creation of a separate but public sphere can be read as a feminist explication of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's notion of the "public sphere" and the discursive and practical ways in

which this sphere serves as a structurally transformative force within civil society. In the early 1970s, women, particularly lesbians, recognized that not only was their access to the structures that defined popular/mainstream music limited, but also that utilizing capitalist principles while not their primary motivation was, however, a necessity. The founders viewed the festival as not only promoting the relevance and worth of women's cultural expressions, but also as a way of subverting the hegemonic ideology that implicitly (if not explicitly) valued men's expressions of culture over those of women. The festival was not viewed as an "us" against "them" proposition, and the point was *not* to create a "separate but equal" sphere in which women could play music in the same way that men were playing music, but to create an egalitarian community that promoted not only the good of the individual artist but also that of the larger community. Echoing Habermas's narrative of modernity: the rise of the public sphere (against great political obstacles posed by censorship and other forms of political despotism practiced by the absolutist state), and its triumph (in the vibrant institutions of a free press, clubs, philosophical societies and the cultural life of early liberal society and through the revolutionary establishment of parliamentary and

democratic regimes)[1], women viewed the festival as a site (both discursive and physical) on which to build an inclusive women's community.

The nature of this community would be both public and private. It would be *public*, because *all* women would be encouraged to attend the festival and participate in creating and continuing practices designed to promote women's music, culture and relationships, and *private*, because the festival would include *only* women, and more specifically would focus on lesbians and the lesbian community. This paralleled what Habermas reconstructed as the particular contours of the modern public sphere: the *institutionalization of equality* irrespective of social status; the *reassignment of meaning* to cultural commodities based on communication between private citizens; and *inclusion as a practice* rather than a theory (in principle, everyone could participate).[2]

The institutionalization of *equality* and *inclusion* as practice are expressed in the sliding festival fee-scale (which ranges anywhere from $250.00 to 500.00 and the "more if you can, less if you can't" principle whereby women who are more financially able are encouraged to pay the higher

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[1]Joan B. Landes. "Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere:* A Feminist Inquiry." *Praxis International* 12:1, (April, 1992): p.107.

[2]Landes, p.110.

admission price so that women who might otherwise not be able to afford the festival can pay a lower admission price). The festival's mission statement explains that "...[at the MWMF] we create and experience a unique culture here. ...we have our own unique, deeply felt ethics and social guidelines ...knowing that we have an opportunity to create community that can reflect the values and priorities that are truly important to us...our community welcomes all womyn..."[3]

There are, according to Habermas, practical limitations to this particular model of the public sphere as tension arises between the *formal criteria* of abstract moral reason and *the goals* of substantive rationality.[4] The MWMF provides a discursively complex site in which negotiations over a multitude of issues take place - radical political activism, explicit sexuality, racial and class issues, hetero/homo/ bisexual orientation. Discussions of the theoretical application of these principals, in very real and physical actions, occur in the daily context of festival life.

Negotiation of sexuality and issues surrounding sexuality has continued since the beginning of the festival. Festival founders viewed the exclusion of men as necessary

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[3]1997 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Program, Michigan State University Special Collections, (2).

[4]Landes, p.111.

for the construction of a women's community dedicated to the needs of women, and especially lesbians. Lesbian musicians already faced exclusion from dominant hegemonic structures that traditionally valued and commodified heterosexual relationships in music. Songs that served to illustrate lesbian love relationships or challenge patriarchal norms were ignored if not censored by mainstream record companies. The creation of a separate public sphere was an absolute necessity not only for the survival of women's music but also for the survival of the burgeoning lesbian community, and as the women's liberation movement grabbed hold of the nation's conscious-ness it demanded equality for all women. Feminists, and especially lesbian feminists, were interested in bringing women's culture to women and creating a public space that focused solely on women's achievements as musicians. However, women's music festivals were not simply a by-product of the early feminist movements.

The women who were involved in organizing the first festivals heavily identified with leftist political movements (student, counter-culture, and Civil Rights) and recognized the need for performance spaces which would be open only to women. Many of the women also identified as *lesbian-separatists*, which increased tensions when they tried to

negotiate contracts for performance spaces, as well as increasing tension between the women themselves. This would later manifest itself in the (grudging and still controversial) compromise over admitting boy-children to the festival grounds. These women also rejected the dictates of patriarchal musical culture that placed heavy emphasis on misogynistic and sexist lyrics, and the use of women as "objects of desire" rather than talented musicians, songwriters and/or performers, and rejecting capitalist ideology underlying the mainstream music communities - that the bottom line had to precede artistic integrity. This would become problematic when the economic needs of the independent record companies and those of the performers meant that profit *had* to be considered, and the notion of an egalitarian, "need" based community had to be deferred in order to continue making music. The tension that this produced would serve as yet another site of negotiation and another opportunity to further construct a lesbian community.

Women were also looking for a way to place female musicians, who were already out on the road performing, squarely in the spotlight. Pam Sisson, a performer in Lansing, Michigan, was involved in the early era of the women's music movement and explains how early "out" lesbian

performers broke into the music business:

> The old guard did that...we got out there on the radio and T.V. when it was *not popular*. I remember doing a radio show in Flint, and my minister said "Oh my god, I can't believe you did that right after the 700 Club!"...that really reactionary show. And I said "Well..oh well." You just do it...these really nervy things.[5]

Not only were lesbians out of the closet and on the radio, but they were also performing in smaller venues around the country. These performance spaces were usually on liberal college campuses or at community centers in more liberal feminist communities. Rather than directly confronting patriarchy, women's music for the most part ignored it, and by its very existence, created an alternative culture.[6]

Ignoring dominant culture was not enough to ensure the survival of women's music, and it soon became apparent that the intersection of women performers seeking a place to play women-centered music, political organizers seeking a cooperative work environment, and feminists and lesbians seeking music to reaffirm their lifestyles and experiences could be harnessed to create a space in which women's music could not only survive, but also thrive.[7] This generation of lesbians would come to be known as the "old guard" (as Pam

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[5]Personal interview, March 13, 1997.

[6]Cynthia M. Lont. "Women's Music: No Longer a Small Private Party." in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*. ed. Reebee Garafalo. (New York, 1986): p.243.

Sisson points out) or the "founding mothers" (i.e. Holly Near, Meg Chrisitian, Alix Dobkin, and Kay Gardner) of the women's music movement.

As the founders sought to create a festival where women's music and culture would be recognized, valued and shared they were forced to confront the hard realities of a women only space: Who would be allowed to attend the festival? All women or only women who identified as lesbians? What about women with children (specifically male children)? Who would be allowed to perform? Again, all women or only women identified as lesbians? If the aim of the festival was to create a more egalitarian community of women then how would they attract women of color? Economically disadvantaged women? Women with disabilities? How would they define the term "lesbian?" And in 1995 with the transgender community knocking at the gates, the festival would be forced to re-define the term "womyn." Could male to female transgendered persons attend the festival? If not, then could female to male transgendered persons continue to attend? The festival finally settled on the definition "womyn born womyn" as a way of defining who would be allowed to attend the festival and who would not.

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[7]Lont, p.243.

Interestingly, on-going debate forced the women organizing and attending the festival to re-evaluate the idea of a lesbian community. What was a lesbian community? What was a lesbian for that matter? How could lesbians build communities at the festival and still include heterosexual women? Were women in the S/M (sado-masochistic) community just practicing another form of violence against women or was it a way of women reclaiming oppressive patriarchal practices and exerting agency? And of equal importance, were these women *really* lesbians?

One of the problems with trying to define lesbian identity and community was that in doing so it served to reify and reinforce the differences between heterosexual and homosexual rather than blurring the boundaries. A number of scholars have demonstrated that the construction of homosexuality and lesbianism, in particular, as a "third sex" leaves conventional assumptions of gender polarity and normal heterosexuality intact by containing difference in a third, static category.[8] Creation and perpetuation of a lesbian community involves exclusion in some areas which then becomes a question of whether or not to fracture the women's

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[8]Biddy Martin. "Sexual Practice and Changing Lesbian Identities" in *Femininity Played Straight.* (New York, 1996): p.102.

community at large or leave it intact, but rather how to create a community based on an inclusive acknowledgment of difference.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is a self-acknowledged lesbian oriented community. This is made obvious in every aspect of the festival, from the program, which begins with the statement that "Our community...is uniquely infused with a strong and beautiful lesbian spirit" and ends with a note from the producer to the volunteer workers which thanks "...the women who leave their homes for the summer, who leave their countries for a month, who leave their girlfriends, jobs, animals and flush toilets to contribute their energy to the making of this Festival."[9] Lesbians take to the stages as performers, conduct workshops designed to help build relationships between women (political, social and romantic), and as artisans and crafts-women, designing products for lesbians. And from the beginning of the festival it was made clear that bringing together the lesbian community would have to be done with close attention paid to not only the issue of sexuality, but also age, ability, race and economic class.

Yet, however egalitarian the founders wished the

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[9]1997 MWMF Program, p.2.

festival to be, they recognized that in order for the festival to continue and for women (particularly the performers) to benefit from the knowledge and skills gained at the festival, there had to be a practical, economic component attached to the festival. The music community needed women with skills in producing, engineering, recording, sound, lighting, and technical stage experience, and the women needed a place in which to learn these skills. The founders (some of whom happened to be part of the Olivia Records Collective, the first record company devoted solely to the music of women performers, mainly lesbians), in conjunction with the newly formed distribution network (WILD) realized that in order to control the output of women's music they were going to have to find a way to control the modes of production.

This desire to control the modes of production reflects a neo-Marxist analysis of commercial popular (and public) culture. Following the wave of recent scholarship base on Antonio Gramsci, public culture can be viewed as neither pure corporate manipulation nor as pure grassroots expression, but as contested territory where hegemonic and oppositional values symbolically or explicitly engage each

other.[10] Artists become commodified through the dissemination of the mass media, thus taking away the ability of the community to make music and broadening the meaning of such music as it expands to include commercial communities. Individuals and communities are denied the ability to make their own music, thus removing individual and community solidarity formed through the music-making process. Individuals and communities are increasingly forced to rely on productions of the mass media to determine their musical needs. It is in this way that the entertainment industry manipulates and exploits the individual and the community making it more difficult for alternate forms of music to be procduced and distributed.[11] The founders of the MWMF recognized the need to by-pass the traditional record production companies and to gain control of the production and distribution of women's music, and the festival seemed to be just the place to start.

In this thesis I propose to address a variety of issues linked to the creation and continuation of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Among these are the creation of the festival and the relationship between the festival and the

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[10]Peter Manuel. *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India.* (Chicago, 1993): p.10.

[11]Manuel, p.12.

attempts (and successes) at building a lesbian community through the festival practices. I will address the issues of physical space based on Jürgen Habermas's theory of public versus private space and the resulting tension that arises from a nostalgic view of "public culture" encountering the everyday life of the festival. I believe that this results in positive community building, though not necessarily easily achieved. Some of these issues address the use of physical space and the role it plays in conflict and negotiation within the festival environment, the uses of music within particular physical spaces, and the role of physical space in relationships between women with differing backgrounds in race, age, ability, sexuality, and socio-economic class. I will then discuss the creation of a lesbian community through the festival, viewing lesbianism as a critical site of *gender deconstruction* that allows for inclusive acknowledgment of difference rather than as a unitary experience with a singular political, social, economic or sexual meaning. Finally, I will address the commodification of women's music and what can be loosely described as women's culture, taking a neo-Marxist perspective in which "democratic-participant" forms of mass media (read: women's music) present new possibilities for alternative forms of control, content, and

effects.[12] The intersection of these three (issues) not only makes connections between the building of lesbian communities and women's music festivals, but also poses new questions regarding the future of lesbian communities and of the festival itself.

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[12]Manuel, p.3.

Chapter 1

Festival and Physical Space

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival follows the scripted yet spontaneous outline that defines festival interaction and plays an integral role in formation and continuation of communities and community identity, while also displaying certain common characteristics that identify the event as 'festival.' Festivals "...occur at calendrically regulated intervals and are public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene and purpose [,]"[1] and focus on group life using systems of reciprocity and shared responsibility to reinforce the commonalties and shared identity of the group. Spaces are carved out for performers and participants, though at times the line between the two may become blurred. This is seen not only as a positive aspect of festival but is also actively encouraged and sought out. There are many components that make up a festival experience, and in this chapter I will discuss the construction of the Michigan

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[1] Beverly J. Stoeltje. "Festival." in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainment: A Communications-centered Handbook.* ed. Richard Bauman. (Oxford, 1992): p.261.

Womyn's Music Festival (both metaphorical and physical) and the ways in which the physical space of the festival contributes to lesbian community building.

