

WOMEN'S MUSIC FESTIVALS AND LESBIAN FEMINIST PROCESS

Michelle Crone

As a worker at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in the 1970s, and later Robin Tyler's West Coast and Southern Women's Music & Comedy Festivals, and as a producer at Rhythm Fest, I was in charge of "Rumor Control." That was the name of a tent, and also a process for facilitating the resolution of issues people brought up. I had been trained as a grassroots organizer. Then, as part of an improvisational theater group in the West Indies, I learned to go with what is happening without questioning or judging. These skills helped me develop my lesbian feminist process that I have come to see as extremely revolutionary, then and now. We practiced and refined those processes at women's festivals.

I think self-esteem is vital to our growth as human beings, which then helps us interact with people as wholes, not just parts that we have had to show in order to survive. Festivals provided the space needed to allow this process to grow. We had every step along the way open to question, and indeed women did question. Individuals had to think deeply and defend why they were saying certain things, while as facilitators we would have to try to make the space as safe as possible.

This process was long hours and days in between building whatever it took to hold a festival for thousands of women. Whenever I would be running some of these sessions, I would rely on humor a great deal to soften or make points or release tensions. At times, I would ask for joint screams. Even now, after so many years, I find that the techniques are still as powerful when dealing with groups.

One of the main realities of feminist process was to make sure that diversity was there and that you were looking at all the things that held women down, such as classism and racism—all

the “-isms”. Because of all those “-isms,” women’s voices were pushed way down.

So for making an arena or environment where women could find their voice, and could voice whatever it was they wanted to voice, you often had to go through decades and decades of each woman’s life of conditioning, depending on her cultural and family background. That’s a *long* process, and a *slow* process. So when we would gather in circles to start processing around certain issues, often we would have to go through just hours and hours of women acting out, not knowing how to express what was going on, of making it OK and encouraging women to break that veil of silence that they had had to live with for so long.

Once that was done, once that started to evolve, once women started to get a taste of what it was like to say something that was not put down, it was an *amazing* process to witness. I’m not saying there was not conflict, or that women didn’t disagree. We had some women who were so darned verbally dominant that we started having to come up with ways of not letting certain women take over circles, without using patriarchal rules like Robert’s Rules of Order.

We always tried to go with consensus, but also use things like the talking stick, or passing the crystal, some kind of structure where women would have to share the stage for voicing, would have to not make it personal. You have to come from your heart, the I. You cannot blame.

That all came out of feminist process, and we carried that in with Rhythm Fest, and at the same time, we had to build a community in what were very often short periods of time. On some of the land, we had to put in electrical or pipe in water. At Cloudland (in northeast Georgia), we had women crawling under these very old outbuildings and fixing the plumbing. We had to bring in certain kinds of refrigeration in order to feed women.

But we had this experience from Michigan, building what we called the witches’ kitchen, which was nothing. You know, we dug

holes and put hay and ice and tubs for refrigeration. Or at Seneca Peace Encampment (summer 1983), we made outside kitchens and fire pits that were very functional. We had a lot of these skills that evolved from just needing to do it, and having women learn along the way.

I just wish that we could have captured that somehow, to continue to see it and feel it and smell it and breathe it, to see women evolve and become *empowered*. Hole-digging, ditch-digging, out-house building, you name it. Women at first thought, "I don't know if I can do that." And then, after a few attempts at it, they were ready to put on the tool belt and go out there and build a stage or whatever. It was an amazing, amazing process, and I know that wherever those women ended up in their lives, whatever path they created after these festivals, they got nourished from this process. They got self-confidence from this process. It made a huge difference in their lives.

Today, when I facilitate group process, I always make sure to give credit to the women of festivals when I am introducing techniques, especially when men are in the groups. When they are holding the talking stick, I want them to know that there is herstory here, and to honor the native tradition that we adopted to further our fair process.