

# 30 Years of Revolution: The Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

By HOLLY PRUETT

Editor's note: *Twenty and more years ago, Vermont was famous for its strong and active feminist lesbian community and for sending from 50 to 100 women to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (in the photo I have, I counted about 63). There were controversies then as now, the most persistent of which is the festival's policy of admitting only "women-born-women," thus excluding transwomen.*

All they wanted was a good time. Thirty years ago, when a teen-aged Lisa Vogel and her friends organized the first Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, they didn't realize they were launching one of the most enduring cultural institutions of what was then still called the Women's Liberation Movement.

Now, three decades later, the Festival still delivers a good time – Tribe 8's Lynee Breedlove calls Michigan "the best party on the planet." It's also a week of respite from a world still steeped in sexism. It's a family reunion, even if you don't yet know anyone there. It's a place of physical freedom, of connection with the land, our bodies, and the fearless night sky.

The artists featured in the 30th Anniversary line-up are as diverse in generation, geography and genre as the audience. Producer Lisa Vogel calls this year's program "a celebration of the history of the lesbian feminist movement and of women in music and the performing arts."

## Three Decades of Music and Culture

Icons of the 1970s – Holly Near, Ferron, Cris Williamson, Teresa Trull and Barbara Higbie, Mary Watkins, and Alive! – share this year's stage with punk/pop phenoms The Butchies, Le Tigre, and Tribe 8. Long-time festival favorites Indigo Girls, Betty, Toshi Reagon, and Ulali will get down

with more recent sensations like Bitch, Paprika, and Animal Profrock.

Two of last year's hottest newcomers return: East Coast rap duo God-Des and Canadian hip-hop rocker Ember Swift. Headlining on the Night Stage for the first time is Gail Ann Dorsey, fresh off tours with David Bowie and Ani DiFranco. Michigan first-timers include Sistas in the Pit, a funk rock trio from San Francisco; Slanty Eyed Momma, political poetry with electric violin; and Yvette Narlock, a Canadian troubadour who has toured with KD Lang.

This year's opening night offers a tribute to the power chords and throbbing bass lines that said "girl power" before the phrase was invented. "30 Years of Rock Chix Lix," directed by Betty's Alyson Palmer, features performers from the entire week's line-up paying homage to the mainstream music that has rocked women's worlds: anthems by Pat Benatar, Blondie, Melissa Etheridge, Heart, Queen Latifah, and more.

And that's just the music. Comics Elvira Kurt and Suzanne Westenhoefer, and performance pioneers the Dance Brigade return. From the "land down under" come not one but two irreverent musical comedy duos: New Zealand's much-beloved Topp Twins, and festie-virgins Novak 'N Goode from Australia. Hanifah Walidah's one-woman show "Black Folks Guide to Black Folks" explores sexuality, health, love, faith, and fear through an entire neighborhood of characters. In another one-woman tour de force, Julie Goldman's "Third Party" will ignite the house with her timely and righteous political rant.

The Festival closes Sunday with traditions old and new. The morning showcases concerts created by festigoers in Ubaka Hill's Drumsong Orchestra and Aleah Long's One World Inspirational Choir. When night finally falls, Ruth Barrett closes the circle with the hushed rituals of the Candlelight Concert. In

between, the afternoon's energy will fly through the air with the greatest of ease, at the second annual Circus Fever! featuring the aerial and acrobatic arts of LAVA and Wise Fool New Mexico.

## An Experience to Call Your Own

With a steady but ever-changing audience of 4,000-5000 women and children, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is more than a series of concerts. It is a highly-organized, self-sustaining community. Festigoers meet women from around the world through workshifts producing vegetarian meals or making all the systems hum: child care, health care, transportation, recycling. Time not spent at concerts or workshifts is passed in some of the hundreds of workshops, running the Lois Lane 5K, taking in the Film Festival or Crafts Bazaar, joining the Butch Strut or the Femme Parade, or simply wandering.

Holly Near, who performed at the first Michigan 30 years ago, says, "The Festival now is like a wise old city. Many of us gather ideas and cultural response so we may go back out in to the world, energized and ready to end the war in Iraq, confront the Patriot Act, and close down kid jails. But you can choose to arrive with no plan, forget about the world, listen to great music, find a cute girlfriend and dance all night!"

Thirty years later, Lisa Vogel shows no sign of calling it quits. "I plan to keep at it as long as it is a fun, stimulating, and rejuvenating space for women," she says. "As much progress as we've made in gender politics, this planet is still a conservative place to be a radical woman. Young women who come to the Festival today tell me they need this space as much as we did 30 years ago." ▼

*The festival takes place August 9-14. The price for a full week of camping, meals, and all programming and services is \$350 - \$410 (sliding scale) if purchased before July 16; \$385 - \$435 after. Check the website (www.michfest.com) for details, or call (231) 757-4766.*

*Holly Pruett is a freelance writer living in Portland, OR.*

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