Festivals are representations of cultural and communal beliefs that are expressed in public ways. However, the definition of what is 'public' varies according to the needs of the community and the function of the particular festival. Each festival has its own structure of organization, terms of participation, and historical and social meaning for the community, thus creating what Richard Bauman terms "traditionalization"[2] in that festival performers and their audiences situate themselves within socially constituted and structured festival experiences (i.e.workshops, musical/dance /comedic performances) which are already imbued with meaning but allow for additional interpretation or infusion of new meaning. According to Beverly Stoeltje,

> Quite commonly, however, indigenous practices survived under a new name, disguising their origins. These became known as festival or fiesta, in contrast to ritual, which became the serious occasions focusing on male authority legitimated by modern official religion. In an effort to denigrate indigenous religious practices, modern religion thus assigned festival to a position peripheral to the core of ritual life...As a result

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[2]Richard Bauman. "Contextualization, Tradition, and the Dialogue of Genres: Icelandic Legends of the *Kraftaskald*." in *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*. ed. Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin. *Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language*, 11. (Cambridge, England, 1992): p.125-145.

> ritual is associated with official religion, whereas festival designates occasions considered to be pagan, recreational, or for children.[3]

A close look at the physically and socially constructed components that make up each festival provides insight into the parameters of significance for both festival performers and participants. This also reveals fundamental transformations within specific communities, in this case the lesbian community, brought about, in the case of the MWMF, by the continual negotiation and renegotiation of space - political, social, communal and sexual. It is because of the physical boundaries provided by the festival land that women are able to express individual identities as well as participate in a community that is focused on women. What is significant about the physical boundaries of the MWMF is that they are used not only to create a safe, communal living experience for the women attending the festival, but also used to monitor community identity and activities, thus reinforcing what the festival (and larger lesbian community) considers "lesbian." Interestingly, the festival has chosen to negotiate controversial issues of individual and group identities, as in the cases of the transgender and leather communities, rather than making hard and fast rules that

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[3] Stoeltje, p.262.

leave no room for negotiation. It is my belief that the festival's physical space and boundaries play a major role in conflict, negotiation and the building of lesbian communities.

Much like the MWMF, Native American Pow Wows provide a concrete example of festival and the varying degrees of community interactions. Pow Wows serve as a glue for Native American communities in a variety of ways; spiritually, socially, economically, and politically; offering the members of the communities a way in which to express their individuality while maintaining a connection to traditional, historical and/or contemporary identities. Pow Wow serves as an historical memory and as contemporary culture, providing a physical space in which to transmit and express differing facets of Native American identity. As Marsha MacDowell and Arnie Parish point out, a Pow Wow is "...a time and place to honor past and present community members, to celebrate life and creation, to give thanks, to enjoy the company of family and friends, and to pass on the knowledge of elders to

youth."[4] Pow Wows are movable festivals so that the community must come together in different locations constructing and reconstructing the physical/social/ spiritual space year after year. This reconstruction is an acknowledgment of sorts which allows for new ideas while continuing to preserve traditional ways, as if indicating that the physical surroundings matter less than the participants. Pow Wows differ from women's music festivals in that the main foci of Pow Wow are traditional tribal dance and the continuation of tribal culture rather than highlighting individual musical performances or accomplishments. However, both festivals have commonalties such as limited advertising (using mainly word-of-mouth or ads placed in newspapers that are specifically designed to reach each community) and remaining non-commercial. In recent years the Native American dance community has sought "...audiences to help support the event[s] economically as well as to share in other educational, social and cultural activities."[5] The MWMF is exclusive, and does not view support from the general public

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[4] Marsha McDowell & Arnie Parish. "Pow Wows in Michigan." from *Contemporary Great Lakes Pow Wow Regalia* ed. Marsha McDowell. (East Lansing, MI, 1996): p.8.

[5] Charlotte Heth. "Native American Dance, Ceremonies and Social Traditions." from *Contemporary Great Lakes Pow Wow Regalia.* ed. Marsha McDowell. (East Lansing, MI, 1996): p.4.

as something necessary or desirable.[6]

Also tied into this issue is that of the festival's unusual business status, though it could qualify for non-profit status it has never opted to file as such with the IRS. One of the main reasons for this choice is that as a non-profit corporation the festival (and the women running it) would be subject to governmental interference: by paying taxes the cooperative remains free to do as it pleases. This is not to say that one type of festival is more valuable than another, or that only one approach to festival is "legitimate." It simply denotes the different ways in which the festival is manifested within specific groups as well as pointing out the very different reasons behind creation and continuation of festivals.

Another type of festival which grounds itself in ways similar to the Pow Wow, is that of the folklife festivals, particularly those supported by the Smithsonian Institute and more specifically, the Festival of American Folklife. Founded in 1967 the Festival of American Folklife [FAF] "...has had an enormous influence on publicly oriented

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[6] This is not to say that Native American festivals/ceremonies are all open to the public as many ceremonies are carried out in private spaces away from non-tribal audiences, nor is this saying that women's music festivals exist solely for the benefit of women. Rather, what I am trying to emphasize here is that like the lesbian community, the Native American community constantly negotiates the question of what constitutes the basis of a given identity.

folklife programming in the United States, because of the scale and vigor of the festival, its location in the nation's capital, and the caliber of its staff. The festival has served as a training ground for many public-sector folklorists...and the FAF format has become a model for productions in many other locales."[7]

Much like the MWMF, the FAF functions in a number of different ways: legitimizing and emphasizing folklife and folk culture as well as creating economic opportunity for performers and craftspeople. The FAF allows those people whose skills and stories might not otherwise be seen or told a space in which to display these talents and tales. However, there are some major differences which stem from the amount of money the Smithsonian allots for FAF (though surprisingly participants are not paid a great deal and most honoraria must be supplemented to cover the costs of traveling to and staying at the festival) and the basic overall function of the festival. Unlike the MWMF, the FAF advertises to a wide range of people hoping to draw large crowds. The FAF takes place over a two week period on the Mall in Washington D.C. where members of the Smithsonian

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[7]Richard Bauman, et. al. *Reflections on the Folklife Festival* (Bloomington, Ind., 1992): p.4.

staff set up the displays, exhibits and performance areas, whereas the MWMF lasts one week on privately owned land in a remote area of northwestern lower Michigan and solicits volunteer worker teams who arrive up to five weeks before the festival (and are not paid for the work) in order to set up the festival site, and remain from one to four weeks after the festival to help breakdown the site. The FAF is less about specifically *passing on* folklife and folk culture and more about *showing* audiences examples of these things, whereas the MWMF is about active participation *in* festival activities, workshifts, and performances.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival functions as a modern form of cultural production: complex, scheduled, heightened, and participatory events in which symbolically resonant cultural goods and values are placed on public display.[8] The festival serves as a way in which to not only legitimize women's culture, and more specifically, lesbian culture, but also as a way of producing and distributing it. Women travel across the country and the globe to attend the festival for many different reasons: the chance to connect and reconnect with a wider women's/lesbian community, the opportunity to see favorite female musicians perform live, to

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[8]Bauman, p.1.

be able to purchase goods (such as music, clothing, artwork and literature) that might not otherwise be available in women's' home communities, and to experience the feeling of living in a women-only community for a limited time.

While the overall *stated* purpose of the festival is to transmit the value of women's culture and music, negotiation of difference occupies a large portion of the festival week. What is interesting about these negotiations is that they all involve the use of physical space - whether or not to show certain films or which bands will play on which stages at what times. Each year the festival deals with community tensions which spring from a variety of sources, and must come up with ways to negotiate these differences, all in all the festival and the women attending festival have been remarkably successful in finding ways to do this.

There are several reasons that the festival has been so successful in negotiating difference. The first is that the physical layout of the land allows for the partitioning off of separate spaces, and the second is the consistency of the physical layout of festival space. Holding the festival on the same land every year makes it possible to lay out boundaries that allow for a wide range of activities to take place during the festival.

The consistency of the festival also revolves around the fact that it must be constructed, literally, from the ground up every single year. There are no permanent structures on the land (other than the asphalt path and wells for water) thus requiring volunteer teams, made up of hundreds of women, to do everything from lay pipes to build stages during the weeks leading up to the festival. One reason for the lack of permanent structures is the damage factor, since the land is only used during the summer months, building permanent structures would require a full-time caretaker since people living near the festival, in the past, have damaged electrical transformers (which are now located underground) and other equipment left on the land during the off-season.

There is also a 'method to the madness' of the annual reconstruction of festival space. The women who volunteer to help set up festival come from a variety of backgrounds and possess a variety of skills, and building the festival from the ground up creates not only another lesbian community but also allows women to learn new skills such as carpentry, plumbing, and/or landscaping. The producers admit new women into the work crews on the basis of applications submitted every November thus increasing the number of women who are able to participate in the making of the festival.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival has not always been held in its current location. In fact, in 1976 two thousand women celebrated the first Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) on a private piece of land north of Mt. Pleasant, MI. Using rented and borrowed equipment, seed money from bake sales, garage sales, car washes, and legend has it, the divorce settlement of one of the members of the collective, the organizers/producers were able to pay the musicians' wages and festival expenses with $400 to spare. Just before the 1982 festival the owner of the land backed out on the contract and refused to allow the organizers to use the space. The women were forced to find another location weeks before the festival was to begin.

Since then the festival has moved to its current location in Wallhalla which is just north of Hart, Michigan, and has grown to include between 5,000 and 8,000 (though a record 10,000 women came to the land for the 20th anniversary) on the 650 acres of privately owned land. The festival takes place in August with women from all over the country and the world coming to "the Land" (as it is affectionately referred to) to camp in the woods, eat vegetarian meals cooked by festival-goers, shop at the open marketplace where the craftswomen offer everything from jewelry to custom made

leather harnesses, attend workshops dedicated to improving the lives of women, and listen to a wide range of women's music. Though the festival embraces *all* women, the focus is definitely on lesbians and lesbian life. For most, the festival offers the only safe place for lesbians to openly display affection and not have to fear violent reactions to their sexual orientation. Most workshops, which take place at specific times in specific areas of the festival grounds, are geared toward building and sustaining lesbian relationships (romantic or otherwise) and lesbian communities, and the musical messages are aimed at relationships between women.

Beginning in the early 1980s, the land was owned and the festival produced by three women, Lisa Vogel, Barbara ("Boo") Price and Kristie Vogel, but as of 1994 the Festival business has been owned and produced by Lisa Vogel with the help of hundreds of volunteer workers. In 1988 the mortgage on the land was paid off and in 1989 the festival installed the first and only permanent structure, an asphalt path which begins in a central location known as the Triangle [see map] and stretches around the festival grounds in a half mile semi-circle, ending in front of the entrance to the Night-stage. The path has offshoots which extend into dif-ferent areas of the festival much like spokes of a wheel, and which

allow women with disabilities access to support tents, Day-stage, and Nightstage. The land itself divided into areas for camping, performing, workshops, crafts, and various other community spaces (i.e. the medical tent - called "The Womb," support tents for women of color, sober women, and women over forty), with the camping spaces occupying the majority of the festival areas. The entrance to the festival land is located off of a county dirt road approximately four miles from the main road. The dirt road that leads up to the festival entry gates is an important part of the total festival experience, perhaps because it delineates the space between the 'real world' and the festival world that the women occupy for the week.

The location of the entrance is important for a number of reasons; first, it is removed from the main road, and the prying eyes of the general public, and second, it can accommodate the large number of cars that line up outside of the entrance every year. In 1996 I arrived at 10:30 am on Monday, the first official day of the festival, only to find myself number 423 in line. I was told that the women at the front of the line had been sleeping in their cars for several days, some since the previous Friday! The line functions as many womens' first experience with festival community

building; not only are women able to establish and re-establish connections with other women, but there is also an informally enforced "code of honor" that governs the line. Spaces are saved for women who need to drive into town to pick up additional supplies, first time festival-goers ("festie virgins") are welcomed and brought into the fold, and as the line grows longer festival workers walk the line making sure that things are running smoothly and answering questions. At some point there is an official count of cars, and it is announced as women drive on to the land. My wait in line was nothing like I'd ever experienced before, there was none of the tension and anxiousness usually associated with long waits (with the exception of women who desperately wanted to get on the land!), and when it came time to drive onto the land we proceeded in a slow, but orderly manner. One reason that this particular ritual seems so important is that it seems to serve as the liminal space between "public" and "private" lives for many women.

Once on the land women are directed to an area in which to unload gear, and then assigned a ("personal") parking space for the week, meaning that if a woman leaves the land she will come back and park her car in the exact same spot she left, although few women actually leave the land during

the festival week. With gear unloaded and car parked, women are directed to the orientation tent where they are asked to fill out cards regarding allergies (particularly to bees and other insects), shown a video that gives an overview of the festival, and then asked to sign up for work shifts.

In an attempt to establish a more egalitarian community, each four to seven-day festival goer is required to work at least two four-hour shifts during her stay (women who come for less than four days are asked to work one four-hour shift). According to the program, "The Festival is structured so that all of us pro-vide the village services for each other by doing workshifts, creating what is truly at the heart of our Festival -- the building of a community of womyn together."[9] Women may choose to work in areas such as garbage patrol, stage security, or traffic control and every woman is asked to work at least one shift in the kitchen area helping chop, peel, mix and serve the food that festival-goers eat during the week.

