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The Washington Sisters in "Radical Harmonies"

THE WAY  
BACK HOME"Radical Harmonies" Documents the  
Heart of Women's Music

BY EUAN BEAR

It was a pre-screening gathering of bright, accomplished lesbians — writers, college professors, consultants, videographers, healthcare professionals, microchip engineers — for dinner at the home of UVM psychologist Dr. Esther Rothblum that night. Filmmaker Dee Mosbacher and her partner helped greet the guests and talked about making the film *Radical Harmonies* — a five-year process. All the guests, including the filmmaker, are "of a certain age," old enough to remember when there was no women's music, when it all started, and how it changed our lives.

*Radical Harmonies* was being screened at the Women in Medicine (read "Dyke Docs") conference at the Radisson Hotel as a fundraiser for the Lesbian Health Fund's 10th anniversary. It was only the second screening for the documentary, which won Best Film at the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay Film Festival this year. Tickets for that screening sold out within 24 hours.

And no wonder. There is so much history and hope here, from the opening bars of Meg Christian's "The Way Back Home" to the final credits. Dee and her partner called it the "singalong" movie, and many of us did, though it wasn't quite enough: snippets, a chorus, a single verse evoked the power of the music without letting us get well into any one song. It was tantalizing, and in its cumulative effect, ultimately led to a satisfying realization: we women, nearly all lesbians, did this, we created opportunities for women musicians, sound and lighting techs, comedians, performers across a wide range of styles.

Apart from our group, attendance from the conference participants seemed sparse — apparently due to competition from the Vermonters for Civil Union/Vermont Fund for Families fundraiser at the Boat House and some political wangling between the conference organizers and the Lesbian Health Fund. We found that out later — for us the movie came first.

The gist of this documentary is archival footage of performance after performance, many accompanied by commentary from the performers now: Meg and Cris at Carnegie Hall, Alix Dobkin, *Deadly Nightshade*, BeBe K'Roche, Ferron, Theresa Trull (in both butch and femme incarnations), Holly Near,

review

"Radical Harmonies"

By Dee Mosbacher

Woman Vision

[www.woman-vision.org/radicalharmonies.htm](http://www.woman-vision.org/radicalharmonies.htm)

Susan Freundlich (one of the first ASL interpreters for women's music), Linda Tillery, Mary Watkins, the Berkeley Women's Music Collective, Nancy Vogel, Casse Culver, Robin Tyler, Maxine (oh, yeah, Maxine) Feldman, Kay Gardner, Gwen Avery (mm-mmm), Margie Adam, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Ysaye Maria Barnwell, Judith Casselberry, Susan Abod, June Millington, Ubaka Hill, Alive!, Ronnie Gilbert, Deirdre McCalla, Robin Flower, Edwina Lee Tyler, The Washington Sisters, Toshi Reagon, and more, right up through Ulali, Tribe8, Indigo Girls, Sexpod, Azucar y Crema, and Ani DeFranco! I'm sure I've forgotten some names or couldn't write fast enough in the near-dark to get them all down.

As June Millington (or was it Maxine Feldman?) said in the film: "We had an impact, we did it. There would be no Melissa Etheridge today without us."

The first tour identified as a "women's music" tour was "Women on Wheels," in 1975 with Margie Adam, Cris Williamson, Holly Near, and Meg Christian. Linda Tillery said she didn't get what the big deal was: "It's not Aretha!" Gwen Avery and Linda Tillery and Mary Watkins challenged the whiteness of the women's music world with tours of their own. And then came Casselberry and Dupree, and poet Pat Parker, Tillery, Avery, and Watkins touring as "The Varied Voices of Black Women."

The first concerts were nearly as simple as one spotlight, somebody's brother's amplifier and a single microphone, with photocopied fliers for publicity. One sound tech in the film talks about how she had to "reset all the crossovers" when they rented a soundboard. Having women techs was as important as the women performers on the stage.

The film at least touches on some of the controversies and growing pains. The night Holly Near and Malvina Reynolds played the same bill, with Near insisting on women-only space and Reynolds demanding that men should be admitted. Linda Shear's desire for a lesbian-only experience as a healing space and how it turned into a source of divi-

sion instead. How Bernice Johnson Reagon discovered that the sign for African was racist and then found Ysaye Maria Barnwell who said of course ASL — like all language — is culturally influenced, and found new signs to convey the words without the negative images. How some members of the Deaf community felt their language was being used to enhance the visual experience of Hearing audiences because it was beautiful to watch, and not really for Deaf women's information.

How changes were made — at concerts and at women's music festivals — to accommodate women with disabilities that affected their mobility, way before the Americans With Disabilities Act.

And from the early women's music concerts came the National Women's Music Festival in Indiana, where the sliding-fee scale was invented (that is, women who earned less could pay less; women who earned more would be asked to pay more voluntarily), and the Mother of All Women's Music Festivals, Michigan. Robin Tyler tells the story of the two women from Mississippi who came to her Southern Women's Music and Comedy Festival and sobbed in her arms. The two women were Wanda and Brenda Hensen, who went on from there to found the Gulf Coast Women's Music Festival on land in Ovet, Mississippi they had bought and from which the local right wing was trying to drive them. Fifty-five women came to that first Gulf Coast Festival at what is now Camp Sister Spirit.

Then came an explosion of performers in wide-ranging genres — comedy, dance (Wallflower Order, showcasing women of various body sizes and ages), classical music from chamber to symphonic, Spanish classical guitar, punk, funk — way beyond the original folk-influenced beginnings. And all of them wanted to perform in women's spaces, at women's festivals and concerts, for women.

Women's music, said Linda Tillery, is about "creating a whole human being." Ronnie Gilbert declared that it "transformed me." And Cris Williamson had the last word: "I don't think we've heard the end of women's music."

Dee Mosbacher told the audience that it had taken five years to make the film, and when she asked the Dolby folks how much it would cost to license their technology, her heart fell when the price quoted was \$25,000. And then it leapt when the price went down to zero because her documentary enterprise is a nonprofit organization.

It took three writers, five editors, ten filmers, and three post-production sound techs to put together the (nearly) finished project. Mosbacher is \$50,000 in debt — and that's before the DVDs and videocassettes have been made. It was only through the generosity of hundreds of people that the film has gotten this far, she said, people who have contributed time, film footage, agreements to have their voices and images shown, given money to help the film along.

And in that spirit of generosity, she told us how so many of the performers in the film came to the premier in the Castro that night, and afterward came up on stage and broke out in song.

When this film comes out, buy it. It belongs in every lesbian's film/video/dvd library. It's our history. We did it. ▼

Euan Bear still has both her original copy of *Lavender Jane Loves Women* on vinyl and a turntable to play it on in *Bakersfield*.



Julie Walters Jamie Bell Jamie Draven

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