Interaction and communication are what actively engage festival participants, and distinguish festival from events that only require passive receptivity. Festival action is a combination of participation and performance in a public

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[9]1997 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Program, p.5.

context. In festival very little action is private and what is private [such as religious devotion or courtship] is made possible and defined by the purposes of a particular festival.

The MWMF workshifts are perhaps the best example of action made possible by a particular festival as they exist only because women come to the festival. Workshifts also become locations in which lesbians seek out romantic relationships, the program encourage women to work their shifts since "...you never know who you might meet in during a garbage run or a shift in the kitchen." Sexual attraction and possibility are offered as ways of encouraging commitment to the community, and couples who have met at festival workshifts are quite common. After signing up for workshifts, women are given a festival program and are free to go set up their camps.

Since the campgrounds are spread out over many acres, women are transported by using tractors and flat bed transports to designated 'drop off' spots along the dirt road that creates the festival loop. The transport process is highly organized and is able to accommodate a large number of women (around 1,500 to 2,000 on the first afternoon of the festival) in a relatively short period of time. Groups of

women are assigned numbers or names of well known lesbian social/cultural representations (i.e."Dobkin dykes" "Lavender ladies" or "the Naiads")[10] and are told to wait in line until their group is called. When the group is called, women begin the loading process with help from one of the workers. All gear is loaded on to the flat bed according to size and weight, and then the women occupy the seats on the outside of the pile of gear. The driver then makes stops at various drop off points, treeline (approximately 3/4 of a mile into the festival grounds), then the Triangle (approximately 1 1/2 miles into the grounds), and finally the over-50s camping area (approximately 2-2 1/2 miles into the festival grounds). Women then unload their gear at the drop off point and set out in search of the perfect spot to spend the week.

The camping areas are divided into ten different sections allowing women to camp in areas that accommodate their specific needs. Closest to the main gate (and farthest from the actual festival grounds) are the RV campground, which was initially established to accommodate the older festival-goers who either didn't want to continue camping in tents or were unable to do so, and the "Twilight Zone," which

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[10] These markers refer to lesbian singer/songwriter/activist Alix Dobkin, the color most frequently associated with the lesbian nation, and the lesbian publishing company Naiad Press. These markers do not necessarily offer comment on individuals at

is the gathering place for the loud, late-night parties, and rowdier members of the festival community. North east of the RV camping area is Brother Sun Camp, which accommodates boys from the ages of four to ten (since boys over the age of three are not allowed into any other part of the festival grounds), and provides a family camping space.

There is an on-going debate surrounding the exclusion of male children from the festival. On one hand there is the commitment to preserving a women-only space for the entire week of the festival, and on the other there is the matter of inclusion versus exclusion. How do we create a better society (which is one of the aims of the festival) if we exclude male children? This issue remains unresolved as many festival-goers point to "tradition" as the guideline.[11]

Just east of the Twilight Zone is DART (Disabled Access Resource Team) RV camping for women with disabilities. DART offers shuttle services from the campground to the main festival area, accessible toilets, access to direct-to-medical electricity, assistance with personal-care, and "Helping Hands" to assist campers with setting up camp, general labor-oriented tasks during Festival, as well as

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the festival, but rather are used as symbols for the recognition of the strong lesbian presence at the festival.

[11]For more on the history of separatism at MWMF see "Separatist Politics at the Women's Music Festival" in Gay Community News (Oct. 7, 1978): pp.10-11.

packing up camp when the festival is over.[12]

To the east of these specialized campgrounds are the more general camping areas. All of these areas are geared toward the special needs of campers, with special areas for quiet camping in "Amazon Acres," chemical-free camping in "Bread & Roses" (which prohibits the use of alcohol, tobacco and other chemical substances), and over-50s camping in Bush Gardens (which was recently changed from over-40s due to the large number of aging festival-goers). Women are allowed to set up camp in any of the designated camping areas, but are asked to allow for at least 10' of space between tents, however, as the week progresses this becomes more difficult to do. At the 1996 festival there was a skirmish over space issues when several newly arrived campers pitched their tents inside the 10' invisible boundary. The woman whose space was being invaded requested that the new campers move their tents back several feet, and the campers explained that they were unable to do so because of several small trees that occupied otherwise open space. The woman replied that they should just "chop down the little trees (a definite festival no-no) and move the tents." The conflict was solved when the campers shifted the front opening of their tents to face away

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[12]1997 MWMF Program, p.9.

from the woman's campsite.

Located east of the campgrounds is the workshop meadow with approximately seventeen spaces available on a rotating daily basis. Workshops focus on such subjects as spirituality, creativity, self-help, sexuality/gender issues, political activism, music performance, production, fundraising, and networking, as well as practical skills such as how to interview for a job, writing workshops (in 1996 a workshop on writing working class women's autobiography was conducted by Dorothy Allison), and workshops on health and healing. Each workshop space is designed to accommodate varying numbers of women, with the workshops that are likely to draw large numbers of participants (such as "Loving Partners: Co-Creating Conscious Loving Relationships" which drew nearly 150 women) are scheduled for the large open spaces in the meadow, and smaller workshops (less than 30) are assigned to the smaller areas surrounded by trees and other natural sound barriers.

In addition to the workshop spaces, there are individual performance areas. The performance areas are separated into several different spaces which include the Nightstage, the Daystage, the Acoustic stage, and the Open-Mic stage (better known as the August Night Cafe). Each of these performance

spaces functions not simply as a place to play music or showcase drama and dance, but also as a physical represen-tation of the power of lesbian community building. Like the rest of the festival grounds, the performance spaces are re-built every year by volunteer and paid workers. Who come to the land two to three weeks before the start of the festival. Working together, women construct each of the performance stages.

Performance areas are not just used for audience seating; rather they are large open spaces which invite women to participate in the performances in a variety of ways. For example, the Nightstage performances take place in the sometimes chilly evenings and give women a chance to snuggle close together or to get up and dance and generate some body heat; either way women are participating as more than passive listeners. Performance areas also best embody the spirit of "inclusive acknowledgment of difference" which gives space to as many different preferences as possible, allowing for concert seating which is divided into "Chemical okay" and "Chemical free" areas which are then divided into "Smoke okay" and "Smoke free" zones within each area. There are spaces for women with disabilities and an area in front of the stage reserved for women with hearing impairments so that

they can watch the sign language interpreter during the musical performances.

The Nightstage is situated on the largest piece of open land at the festival (directly in front of the festival workers' camping area), and is able to accommodate the audience in an open field that measures approximately one hundred yards by one hundred yards. The stage itself is approximately 100 feet by 100 feet with a runway that extends from the stage about a quarter of the way into the audience. It is this runway that allows performers to get close to the audience, and in the case of the 1997 festival, allowed Toshi Reagon to perform an acapella version of Ferron's *Misty Mountain* as a third encore while the stage crew set up for the next performance. The stage is covered with a large yellow and white striped awning which has a front flap that can be pulled down to protect the stage and equipment in case of rain (as was the case at the 1997 festival when torrential rains caused the festival to virtually shut down on Monday and Tuesday). Nightstage is the most technically complicated venue at the festival, equipped with an excellent sound system and lights, and run by some of the most experienced engineers in the industry. It is the only venue (other than open-mic) that hosts night performances (there are no daytime

performances on the Nightstage). It requires a large stage crew since the set changes can involve the movement of large amounts of equipment in extremely short periods of time. At the 1997 festival the stage crew was able to remove Toshi Reagon's band's equipment and set up all of the equipment (including keyboards, drums, guitars, and horns) for the Latin salsa/jazz band, Azucar y Crema, in about twenty minutes.

In contrast to the Nightstage the Daystage hosts the majority of acoustic musical performances. Smaller than the Nightstage, Daystage looks out over a field that is approximately fifty yards wide and one hundred yards long. To the north of the stage is the festival community center and the open-mic stage which doubles as the dance lesson floor and basketball court during the day. At the east end of the field is the stage, approximately 50 feet by 50 feet, covered by a large yellow and white striped awning, and at the west end is the crafts area which gives musicians a chance to draw additional audience members from the shoppers (and for the audience members to move to the crafts area after the performance to buy CDs and to meet the artists).

Daystage typically hosts a smaller audience than the Nightstage, in part because it begins at 1:00 p.m. and runs

concurrently with the workshops, and in part because the performers are not typically as well known as the Nightstage performers, though this is not always the case. At the 1997 festival the field was packed to capacity when Cris Williamson, Tret Fure, and June Millington took the stage to play songs from Cris's older albums (their Nightstage performance was limited to material from their recently released CD "Between the Covers"). Dar Williams also drew a large crowd due, in part, to her performance at the 1996 festival (at both festivals Williams was called back for several encores, and left the stage to women chanting "Nightstage! Nightstage!") as well as to the recent commercial success of her third album. In recent years Daystage has become the site of a great deal of controversy regarding the appropriateness of public displays of sexuality; it has also become one of the most important physical sites of the festival in terms of lesbian community building. Controversial Daystage performances by groups such as Tribe 8 [in 1996] and Sexpod [in 1997] have sparked a series of workshops designed to negotiate conflict between women and open up a space for discussion of the issues affecting women of different generations, lesbians, performers and participants, and the community at large.

Interestingly, women's music festivals encourage new and innovative talent, and welcome performers who step outside of traditionally scripted performances not only allowing for "mistakes" but actually encouraging performers to take risks and rewarding them with cheers and applause even (and perhaps especially) when the performance is less than perfect. At the 1997 MWMF there were several occasions of not only audience support, but also encouragement of musicians. This sort of experience is almost unheard of in mainstream music where the goal seems to be reproducing the studio-sound. One example of this was Kinnie Starr's performance on the Day-stage. Starr, new to the women's music festivals, is a talented 20-something rocker who combines music and poetry in a style reminiscent of the 1960s beat poets. During the performance Starr climbed down off the stage and moved into the center of the audience, beating out the rhythm of her song on her thigh, chest and stomach as she sang acapella. The energy and emotion were palpable, and at the end of the song she broke down and began crying. As she walked back to the stage, unable to begin the next song, she said "I'm sorry, I've never been anywhere like this and I'm overwhelmed." The audience responded by clapping, and women yelled out "That's okay, we understand." "Don't worry about

it!" and the most extraordinary comment "Hey, we're here to see you--we'll wait!" To which Starr responded by dropping to her knees briefly with her hands covering her face, and the audience fell silent.

What happened here was that for a moment the audience was reminded of their own first (or perhaps it was their first) experience with living in a community of only women, built and run by women for women, and it spoke to the powerful impact of a women-only spaces. A similar incident took place two days later on the Nightstage. Toshi Reagon's classic antique blues guitar was dropped and split in half, and as she sat in her chair on stage, sobbing, the audience was first silent, as if in remembrance of the instrument, and then shouted its support when Reagon was lent another guitar (courtesy of Teresa Trull) and began her set. Simply put, she brought down the house.

There are a number of different factors which contributed to these two experiences at the festival. The first is that the proximity of the audience makes for a more personal and intimate experience for the performer. Performers are able to actually interact with their audiences because the stages allow performers to get physically closer to their audience. A second explanation for these two particular

experiences is that the performers felt more comfortable expressing emotion in front of an audience of women *like themselves*. This becomes problematic in that it tends to essentialize lesbian (and woman) identity; however, there is something different about a performer letting down her guard in front of an audience that she knows will respond not only sympathetically, but, in fact, encourage her to express her emotions.

Completely different from both Nightstage and Daystage is the third performance area, Acoustic Stage. This stage is situated at the bottom of a hill that slopes up approximately 50 yards, and forms natural amphitheater seating for the audience. This stage may be the most complicated of the stages as it requires special wood floors and acoustical shells to direct sound. It is on this stage that the drumming, dance and dramatic performances take place. Rather than using standing microphones (as is the case with Nightstage and Daystage) the Acoustic Stage performers are either individually mic-ed or use omnidirectional microphones in order not to interfere with the performance or require performers to be situated in one central location on the stage. The Acoustic Stage is the only stage not covered by an awning, which becomes a problem when it rains (as it was at the 1997 fes-

tival when the Mercy Sidbury Dancers had to be stopped in mid-performance because rain had made the floor too slick to dance safely). The Acoustic Stage performances are well attended since they take place after the workshops have concluded, between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m., which is also the dinner hour, and has become a tradition for women to enjoy their evening meal during these performances. Another difference between Nightstage/Daystage and the Acoustic Stage is that performances are offered twice during festival week (limiting the number of actual performers on Acoustic Stage), whereas both Nightstage and Daystage offer a completely new lineup each day.

The open mic performances are an interesting aspect of festivals, in that they provide women with the opportunity to test out their material on MWMF audiences knowing that a good performance may secure a spot on stage at this or *another* festival (such as the National Women's Music Festival, NWMF). Women at the open mic are given ten minutes to perform, and music is not the only medium of expression--poetry, dramatic readings and/or performances are all acceptable, but it is the music that receives the loudest crowd approval. There is always the thought in the back of the musician's mind (and the audience's as well) that today's August Night performer

might be the next year's day stage performer, and the next decade's Nightstage hit.

One area of the festival that remains constant over the week long period is the crafts area which sells clothing, works of art, reading materials, alternative medicines, jewelry and more, as well as services such as tarot card readings. The crafts area at the MWMF has over one hundred booths offering everything from haircuts and harnesses to massages and music. The crafts area is open from Tuesday through Sunday of the festival week from 10:00 am to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, from 9:00 am to 5:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and from 9:00 am to 7:00 p.m. on Sunday. Crafts women work the entire festival, and many of them camp in or near their booths during the week as they are expected to provide their own security (signing up for various shifts during the week).

There is a symmetry to the crafts area, which is set on a flat piece of land approximately 100 yards by 100 yards, in an attempt to make individual booths accessible to all women. Individual booths are set up side by side rows with each row of booths separated by ten to twelve feet of carpeted space making it possible for women in wheelchairs to more easily traverse the area; this has the added benefit of making it

easier to move women through the exhibits while also allowing for browsing. Booths are constructed by the crafts women, and range from the most basic construction (just enough plywood to hold up the business' sign) to the highly elaborate. One example of this is Goldenrod Music Distribution's bright pink "store" which has a roof, window covers, a separate space outside of the building for performers to autograph their CDs, and a reconstruction of the store's 'listening booth'. The listening booth at the Goldenrod store in Lansing, Michigan features a wall of hundreds of CDs and portable CD players which allow customers to listen to the music before they buy it. A scaled down version of the listening booth is constructed at the festival, and is one of the most popular places to hang out and listen to music or meet other women. Other booths are grouped together and located inside of large tents as an 'indoor market' of sorts. One of the governing rules of the crafts area seems to be to separate similar businesses (i.e. record distributors Goldenrod and Ladyslipper occupy booths on different sides of the crafts area) in an attempt to provide as egalitarian an environment as possible, as well as encouraging shoppers to move through the entire area in order to see what's available, and the festival program does list each individual

business (and their contact information) as well as their festival location.

Another interesting aspect of the crafts area is the creation of the Barter Market. Listed in the festival program as an activity offered by the Women of Color, the barter market is

> ...in the tradition of our Foremothers--trading goods, and services for other goods and services. For witches, bitches, hags & hagglers. For the artistic, the aggressive, the quiet and the shy. For any woman or girl who has anything to trade: books, clothes, cookies, haircuts, art, advice, poetry, massage, collectibles, and junque. No money allowed! 'Hawk Nest' available for spotlighting trade items; 'professional' hagglers to help you hawk. Outrageous attire encouraged but not required.[13]

The barter market is part of an attempt to allow women to trade their goods and services even if they are not part of the formal crafts area. All around the festival there are women who set up blankets and sell jewelry and/or beads and other smaller types of souvenirs, and the night time campfires are good places to buy cassettes from women who produce and record their music independent from record companies.

The areas surrounding the performance and crafts area function in a variety of ways to reinforce the community ties and aid in the transmission of community values and history.

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[13]1997 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Program, p.13.

One of the most remarkable areas at the festival, and one that gets relatively little attention is that of the quilting area. During the festival week the quilters set up under a large tent and invite all women, regardless of their sewing skills, to participate in making the quilt. At the final Nightstage performance of the festival the quilt is raffled off, and one lucky woman leaves the festival with a unique piece of memorabilia. The gifting of quilts comes from Native American tradition and "...has very significant meaning within Native culture. Generally conducted under the supervision of a female member of a clan or family, giveaways represent sharing material wealth with others in honor of a loved family member."[14] The gifting of quilts is a way in which to bind the community together through shared representations of culture. The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival quilt has the traditional insignia of the festival, a piano framed by the trees under a full moon and sky filled with stars. It is a remarkable feat to design and complete a quilt in one week, as many quilts can take up to a year to complete. In addition to the quilt itself, the quilters keep journals during the week which discuss the patterns, the

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[14] Marsha McDowell & C. Kurt Dewhurst eds. *To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions*. (East Lansing, MI., 1997): p.51

thoughts of each individual worker, and other issues discussed while they sewed. These memories are now archived, whereas in the past they were raffled off at the same time as the finished quilt.

In addition to the quilting area, there are areas, such as Gaia Girls Camp and Brother Sun Camp, which pass on the traditions of the festival to the younger generations. These camps teach children songs and games with an eye on creating a less violent, more tolerant world. There are a variety of workshops offered for younger children, such as puppet making, face and body painting, as well as workshops for older girls (12-16) that focus on positive body images in addition to offering a workshop entitled "Gathering of Girls: Coming of Age" which culminates in a 20 minute presentation and celebration of the rites of passage for girls on the last day of the festival. Another benefit of the closed festival space is that mothers (and grandmothers, aunts, etc.) feel safer about letting their daughters move about the festival grounds on their own, and girls are able to test their independence in an environment where they know that help is available at all times. Festival-goers are now seeing the effects of this unique environment on the next generation of

young women who have been coming to festival since they were small.

Music at the festival is divided into many different categories, and the producers are constantly trying to balance the needs of the community. The "old timers" (i.e. Alix Dobkin, Cris Williamson, Margie Adams, and Holly Near) draw in the crowds and generate the revenue necessary to keep the festival going, while the new performers (i.e. Sexpod, The Murmers, The Lunachicks, and Dar Williams) ensure that the festival draws in a younger crowd that (hopefully) will infuse new blood into festival culture. Since spirituality plays an important role in festival culture, many performances are geared toward promoting the spiritual well-being of women. Drumming, chanting, and singing women-focused songs are an integral part of the festival, as are dance performances and the telling and "re-telling" of women's history.

The performances features well-known community artists (such as Cris Williamson, Tret Fure, Holly Near, Linda Tillery, Tish Hinajosa, and Ubaka Hill, to name a very few) in a very specific order. Generally Nightstage starts out with a welcoming ceremony the day after the festival actually begins allowing women the opportunity to settle in and get

their bearings. In the case of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival the welcoming ceremony is held on Wednesday (two days after the actual start of the festival) and again on Friday for the women who are only able to attend for the weekend. The repetition of the ceremony gives more women the opportunity to participate in this ritual, and it also has the added benefit of inclusivity as the ceremony draws in women who have not been part of the rest of festival week and creates a shared experience for all women attending the performance. The welcoming ceremony includes standard practices such as the Official Welcome, in which each different group of women is welcomed to the festival in their own language (this has been known to include up to 30 different short welcoming speeches), followed by a ceremony that includes dancers, singers, stilt walkers, and (in the case of the 1996 festival) women on scaffolding breathing fire into the dark night air. The ceremony ends with a rousing rendition of Maxine Feldman's song "Amazon Women Rise" in which the audience joined the performers (the 1997 ceremony featured Judith Casselberry, Edwina Lee Tyler, Ubaka Hill, Barbara Higbie, June Millington, Nedra Johnson, Ulali, and Kay Gardner, to name a few) in singing with the chorus. At the conclusion of the ceremony the stage was reset and Sawagi

Taiko, the first all-women's Taiko (drums) group in Canada took the stage. They performed energetically for an hour, beating the Taiko drums, playing the *fue* (Japanese flute) and as an encore, ended with a rousing version of Jan & Dean's hit tune "Wipe Out."

After announcements (such as the raffle, reminders to pick up cigarette butts, and that every women who has signed up for a shift in kitchen needs to show up for her shift) and a brief introduction by the Nightstage host (drummer, Ubaka Hill), Barbara Higbie and Teresa Trull took the stage. Higbie (on piano and electric violin), Trull (on electric guitar) accompanied by Bernice Brooks (on percussion) agreed to fill in for comedian and singer, Lea Delaria. As they moved through the set Higbie and Trull played songs from their 1983 collaborative project (when they were still romantically linked) ***Unexpected.*** It was this album that gave Trull the technical skills to begin a "second" career in record producing and engineering when her own music failed to reach mainstream audiences. Trull's attempt at mainstream audiences came in 1986 when she released *A Step Away* (on Redwood Records, Holly Near's label) and was asked to play with Bonnie Hayes (who had written the song "Rosalie") and her band as the opening act for Huey Lewis and the News. It

was at this point, Trull says, that she realized that the mainstream music scene was not where she wanted to be.

On Nightstage Trull and Higbie teased each other about their long-ago ended relationship, and their current collaboration before they began another song. They joked about themselves, remarking that in the lesbian community there really is no way to get away from ex-girlfriends because they become the girlfriends of your friends. The audience laughed long and loud before Higbie and Trull began playing again. It was a beautiful, energetic set, and obvious that they were having fun together as they announced plans for a second collaborative project, *Playtime*, to be released in 1998 (the next day women pre-ordered thousands of copies of the as yet unreleased CD). At the conclusion of the performance (Higbie and Trull did two encores), thousands of women streamed off of the field toward their tents or toward the August Night Cafe and the open mic performances.

Higbie and Trull's performance and on-stage dialogue can be seen as an enactment of James Scott's notion of 'hidden' transcripts. Scott states that, "...we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things,

they insinuate a critique of power."[15] While Higbie and Trull were poking fun at their ended relationship, they were also critiquing lesbian relationships as well as the community and upending dominant society's stereotypical image of lesbians as hyper-sexual. This act reifies lesbian communities and relationships as it utilizes a "hidden" transcript as that becomes "public" at the festival. Lesbians "get" the joke because they live this particular reality, as such it becomes a social transcript which reinforces community interactions.

The festival's physical layout and boundaries provide lesbians with a sense of security as well as create new challenges and emphasizes existing tensions within the community. There are, however, elements other than physical boundaries which contribute to the furthering of the lesbian festival community. The following chapter will discuss lesbian community building through the radical performances at the festival by Tribe 8, an all-lesbian punk rock band, and the ways in which their performance emphasizes tensions within the community and creates new discursive sites in which lesbians are able to negotiate difference.

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[15]James Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* (New Haven, CT., 1990): p. xiii.

Chapter 2

Festival and Lesbian Community Building

In order to understand how and why lesbian community building occurs at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF), and more specifically, to understand the context in which a performance by Tribe 8, an all-lesbian punk-rock band, becomes a discursive site of lesbian community building, it is necessary to understand that lesbian iden-tity, lesbian community and the festival itself are the result of cumulative historical moments. The women's music movement did not simply "invent" itself in the 1970s; rather it was (and remains) a result of decades of lesbian community building. According to Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, "...community is the key to the development of twentieth-century lesbian identity and consciousness. Even though lesbians or gays did not live in the same areas, or work at the same place, they formed communities that were primary in shaping lesbian and gay culture and individual

lives by socializing together."[1] Over the past twenty years the MWMF has served as one particular site of lesbian community building, and in doing so has become a mainstay of the lesbian community itself reifying lesbian community and culture through workshops, arts and crafts, and music. Tribe 8's performances at the 1994 and 1996 festivals represent an active attempt to negotiate difference, reinforce similarities, and address the need for flexibility and understanding with regard to relationships between lesbians.

While the festival welcomes all women there is an assumption that the majority of women attending the festival are lesbians. Historical reasons for the large number of lesbians at the festival can be traced back to its inception and the need for a separate space in which lesbians could escape the sexist and homophobic attitudes of the world around them, and spend time in an environment that promoted not only women's music, but women's relationships (social, political and romantic) with other women as well. It also has to do with the historical conception of a larger lesbian-feminist community in the 1970s, which was associated with assumptions that, first, the nurturing, loving values

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[1]Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community.* (New York, 1994): p.3.

associated with women were what they wanted to emphasize in their communities. Second, they chauvinistically believed that all the women who were producing anything of worth were lesbians, hence "lesbian culture" became synonymous with "women's culture."[2] The lesbian community at the MWMF is unique in its attempts to create a more egalitarian community through attendee participation in addition to its attempts to recognize and negotiate difference. While the festival is not a utopia, lesbians at the festival strive to create a space that reflects the values and ideals of the community as a whole. Lesbian identity should not, however, be viewed as monolithic nor as an essentialist reduction of "women-loving-women," but rather as a complex amalgamation of political, social, personal and sexual issues (to name a few) affecting womens' lives.

Lesbian identity and lesbian community building through festival participation can be understood as a paradox: as an attempt to isolate the lesbian community in order to give women who participate in it a chance to build stronger relationships with one another as well as providing a wide range of activities designed to reinforce as well as build

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[2]Lillian Faderman. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America.* (New York, 1991): p.218.

lesbian relationships. This paradox can be expressed in much the same way Joan Wallach Scott outlines the struggles of the French feminists in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Scott explains that for the French feminists, attempts to claim citizenship and rights associated with it became somewhat problematic as "...their arguments were also paradoxical: in order to protest women's exclusion, they had to act on behalf of women and so invoked the very difference they sought to deny."[3] Because they were denied the right to participate in the political process, French feminists attempted to redefine the traditional political definitions of gender, and in doing so were forced to not only confront the underlying assumption that "male" and "female" were two separate entities and seemingly natural divisions when, but also to reinforce it when, in fact, it was (and remains) an indeterminate phenomenon whose meaning is always in dispute. Scott further explains that

> Drawn into arguments about sameness or difference that they did not initiate, the French feminists I discuss in this book tried to reverse the terms used to discriminate against them. But, like Blacks or Jews or Muslims in other historical circumstances, they took on the group identity attributed to them even as they refused its negative characteristics. *This affirmation of group*

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[3]Joan Wallach Scott. *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man.* (Cambridge, MA, 1996): p.x.

> *identity made it impossible to declare it entirely irrelevant for political purposes.* [4]

Lesbian group identity functions in a similar manner as the terms "lesbian" and "lesbian community" immediately define groups of women in ways that point out their differences (social, political, and/or sexual)from other women and yet, *not* labeling lesbians as "lesbian" makes it impossible to form any sort of group identity which allows community building to take place. With this in mind it is necessary to recognize that while it is problematic to analyze "lesbian community" as an homogeneous entity, it is equally problematic *not* to discuss the exsitence of such a community; therefore this chapter will, among other things, discuss the historical, social and political implications of the existence and continuation of a lesbian community at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival through the performances of Tribe 8.

Tribe 8's performance at the 1996 Michigan Womyn's Music Festival can be read as a multi-layered performative act in which the claiming and use of public space, *in a specific historical moment,* is used to express what has traditionally been seen as private (i.e. female sexuality, women acting out

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[4]Scott, p.x. (emphasis mine)

rage and anger). This performative act can also be read as a way in which women, and in this case, lesbians, go about upending societal definitions of gender and power in order to redefine language and acts, such as rape, that have traditionally oppressed women. In a very real sense, readings of this particular performance can be used as a means of deconstructing the notion of gender as simply a cultural construct. After all, how else can the transgressive effect of an all-lesbian punk band (an anomaly in and of itself, as punk-rock has, historically, been the refuge of young, white, disenfranchised males) that defines its ideology as one that forces men *and* women to reevaluate what it means to be a woman be explained or understood? Additionally, the reclamation of language and acts that victimize women can be seen as both empowering and disempowering in that the meaning of such acts is both shifted and reified. This is not to imply that the message is not loaded with contradictions and assumptions that become highly problematic as the methods of transmission are critiqued - it is. My purpose is to evaluate these performative acts and the ways in which they function as discursive sites of on-going negotiation, as well as shedding light on the positive and very real ways in which

these acts add to the foundation on which lesbian communities, within the festival context, are constructed.

By 1994 the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) had been taking place each August for nearly twenty years. Women who had attended the first festival, in 1976, were aging and attending the festival in slightly smaller numbers. Reasons for this shift ranged from health concerns and/or an inability to do some of the things they'd done when they were younger (since the festival requires that women camp in tents or, in limited numbers, RVs) to commitments to family or jobs to monetary concerns (as a week's stay at the festival costs upwards of $250.00). Festival organizers realized that in order to attract more younger women, who would comprise the next generation of festival goers, they would have to offer a wider range of musical talent as well as workshops and activities that would draw a younger crowd while still providing women with the "traditional" festival experience (i.e. well known women's artists such as Cris Williamson, Holly Near, Linda Tillery, and Ubaka Hill who would sing, chant or drum). The shift in demographics meant that organizers needed to also book women who represented younger

women's experiences and musical tastes.[5] The need for, and subsequent inclusion of, new, radical musical talent has exploded into the festival and the lesbian community and stirred up controversy. Groups such as Tribe 8, The Luna Chicks, Sexpod, The Murmurs, and Cobra (the only all-women's rock band in China) have not only helped redefine festival performance but have also opened doors to some controversial public spaces where community building takes place.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival can be viewed as a critically discursive site of lesbian community building which allows for "inclusive acknowledgment of difference," rather than a unitary experience with a singular political, social, economic, racial or sexual meaning. The thought behind this is that by attempting to include as many differences as possible the community will become stronger, as well as more aware, if not accepting, of these differences, thereby creating a more egalitarian community. This is not to suggest that this is an actuality, rather a possibility within the lesbian community, and one best illustrated by Tribe 8's 1996 Daystage performance at the festival. First, however, I will attempt to place the festival and the

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[5]This is not to imply that younger women do not enjoy listening to the 'old-timers' who perform at Michigan, nor does it imply that older festival goers do not listen to music made by younger women. It is meant to denote the need for festival

resulting lesbian community in an historical context.

Historicizing sites of lesbian community building and the reasons why and how they exist, requires an understanding of what Jonathan Ned Katz terms "historical forms of homosexuality." In his ground breaking book, *Gay American History*, Katz observes that

> Beyond the most obvious fact that homosexual relations involve persons of the same gender, and include feelings as well as acts, there is no such thing as homosexuality in general, only particular historical forms of homosexuality. There is no evidence for the assumption that certain traits have universally characterized homosexual (or heterosexual) relations throughout history. The problem of the historical researcher is thus to study and establish the character and meaning of each varied manifestation of same-sex relations within a specific time and society.[6]

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is an historically situated site of lesbian culture and therefore, should be seen in a particular historical context in relationship to the individual festival itself rather than being viewed as a monolithic representation of the lesbian community as a whole. However, if the MWMF does not represent the larger lesbian community, and if, in fact, there *is no* monolithic lesbian community, what function does the MWMF then serve?

According to Lillian Faderman in her book *Odd Girls and*

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organizers to extend the boundaries of musical inclusivity in order to appeal to a wider range of women - younger and older.

[6]Jonathan Ned Katz. *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (New York, 1976): pp.6-7.

Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America , lesbians have traditionally been seen through either the "essentialist" lens (women are born lesbians, and lesbians have always existed, in the past as they do today) or the "social constructionist" lens (certain social conditions were necessary before the emergence of "the lesbian," as a social entity, was possible). As Faderman states, "The criterion for identifying oneself as a lesbian has come to resemble the liberal criterion for identifying oneself as a Jew: you are one only if you consider yourself one."[7] There is more, however, to being a lesbian than simple self-definition. Complex social structures such as those created, in large part, by lesbian bar culture has made it possible for spaces like the MWMF to exist.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival may be read as a politicized community[8], in that the festival was created out of political and social interest in women's music and lesbian culture, and in doing so it (and the women attending the festival) moved beyond the need for fixed political institutions

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[7]Faderman, pp.4-5.

[8]Contrasting Madeline D. Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy's discussion of the Buffalo bar communities "pre-political" status in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Noting that the concept is derived from Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1963), the authors explain that the framework presented in their analysis assumes that political actions are part of distinctly defined political institutions, and that pre-political activities are social acts of resistance that haven't yet crystallized into political institutions.

that would signal legitimization of women's culture. Attending the festival became a political act in and of itself as it mirrored not only the Buffalo bars, but also the churches used as gathering places, by blacks, during the Civil Rights Movement - as a place to be together without the presence of the oppressor(s). The festival also functioned (and continues to function) in much the same way the bar communities did (and do), in that it provides lesbians with a (relatively) safe place to create and display relationships, to test and express sexuality, to share information (social, political, and sexual), as well as to ensure that there is a *place* for lesbians to meet and/or reconnect each year. However, the festival differs from bar communities in several aspects.

The Buffalo bars were an integral part of building lesbian communities, but were also subject to the attitudes and laws of the city and were constantly in danger of being raided and/or shut down. Whereas lesbian bar culture was about fixed, yet moveable, locations within a particular city where lesbians could form relationships within the community, the festival is a constructed experience in that it is not a *permanent* community in the daily lives of lesbians. In light of the Buffalo bar communities, the MWMF is all the more

remarkable because it is a newly created performance environment in exactly the same place every year. It is this fixed location that helps define one aspect of festival as it relates to lesbian community building.

In attempting to define the parameters of homosexual communities William Gagnon and John H. Simon observed that while homosexual communities do not *require* a formal character or even a geographical location they do require

> ...a continuing collectivity of individuals who share some significant activity and who, out of a history of continuing interaction based on that activity, begin to generate a sense of a bounded group possessing special norms and a particular argot. Through extensive use, such a homosexual aggregate may identify a particular location as theirs.[9]

Additionally, the community provides certain salient features which reinforce community boundaries, such as facilitation of sexual union, social support and "...a language and an ideology which provide each individual lesbian with already developed attitudes that help her resist the societal claim that she is diseased, depraved, or shameful."[10] Both the lesbian bars in Buffalo and the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival act as geographic locations in and on which to build lesbian communities. The act of returning to "the Land" is

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[9]J. Gagnon and W. Simon. "On Being in the 'Community'." from *Observations of Deviance*. ed. Jack D. Douglas. (New York, 1970): p.112.

[10]Gagnon & Simon, p.113.

a way of signifying the recognition and legitimization of this continuing community.

While physical location can be instrumental in building lesbian communities, it can also become problematic if individuals are expected to shed individual identity in order to belong to the community. One such example of this is the "butch/femme" dichotomy used (by Davis and Kennedy) to explain the lesbian bar community and relationships formed through this particular community. However, Davis and Kennedy are careful to point out that

> The concept of the butch-fem image is somewhat misleading because it suggests that we are focusing strictly on the visual, when we are in fact considering personal inclination, social rules, community pressure, and politics. It is our experience that all language for talking about butches and fems is inadequate. For instance, the concept of butch-fem roles reduces butch-fem behavior to role *playing* and does not take into account the depth and complexity of butch and fem as an organizing principle which pervades all aspects of working-class lesbian culture.[11]

As with references to the notion of lesbian community building, defining community in terms of "butch" and "fem," I problematic and yet in order to understand the dynamics within this specific community it is necessary to use such specific and descriptive terms. The creating, and sustaining, of lesbian communities involves more than geography

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[11]Lapovsky Kennedy and Davis, pp.153-4.

or organizing principles, such as butch-fem signifiers. The community is centered around such complex issues as gender identity, eroticism, social construction of sex and sexuality, the "permissible" and the "forbidden," and the relationship of all of these to the political and social aspects of lesbians and lesbian communities (though this should, in no way, be read as a complete listing of complexities within the lesbian community). The lesbian community (as if there were such a singular entity) appears to be much more about the continual and consistent negotiation of difference as the community has been forced to define and redefine itself in accordance with particular historical moments and community needs.

Two specific events at the MWMF, both involving the punk band Tribe 8, illustrate the ways lesbian community building at the festival occurs as a result of social and political complexities presented by such performances in a particular physical location. Tribe 8 represents myriad complexities within the lesbian community, and in acting out their beliefs, on stage, they disrupt certain traditional festival narratives about women and lesbians in particular while reinforcing others. And yet, Tribe 8 has created a discursive site in which negotiation of lesbian and female

identity cannot be ignored. Fortunately, the members of the band have been prepared to tackle these issues in rap-sessions that have taken place after their performances, and in doing so, have helped build links to the lesbian community even when a small part of the festival community objected to what was perceived as the band's violent attitude toward women.

In 1994, Tribe 8 performed at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival for the first time. Widely known for stage performances that include members of the band wearing strap-on dildos and cutting them off with chainsaws, knives and other weapons, Tribe 8's presence and performance at the festival was fraught with controversy regarding the perception of the band as misogynistic and violent. Warnings were issued to the women attending the festival that "If you're a survivor of any form of sexual abuse, you may not want to attend the Tribe 8 performance at 8 o'clock as it contains explicit sexual violence."[12] A small faction of women at the festival carried banners that proclaimed "Tribe 8 promotes violence against women" and snubbed a member of the band that tried to explain that she too was a survivor of sexual abuse. What the protesters failed to recognize was

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[12]Andrea Juno. *Angry Women in Rock: Volume I.* (New York, 1996): p.43.

that Tribe 8's lyrics and stage performances were (and are) about venting the anger and outrage of living in a world where women are routinely victimized. This message can be read in several ways. First, it is an expression of righteous anger in the face of the violence that lesbians (and women, in general) face daily. Expressing this anger and by encouraging women to express anger, the message becomes one of the victim lashing out at the victimizer.[13] Tribe 8 guitarist Lynn Flipper describes being assaulted on the streets of *San Francisco*

> I walked into a burrito joint with my lover, and a white guy on speed said "What are *you* doing here? What are *you* doing here, fucking dykes?" He came up and threw food in our faces, and we responded; he gave my lover two black eyes and a bloody lip...We chased him down, and the cops came and got him, but they let him go. If he had stolen a pack of gum they would've kept him overnight. But because he just hit two dykes, they let him go.[14]

On one hand, Tribe 8 expresses very real emotions regarding the likelihood that lesbians are being and probably will be assaulted; however, this presents certain problems when the lens is shifted to view the message in a second way, that to scream and get angry about victimization, and encourage other

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[13]"Violence report released by Triangle, UNCAP: Michigan hate crimes rise 12% in 1997." *Between the Lines*, March 5-8, 1998. p.7. According to the most recently released statistics from the Triangle Foundation, hate crimes against gays and lesbians have increased nearly 12% in Michigan, and over 8% nation-wide since 1992. The most recent figures from the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (UNCAP) documented 2,445 incidents of anti-gay violence in 1997 despite a report of dramatic decreases in violent crimes from the Department of Justice.

women to do the same, could reinforce the notion that women are *automatically* victims.

Sharon Marcus addresses one aspect of the paradox presented by Tribe 8's performances, in her essay "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words," she states

> Rape may be defined as a sexualized and gendered attack which imposes sexual differences along the lines of violence...[and] Many current theories of rape [this may be broadened to include physical assault that does not include rape] present rape as an inevitable material fact of life and assume[s] that a rapist's ability to physically overcome his target is the foundation of rape.[15]

Marcus goes on to explain that disruption of the narrative is possible if women (and men) understand that rape may be viewed as a gendered and scripted language and, in turn, use this knowledge to imagine women as neither already raped nor inherently rapable. Shifting the focus from reparation and vindication (through the legal system) to prevention requires a willingness to understand rape as a linguistic fact rather than a foregone physical conclusion. Women are seen as rapeable because language has defined them as such; however, drawing attention to the issue in the way that Tribe 8 does presents certain paradoxical dilemmas.

The first of these paradoxes lies in the reaction to

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[14]Juno, p.50.

[15]Sharon Marcus. "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words" in *Feminists Theorize the Political.* eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott. (New York, 1992): p.387.

violence against women in general. If lesbians scream about rape and victimization, then they are feeding the notion that women are victims, and yet in doing so they are attempting to remove the stigma of women's guilt stemming from victimization and place it where it belongs, on the shoulders of the perpetrators.[16] What the band's music reflects, however, is the reality of what has *already happened*, and as guitarist Leslie Mah states, "I'm sick of hearing and reading about rape. I'm sick of finding out that every woman I meet has had some horrible experience, like incest or rape....Part of recovering from rape and incest involves feeling *good* about being angry, feeling like 'This ain't my fault. I'm pissed off.'"[17] Feeling angry and *acting out* that anger are things that women have not, traditionally, been encouraged to do.

Women who *do* act out are be labeled "man-haters," "radical feminists," and "dykes." Nancy Fraser explains, in her essay "Sex, Lies and the Public Sphere," that historically, female socialization has required that women be confined to the private sphere thus denying women the ability to define and defend their privacy as well as denying women

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[16]This should *not* be interpreted to mean that men are the only ones who victimize women, or that men are not victims of violent sexual crimes.

[17]Juno, p.64.

the right publicly to express anger or rage. In the case of the Hill/Thomas hearings, "losing" the battle regarding the right to define where the boundaries between public and private would be drawn proved detrimental to Anita Hill's case against Clarence Thomas. Caught between the multiplicity of public spheres defined by both race and gender, Anita Hill was unable to control the routing, timing, and dissemination of her information or the representation of her private life.[18] This resulted in conflicting views, based on racial and gendered stereotypes which were never actually addressed by the panel of Senators, on what "truth" was being told, and who was telling it. This damaged Hill's perceived credibility, and ultimately the case against Clarance Thomas. Conversely, Tribe 8 attempts to control *all* of the information they disseminate as they smash the boundaries (by *choice*) between what is considered public and what has been labeled private. Performances leave no doubt about who is in control of the flow of information and how band members feel about publicly exposing themselves (literally and musically); they harness the rage and anger, and shove it into their audience's faces making no apologies.

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[18]Nancy Fraser. "Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas." *Critical Inquiry* 18, (Spring, 1992): p.597.

According to Sharon Marcus, the reality of rape is that non-combative responses are derived from societal definitions of what is "female" and by association, what is "polite."[19] She goes on to argue that rape is a cultural mode of feminizing women, and Tribe 8's lead singer, Lynn Breedlove, agrees

> Women have been trained for so many generations not to be angry: it's bad to be angry, it's not feminine to be angry. We must be feminine, we must be loved by men, because we must get married-if we don't then we must die, etc...That's so ingrained in us, it's practically in our genes by now. It's real hard for women to get angry. You have to go to Bay Area Model Mugging [in San Francisco] and pay $600 to learn how to shout, "NO!" and to learn how to bite off a guy's dick when he's shoving it down your throat. I'm like, "You can't bite the guy's dick off? Why? Because he's a nice guy? *What*?!" And they're like, "Oh, I couldn't, that would hurt him." Yeah, that *would* hurt him.[20]

Rapists do not automatically have the *power* to rape, as men are not always stronger or more physically able to carry out rape. Rather, the point is that rape is a scripted act which, through cultural modes of feminization, creates situations in which the rapist's success depends on the extent to which the target (presumably the woman) participates in legitimizing the power imbalance through the scripted responses associated with fear. And while acting out and reassigning blame may

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[19]This is not meant to imply that *all* women are non-combative and that women do not react violently/combatively against rapists, rather it is meant to emphasize the relationship between societal definitions of women as "female" and the ways in which women are expected/ taught to behave.

help the survivors of rape, this also serves to reinforce the notion that women are inherently rapable and that controlling rape involves dissuading men from committing rape. It does not suggest that women may shift the outcome of the script by challenging the presumed outcome and/or the rapist.[21] Tribe 8's message challenges everything from the scripted notion of rape to the presumption that gender and power are at all related. Their refusal to be classified in a traditional gendered (read: female) manner can be extended into another reading of the band's performances.

A second interpretation of Tribe 8's performance is that through their radical stage performances they attempt to smash actively the gendered boundaries of the lesbian festival community as well as those of the straight white males who make up the majority of their touring audiences. They point out the socially constructed inconsistancies that define "male" and "female" in this society. Again, Lynn Breedlove explains [in response to the furor over Tribe 8's shirtless performance in Provincetown - the police were summoned to the venue, which happened to be Town Hall, and requested that Breedlove and two other band members put their

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[20]Juno, (36-7).

[21]Marcus' point here is not to blame the victim for failing to fight back, but rather to call for a redefining of the scripted actions and reactions as unconnected to gendered definitions of "male" and "female."

shirts back on]

> They didn't care about my rubber dick hanging out of my pants the whole show. What they cared about was naked breasts....Why are breasts legal to show in a place where men can masturbate and pay 20 or 50 or 100 bucks, and other men can make money off those naked breasts being seen - as in *Playboy* or red-light districts - but *I* am not allowed to be comfortable, as a human being? Why, why, *why?*[22]

The band's bassist, Leslie Mah, summed it up "It just goes back to all the political controversy over the female body. Men's bodies are their own, whereas women's bodies are regulated."[23] Tribe 8's attempts to deregulate gender construction manifest themselves in such things as public sex, non-monogamy and refusing to be forced into specific gender roles while also making it clear that they are "dykes."

What is especially interesting about Tribe 8's performances at the MWMF is that they did not tone down the show for the festival audiences, again blurring the boundary between historically acceptable forms of behavior for women. This connection becomes clearer when the MWMF is viewed as a form of "private" space, in that men are not allowed to attend, and performing rage and anger could be interpreted as "preaching to the choir." What is most important about these

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[22]Juno, pp.52-3.

[23]Juno, p.53.

performances is that in disseminating the anti-violence message, Tribe 8 opened the door for further discussions regarding the lesbian community. The 1994 Nightstage performance and subsequent workshops at the festival were well attended because, as lead singer, Lynn Breedlove stated "[women came thinking] 'Oh, there's some kind of hoo-ha going on -- we ought to go check it out.' We [Tribe 8] were able to address issues that ordinarily might not have been addressed and explain ourselves more fully, so that was good."[24] The community discussion that occurred at the 1994 festival laid the ground work for what would take place at the 1996 festival.

Together since 1989, members of the band, lead singer Lynn Breedlove, guitarists Leslie Mah and Lynn Flipper, bassist Lynn Payne, and drummer Slade Bellum, range in age (from 24 to 36) and formal musical training, but they all agree with the band's bottom line ideology which focuses both on breaking down the constructed notions of gender *and* on empowering women.[25] At the start of their career the band toured the country playing for audiences largely made up of straight white male punk rockers, Lynn Breedlove explained

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[24]Juno, p.44.

[25]see Joan W. Scott *Only Paradoxes to Offer.* (Cambridge, MA., 1996) especially pp. ix-xi.

it, "In any realm of life you're going to have mostly guys - because guys go out, guys have adventures, guys have money, guys buy records, guys have money to go to shows, *guys, guys, guys, guys.*"[26] They note, however, that since their debut at the MWMF their audience has grown to include more lesbians and heterosexual women, and yet the band remains committed to their belief that in order to upend societal focus on malecentric assumptions (i.e. penises = power) they [Tribe 8] must continue, as women and as lesbians, to be overtly sexual for their predominantly male audiences while also making it clear that *they* are in absolute control of their own sexuality. Lynn Breedlove explains that the shocking images the band portrays are there for a reason, which is that "...it totally turns everything upside down again. That's the most important thing for me, to make them reevaluate what they think is a woman. For thousands of years they have told us what it is to be a woman. They have identified and defined women -- and now, here's a *totally different image.*"[27] Exposing their sexuality in public ways, Tribe 8 uses strong language and images designed to shake the audience out of complacency and into awareness.

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[26]Juno, p. 65.

[27]Juno, p. 64.

Two years after their controversial debut at the MWMF, Tribe 8 returned with a vengeance. This time they performed on the Daystage, and warnings were issued to festival-goers at every event leading up to the performance. There didn't seem to be a strong outcry against the group this time, though one could hear scattered debates regarding Tribe 8's method of conveying the message that violence against women is unacceptable and that its okay for women to be angry. At 2:30 p.m. on Thursday August 15, 1996, Dar Williams left the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival Daystage to a standing ovation, thundering applause, and voices chanting "Nightstage! Nightstage!" As Williams performed her final number, women began to emerge around the edges of the field and stage. These women did not look like the "average" festival goer (most festival goers wear either shorts or jeans with a shirt or go topless), rather they were dressed in everything from mechanics overalls accessorized with leather collars, chains and spikes to women dressed in full-body leather outfits of which the most memorable was a woman with long black hair held back by a black bandanna, tattooed and wearing a leather breast plate covered with silver studs and spikes, and tight black leather pants worn with combat boots and elbow length black leather gloves.

A crowd of women formed on the left side of the Daystage, and forced women who had been sitting in the front rows to either move or join the standing crowd. This space was to be designated as the "mosh pit."[28] To the right side of the stage sat women with hearing impairments as each festival performance is accompanied by an American Sign Language interpreter. As the stage crew finished setting up the band's instruments and made final adjustments to the sound equipment the crowd began to get restless and began chanting "Tribe 8! Tribe 8! Tribe 8!" One final announcement was made from the stage informing women that this performance would not be appropriate for small children, but that it was up to their mothers to decide what was best, the announcement also warned that women who had been sexually abused might find the performance disturbing, and that they could visit The Oasis (the on-site counseling center) or The Womb(the medical tent) if they needed to. As soon as the emcee was

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[28]Mosh pits have a history in the punk community as a place in which dancing, aggression, and even violence are acted out. Mosh pits are, perhaps, most well known for the violence (intentional or unintentional) that is a result of "slam dancing." Dancers are known to emerge from the mosh pit with broken limbs, noses and/or jaws as a result of other dancers (some wearing dangerously sharp spikes on their clothing) "slamming" into them in the pit. Dancers in the mosh pit also participate as receptors of a practice known as "stage diving;" this is when a member of the band (or audience) jumps from the stage into the crowd and assumes that the audience/dancers will catch him/her. Stage diving is extremely dangerous, as members of the audience may be drunk or high or simply fail to catch the diver. A number of deaths in the early 1990s called attention to the dangers of stage diving at concerts and clubs; however, it is still quite popular at punk concerts. Another aspect of stage diving is that it can also become an opportunity for sexual assault(particularly of young female concert goers) as the diver is passed along from audience member to audience member (over

finished with announcements she hollered "And now what you've all been waiting for...." and Tribe 8 exploded onto the stage.

As her bandmates tuned their guitars and got ready to play, Lynn Breedlove walked to the left edge of the stage, in front of the mosh pit, and began speaking. She asked the pit participants to pack in tightly and then had the outer edge of the pit form a circle around the women on the inside, then she laid down the ground rules for the mosh pit. She asked that any woman who had been drinking or doing drugs not participate in the mosh pit, she asked that each person be aware of the stage divers and their responsibility to make sure that each stage diver made it to the outside of the pit safely, and then she asked that when someone's arms got tired that that person move to the outer edge of the pit and trade places with another woman. At the end of her talk she shouted "Be safe Dudettes!" and the band ripped into their opening number.

One by one women moved out of the audience and were assisted onto the stage by several of the stage hands. At first it seemed as if only the twenty-something women were daring enough to be doing the stage diving but by midway into

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their heads). All of these factors make the Tribe 8 performance at the 1996 MWMF all the more remarkable.

the third number older women, women with disabilities, and young girls began climbing on stage, falling back into the sea of outstretched hands, and were carried across the crowd like eggs in a basket. Meanwhile Tribe 8 sang and screamed about the dastardly deeds of "Frat Pigs." From time to time Breedlove would walk over to the edge of the stage to encourage someone who had climbed on stage but looked a little frightened by the prospect of actually jumping into the crowd.

The stagediving abated a bit when Tribe 8 tore into their song "Power Boy" and on the stage appeared women with shaved heads wearing little black and red lace dresses, garter belts and stiletto pumps wielding large chainsaws who proceeded to 'attack' women dressed in three-piece suits accessorize with large strap-on dildos. As the song continued "You got your night stick, your surrogate dick...Everyone's afraid of you because you're a moral masturbator..." the "femme" women pushed the faux-men to the ground and "cut off" the source of their perceived power and violence in a performance that was intended to illustrate their frustration and anger at men who rape and victimize women. Part way thorough the number Breedlove doffed her shirt and revealed the symbol for anarchy drawn on her

stomach, and the crowd roared its approval. These images, understandably, confused and angered many women at the festival, in part because it is *extremely* difficult to understand the lyrics of the song over the loud pounding music, but also because images of women publicly acting out their anger and rage against acts that have traditionally been relegated to the private sphere are in and of themselves disturbing. Susan Frazier, manager of Goldenrod Music Distribution, wryly noted that "[I] had women coming up to me at the festival spouting off about Tribe 8 and their so-called violent, anti-women musical messages. The irony of this was that many of these women were simply parroting what they had heard from a small group of protesters. I handed them the lyrics for Tribe 8's songs and told them to come back and discuss the messages with me *after* they'd read the lyrics. Not one woman came back."[29]

After the performance Lynn Breedlove moderated a lengthy rap session between older and younger generations of women and the band in an attempt to help facilitate understanding between the different groups. The majority of women who attended the session agreed that it was an informative and productive dialogue. Women were able to agree and disagree

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[29]Personal conversation, December 8, 1997.

with, express concern over, and object to or accept the messages being transmitted by the band. Perhaps even more importantly, the session was a way of sharing information between different generations of lesbians. Young women were able to talk about the kind of world they now live in, and older lesbians were able to explain the events and actions that forged a path for the next generations. This should not be read as simply a 'warm and fuzzy' experience in lesbian community building as there were some strong objections to Tribe 8's stage performances, and objections to the ways in which women *have* fought back. Again, Lynn Breedlove explains

> There was a woman who told a story, at Michigan, about killing her rapist, and another woman came up to her after the workshop and said, "You shouldn't have done that." [Interviewer, Andrea Juno, asks "She shouldn't have told the story?"] No--she shouldn't have killed this guy, who was raping her. When she was in the middle of a gang rape, she should not have pulled a knife and slashed the guy's throat. When she told that story, so many women had tears running down their faces--....We all felt like, "That could be me, I could do that. I don't have to lie down and not fight -- 'if I fight I'm going to die,' and that whole line of bull they've been handing us forever.[30]

Tribe 8's ideology is similar to that of Sharon Marcus in that they understand that there is a *gendered grammar of violence*, and the band, through its music, advocates female self-defense as a way in which to remove the paradoxical link

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[30]Juno, (40).

between rape and socially constructed notions of femininity. Moreover, they see that it is necessary to break down notions of gender in order to truly get at the roots of violence against women.

Tribe 8's attempts to break down barriers between men, women, lesbians, gay men, and anyone who may fall in-between any of these categories is paradoxical, to say the least. And while screaming/singing about violence against women may, in some minds, reinforce the notion that women are subjects of violence, when combined with attempts to break down gender it becomes something quite powerful. Perhaps Tribe 8's performances are so powerful because their message is designed to reach a specific audience (straight white males), and they don't alter it simply because they sing/play to an audience made up of lesbians. Tribe 8's effect on the MWMF has proven itself quite effective over the past five years. There are now regular workshop sessions which unite the older and younger generations of lesbians attending the festival in an attempt to foster an understanding of each group's different experiences. Additionally, Tribe 8 seems to have best embodied the notion of inclusive acknowledgment of difference, as their stage performances have inspired other artists to include the audience as participants in a

multitude of ways. Finally, I would like to suggest that Tribe 8's performance(s), while having been viewed as something 'negative' at the time can, in retrospect, be understood as having significantly contributed to building the lesbian festival community through radical action. Furthermore, instead of viewing Tribe 8 as an anomaly in the community, I will argue, in the following chapter, that the band is acting in accordance within both the traditional visions and the radical actions that have made the MWMF community a possibility.

Chapter 3

FESTIVAL AND COMMODIFICATION

Women's music, specifically within the realm of women's music festivals, is a commodity which functions in myriad ways, each serving to further connect and build a specific community. In this chapter I will explore the evolution of women's music as a cultural commodity, and its function within the larger lesbian community. In addition, I will examine the complexities created by underlying tensions inherent in the conflict between desire for a more egalitarian social structure within the lesbian community and the need (and desire) to participate in the larger capitalist economy, and explain why these two ideologies are not mutually exclusive.

The creation of women's music festivals, and more specifically the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, was part of a progression that began with women musicians touring the country and playing to small audiences of women in large cities as well as playing in non-traditional venues such as community centers, coffeehouses and, at times, in women's living rooms.

In his book, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India,* Peter Manuel offers a neo-Marxist analysis of the commodification of music, explaining that artists become commodified through the dissemination of the mass media, thus taking away the ability of the community to make music and broadening the meaning of such music as it expands to include commercial communities. Individuals and communities are denied the ability to make their own music, thus removing individual and community solidarity formed through the music making process. As a result, individuals and communities are increasingly forced to rely on productions of the mass media to determine their musical needs. It is in this way that the entertainment industry manipulates and exploits the individual and the community making distribution of alternate forms of music more difficult.[1]

Manuel goes on to explain, however, that these views are an oversimplification of the commodity situation, and that along with studying the nature of media control and the content of media output itself, one must analyze the ways in which, in this case, music is actually interpreted and used by the audiences it reaches, as well as the actual effect it

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[1]Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culure: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago, 1993): p.4.

has on audience behavior and attitudes. He goes on to explain that the recent scholarship of cultural critics, such as Stuart Hall, Simon Frith and Richard Middleton, better explains popular culture as "neither pure corporate manipulation nor as grassroots expression, but as contested territory where hegemonic and oppositional values symbolically or explicitly engage each other."[2]

Performers had dual roles in lesbian communities, not only as musicians but also as the symbols and signifiers of lesbian culture. In the 1970s lesbians used the performers to measure how "safe" a person was. If a woman said she listened to Joni Mitchell and Joan Baez it didn't automatically signify that she was a lesbian, but if a woman said she listened to Chris Williamson, Meg Christian or Margie Adams it acted as a synonym for lesbianism. These musicians became part of a complex system of symbols designed to signify membership in the lesbian community, and as such, became symbols of resistance against cultural and political domination as both the publicly and privately transcripted interactions explored by James Scott.[3]

In a cross-cultural study of the dynamics of cultural

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[2]Ibid., p. 10.

[3] Interestingly, a number of these artists (such as Cris Williamson and Ferron) did not identify themselves publicly as lesbians until the mid to late 1980s.

and political domination and resistance, Scott explains how power relationships are solidified and challenged through social transcripts. Referring to these transcripts as "public" and "hidden" Scott argues that the "public" transcript is a "shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate," and that the "hidden" transcript is the "discourse that takes place 'offstage' or in disguised form."[4] These transcripts serve to either reinforce the dominant position of those in power, as in the case of the "public" transcript, or serve as a way of undermining the dominant power structure through a set of codes or "hidden" transcripts which only those in subordinate positions are able to utilize in opposition to the dominant group. As Tricia Rose states in her ethnographic study of rap music in contemporary American culture

> These dominant public transcripts are maintained through a wide range of social practices and are in a constant state of production. Powerful groups maintain and affirm their power by attempting to dictate the staging of public celebrations, by feigning unanimity among groups of powerholders to make such social relations seem inevitable, by strategically concealing subversive or challenging discourses, by preventing access to the public stage, by policing language and using stigma and euphemism to set the terms of public debate or perception.[5]

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[4]James Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts.* (New Haven, CT., 1990): p. xiii.

[5]Tricia Rose. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America.* (Hanover, NH., 1994): p. 100.

It is through the use of the "hidden" transcripts that subordinate groups express their own measure of power.

Through a combination of live performances and word-of-mouth advertising, lesbian musicians carved a public yet private space for themselves and their audiences. However, the stress associated with not only trying to create music that represented women's experiences, feelings and desires, but also acting as positive lesbian role models in the community strained the emotional, physical and economic resources of the few performers trying to meet the needs of the entire community. The pressure to be everything to everyone was tremendous (and still is) and performers burned out from too many tours and too many demands on their time.

One of the most popular performers, Meg Christian, was instrumental not only in promoting women's music, but became *the* representative of the lesbian community, performing hundreds of shows all over the country for audiences that were starved for music that mentioned lesbians and/or lesbian relationships. When Christian left Olivia Records in 1984 the lesbian community was shocked.

> [She] had had given 15 years to women's music. She was among the most popular, if not *the* most popular, artist in women's music...Meg gave most of herself, and was in many ways, the "ideal" lesbian performer. She was an "out" lesbian, her songs blatantly lesbian, and her

> rapport with her audience unprecedented - and then she was gone.[6]

What Christian left behind, however, was a group of women who had established one of the most important institutions in the lesbian community, Olivia Record Company.

The formation of Olivia Records, in 1973, was a major step toward including women in the process of producing and engineering music, in addition to writing and performing it. Olivia Records also signified a move toward the commodification of women's music. As the brainchild of a collective of women who were searching for a way to implement their lesbian-feminist politics, Olivia Records had the distinction of being the first collective attempt at being an integrated organization devoted to the production, distribution and promotion of women's music.

In examining issues of commodification of women's music it is necessary to first explore commodity as a thoroughly socialized "thing" which then begs the question: in what does its sociality consist? In his introduction to the book *The Social Life of Things* Arjun Appadurai suggests that commodities are things with a particular kind of social potential which, within a certain context, are distin-

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[4]Cynthia M. Lont. "Women's Music: No Longer a Small Private Party." in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements.* ed. Reebee Garafalo. (New York, 1986): p. 248.

guishable from "products," "objects," "goods," "artifacts," and other sorts of things.

A Marxist interpretation of culture assumes that popular culture reflects the ideology of the ruling class, thus negating the effects of popular culture as socially effective. An interpretation such as this is far too limiting for an analysis of the commodification of women's music as it cannot account nor allow for change which occurs within liminal spaces surrounding class and culture, and definitely does not allow for a gendered interpretation of cultural and social transformations. In this sense, a reading of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (and its value as a commodity) needs to shift the focus away from so-called "conventional" theories and examine issues of the commodity situation from a less fixed position.

If commodities are things in a certain situation, and the situation can characterize many different things, at different points in their social lives, how then are we able to address and define the issue of commodity situation? Arjun Appadurai breaks the commodity situation down into three categories: "phase," in which things are seen as moving in and out of the commodity state; "candidacy," a more conceptual feature which refers to the standards and criteria

(symbolic, classificatory and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular social and historical context; and "context," which refers to the variety of *social* arenas, within or between cultural units, linking candidacy with its commodity phase. It is the candidacy category which offers valuable insight into the position of lesbian music within the festival context, and best explains the ways in which festival, while not a specific result of Marxist modes of production, operates as a cultural commodity within the lesbian community.

Olivia Records' initial experience with recording/producing/engineering illustrates one aspect of the candidacy phase of lesbian music. In 1973, around the same time Helen Reddy was awarded a Grammy for her feminist anthem "I Am Woman" the Olivia Collective rallied around a set of goal designed to help women step further into the music industry as well as promoting the well-being of women in general. Their mission statement, included in the Olivia Records Songbook, clearly laid out their goals.

> We established Olivia with four goals in mind: to make women's music (music that speaks honestly and realistically about women's lives) available to the public; to provide talented women-oriented musicians with access to the recording industry and control over their music; to provide training for women in all aspects of the recording industry; and to provide jobs

> for large numbers of women, with reasonable salaries and in unoppressive situations.[7]

Clearly, the collective was attempting to navigate the liminal space between the desire to create a more egalitarian work environment and the necessity of capitalist business principles. Olivia's response to a growing demand for women's music as a result of artists' live performances, was to raise four thousand dollars, mainly in the form of donations, and release its first 45 rpm, which featured Meg Christian's rendition of "Lady" by Carole King/Gerry Goffin and Cris Williamson's "If it Weren't for the Music." The record sold 5,000 copies through mail order alone allowing the new company to engineer and produce their first full-length album, Meg Christian's *I Know You Know*. Christian's album sold over 70,000 copies, which in turn allowed Olivia to produce and release what would become the best selling women's music album of all time, Cris Williamson's *The Changer and The Changed* (over 250,000 copies sold to date).

In 1977 the collective relocated to Oakland, California from Washington D.C., and in the process Olivia experienced a period of rapid expansion. In rapid succession the company turned out a collection of songs by known lesbian artists

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[7] Olivia Records Collective Songbook. (Oakland, CA., 1975): p. 75.

entitled *Lesbian Concentrate*, produced an album by Linda Tillery, and took on another of Cris Williamson's projects. There was also the expectation that the company would be able to continue expanding and reaching out toward new artists and producing varieties of types of music, representing different cultures, ages and classes. However, by 1978 it became clear that desire and necessity were at odds with one another when the collective found itself without enough money to re-press Williamson's album (the "bread and butter" of the company) and was forced to bring in an outside consultant to evaluate the business and recommend changes. Founder and current owner of Olivia, Judy Dlugacz explained "[We] wanted to pay people based on need. It was a really warm, wonderful idea - if you have a lot and someone has a little, then you pay them more. But it just didn't work out that way. How can you fairly determine 'need'?"[8]

The consultant called for a dramatic reorganization of the company, and the women were forced to decide who would stay and who would move on. It was a traumatic time for the company and for the women involved because at the core of the business there was an idealism, based on fairness, diversity,

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[8] Judy Dlugacz. "If It Weren't for the Music: 15 Years of Olivia Records" in *Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture*. 5 (Jan. 1989): p. 20.

egalitarianism, that seemed to permeate the lesbian community, and particularly the festival culture.[9] The attempt, by Olivia, to incorporate collective members' lesbian-feminist beliefs into a business which strove for goals beyond the immediate accumulation of wealth set a precedent for the lesbian community, and were later reflected in the philosophies of the MWMF's.

Olivia was forced to confront the chasm between philosophical desires and economic need with the overwhelming success of both Christian's and Williamson's albums. Recognizing that the women's music community was in need of a broader, more efficient way in which to reach their audience they looked for independent distributors to fill the gap. Distribution of the music was crucial to the "success" of the artist, and until 1979, when WILD (Women's Independent Label Distribution Network) was formed, distribution was done by the women who engineered the record, by volunteers dedicated to this new musical venture, or by word of mouth.[10] The creation of festivals immediately helped market the music not only to the women who attended the festivals (since much of

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[9] In 1997 Olivia stopped functioning as a record company and moved into a new commodity phase which now deals in vacations (specifically cruises) for women as it has proved a more lucrative business.

[10] Karen Peterson. "An Investigation into Women-Identified Music in the United States." *Women and Music in Cross Cultural Perspective* ed. Ellen Koskoff. (New York, 1987): p. 208.

the music women bought at the festival was not available in their local record stores), but to the women in the communities "back home." Festivals made music and material culture available to women who might otherwise not have access to lesbian culture and, perhaps more importantly, community.

On another level, festival represents a level of capitalist consumerism following the desires and demands of the market, in this case specifically the lesbian music community. Again, Arjun Appadurai explains that demand (also defined as consumption) emerges as a function of a variety of social practices and classifications rather than as a mechanical response to social manipulation. Furthermore, it is within a group identity that "things" are provided with a framework which gives the objects value and meaning. Goods (or commodities) which are introduced to the community from outside sources do not have the same value nor are they imbued with the same kind of meaning as goods created within the community.

Independent record labels, such as Olivia and Holly Near's company, Redwood, offered an alternative to the "majors," but more importantly (and more so in the case of Olivia) these labels offered women music that emanated from within the community. Festivals gave these labels a

centralized location in which to market artists and their music, and elevated the value of women's music within the community through the exchange of not only the "product" (i.e. material goods such as records) but also the ideas and messages. Implicit or explicit the messages were expressed in not only the lyrics and music, but also the all-female festival line-ups, and the album liner notes which contained lists of women who had engineered, produced and performed on the album. With the advent of independent record companies (though it is important to note that Redwood, Near's label, focused much more on issues of social protest than on women's music) and distributors focused on the needs and desires of women, audiences continued looking outside of the mainstream for artists and music which reflected their values and experiences.

In his exploration of the nature of the transformation of the Indian popular-music scene (brought about by improvements in recording technology) Peter Manuel argues, that diversity of media ownership is the only means of obtaining diversity of media content, and that concentration of ownership leads to standardization and homogenization, and, by extension, self-censorship and narrowness of content.[11]

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[11]Manuel, p. 21.

Independent record labels have played a major role in diversification and distribution of music over the past twenty years. What the "indies" offer is a chance for artists to market their music to specific audiences, to be more in touch with the audience on a grassroots level, and to take greater musical risks; however, since the indies don't have the same kinds of resources as the majors musical riskiness can come at a high price. Both Olivia and Redwood, tried to produce a wide range of musical offerings, but were financially unable to give their artists the kind of promotional push needed to catapult them onto the charts. And while Cris Williamson's *The Changer and the Changed* might be the best-selling women's album of all time, it doesn't come close to touching the success of some of the things put out by minor groups on major labels. It is here that the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival functions as a counter-balance, providing lesbian artists and musicians with a receptive audience and stage line-ups which feature a multitude of performers from many different genres thus increasing the exposure of each artist.

This, however, can become a sticky situation as there is an assumption in the lesbian, and festival, community, that lesbians are better able to act in ways that promote egalitarianism and diversity. What this does not account for are

the rivalries which arise between performers as they compete for performance slots which will give them more visibility, a larger audience, and presumably, a larger amount of album sales.

This analysis is not intended to cynically categorize performers (or festival attendees, for that matter) as driven simply by market forces; it is, however, intended to show the complex relationship between the festival's desire to create an atmosphere in which lesbians are able to envision a "better" community through inclusive acknowledgment of difference and social, racial, and economic equity, and the need to generate income for performers and festival organizers.

Women's music festivals act in accordance with Manuel's latter assertions and interpretations in a variety of ways. First, they question the underlying assumption that women's music is intended to function dichotomously, as either counter-hegemonic or as a function of capitalist profit, but not both. What festival does do is to bring these tensions together so as to create a space in which to negotiate, mediate and rearticulate contradictions in theory and practice. From the musical vantage point, there are certain principles that weigh heavily on the collective conscience of

the lesbian community, things such as musicians not having to change pronouns in their songs or compromise their musical or personal integrity matter, and there are those who are not willing to submit to mass cultural dictates that say they won't sell records unless they do compromise. This also means that these artists are put in a position that leaves them vulnerable. They are forced to tour a great deal more for a great deal less than many musicians who sign record contracts.

There are a large number of examples of the unwillingness to bend to the dictates of record companies within the lesbian community; however the reluctance to conform to the accepted norms (specifically in the 1970s) did not come without a price. Artists exerted agency as they chose to remain within the lesbian music community, and some found themselves in roles other than musician/performer. One of the best examples of this duality was Teresa Trull's discovery of a "second" career in record producing and engineering when her own music failed to reach mainstream audiences. Says Trull,

> The most support I've gotten has been for my production work...I've gotten a lot of critical acclaim as an artist but I've never had the support behind me to accumulate a large amount of sales. I've always fallen in the cracks. I'm a little too commercial for the independent industry—which involves women's music and

> folk and the independents that initially supported Jane Siberry and people like that—and I'm not commercial enough for the music industry. So I've run across a lot of battles as an artist.[12]

Trull's attempt at mainstream audiences came in 1986 when she released *A Step Away* (on Redwood Records, Holly Near's label) and was asked to play with Bonnie Hayes (who had written the song "Rosalie") and her band as the opening act for Huey Lewis and the News. It was at this point, Trull says, that she realized that the mainstream music scene was not where she wanted to be:

> I came face to face with the realization that what I've been trying to attain for all these years might not be the thing that's going to make me happy. What horrified me most was the way that the people who achieved this amount of success had become a marketable product. [13]

Trull decided that she was unwilling to compromise her music, its message (Trull's lyrics are out and openly lesbian), or her life in order to become a commercial success. Trull's career as a producer is legendary within the women's music community as she has produced albums for artists such as Cris Williamson, Holly Near and Ferron. Trull admits that it is difficult to make a living in the music business, and though she yearns for some sort of security she doesn't regret her decisions.

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[12]Gillian Garr. *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock and Roll.* (Seattle, WA., 1992): p. 148.

A second example of the independent label experience is illustrated by Alix Dobkin and her radical lesbian feminist political beliefs. Looking at Dobkin's involvement with the lesbian-separatist movement and the women's music community it is easy to understand why she has actively avoided involvement in the mainstream folk community. In 1973 Dobkin, along with flutist Kay Gardner and bass player Patches Attom, founded the musical group Lavender Jane. With support from the lesbian community Lavender Jane recorded an album, and after locating a lesbian sound engineer the album *Lavender Jane Loves Women* was released. *Lavender Jane* cost $3,300 for the first 1,000 copies, all of which sold in three months with no formal distribution system other than mail order and a few lesbian-feminist bookstores and on the album cover Dobkin stated:

> For a dozen years I tried to "make it" in the music business—as a solo artist, demo artist, in groups, as a songwriter, as a commercial writer and even in coffeehouse management. So many times I came so close, and felt great frustration and disappointment. Always there was this rough element of mine—an abrasive edge—an imperfection. Record and publishing executives, independent producers, managers, agents, P.R. men and assorted hustlers could never quite polish me into a neat commercial package. Lucky for me.[14]

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[13]Ibid., p. 149.

[14]Dobkin, Alix. *Lavender Jane Loves Women.* Project 1, 1975. Insert.

Alix's resistance against being neatly packaged has made for a challenging career. She has, however, parlayed her musical popularity in the lesbian/feminist community into a speaking tour for Women's Studies programs across the country and recently began writing her autobiography. What has remained constant is her commitment to lesbians and the lesbian community. This commitment to women and the community forms a common thread which runs through not only Trull's and Dobkin's careers, but also the the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival itself.

It would be an oversimplification of festival economics to state that the festival, simply by existing, has created a new space for further commodification of women's music and culture. The festival is a highly complex system of inclusion and exclusion, freedom and limits, as well as attempting to balance egalitarianism with the hierarchical structure necessary to run such a large event successfully. As evidenced by Olivia's turn from record production to travel planning, women cannot necessarily control the means of production. This, however, underscores the flexibility of women's modes of production, and forces women to think in different terms, about the viability of a "women's" social or cultural experience. It also poses new questions such as is

it, in fact, better for the community to have a travel agency which makes more money and is able to funnel it back into hiring and training more women than it is to have a record production company which can barely pay a staff of four? Is it better for the MWMF to bring in so-called mainstream acts (such as Indigo Girls in 1998) in order to attract a larger number of women? Moreover, it forces women to ask questions beyond the immediate, such as, what are the ramifications of hiring mainstream acts to perform at Michigan? Will it radically change the "spirit" of the festival? Will it make it financially possible for festival organizers to pay more of the women who volunteer? Will mainstream acts become the backbone of the festival thereby gradually excluding lesser-known acts? How will the increase in attendance affect the environment (both physically and psychologically) of the festival? These, and a host of other questions remain as yet unanswered.

Perhaps Olivia as well as other businesses in the lesbian community, have accomplished what they set out to do: After all there is a thriving women's music community which, prior to the 1970s, hadn't existed. In fact, with the advent of the Lilith Fair in 1997 there seems to be a move toward recognizing the contributions and talents of many different

types of female artists and musicians, and in representing myriad experiences of women. And yet, in terms of technical participation in the music industry (i.e. engineers, sound and light technicians, producers, etc.), as well as recognition and acceptance of lesbian oriented lyrics, women have a long way yet to go. Still, the fact remains that both women and the festival have forged new ground, making it possible for a new generation of women to experience the music, the environment, the culture and the sense of community that the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival offers each year in August.

The festival land acts as a physical boundary which allows for continued negotiation of difference between lesbians. It is not without conflict and/or struggle, and yet it continually attempts to provide an inclusive acknowledgment of difference while also attempting to maintain a basic set of rules of operation. Additionally, the festival acts as a base for lesbian community building, offering not only a safe environment for lesbians to express themselves and their social and cultural beliefs (as different as they may be), but also offering the music and cultural commodities which express, support and further the lesbian festival community.

The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival cannot be broken down into any one part which can be labeled more significant for lesbian community building, rather the festival, as a sum of all of its widely varied (and controversial) parts, is important precisely because, while offering experiences and cultural representations for all lesbians or all womyn, it maintains a flexibility and willingness to confront conflicts and change head-on. The MWMF survives because of the commitment of women (organizers, volunteers and attendees alike) who believe in the value of a continuing lesbian community.

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